

EDITORIAL

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## Co-operative Education for a New Age?

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Bertolt Brecht once wrote that 'A new age does not begin all of a sudden'; while his grandfather lived in 'the new age / My grandson will probably still be living in the old one'.<sup>[1]</sup> The juxtaposition of old and new was evident as this special issue of *FORUM*, on co-operation and education, was being finalised. But knowing what was new and what was old was less clear than it appeared to be at the time when Brecht wrote his poem, *New Ages*, in the 1940s. On 17 April 2013, the day of Baroness Thatcher's funeral, Meg Munn, MP for Sheffield Heeley, put forward the 10 Minute Co-operative Schools Bill in Parliament which called for schools to be able to register themselves as industrial and provident societies, in addition to allowing nursery schools to form and become full members of trust schools. In making this case, she argued that, in co-operative schools, with their focus upon equality and equity, 'everyone is helped to be the best they can'. Such a bill would enable co-operative schools to more closely resemble co-operatives rather than working within current legal restrictions. She further noted that David Cameron, in 2008, had heralded a 'new generation of cooperative schools ... funded by the taxpayer but owned by parents and the local community'.<sup>[2]</sup> In power, the actual commitment of the ConDem government to co-operative and mutual approaches has remained lacklustre.

In fact, the flourishing movement of co-operative schools, currently numbering over 400, can be read in part as a response to the restrictive and authoritarian direction of recent education policies. Educationists and co-operators have been working within and against the limitations of existing educational, political and legal frameworks in order to increase their room for manoeuvre. New co-operative legal models have been developed in parallel with wider developments in education policy so that co-operative trusts, academies and free schools can be established.<sup>[3]</sup> There have been serious attempts to infuse areas of governance, leadership, curriculum and pedagogy

with co-operative values and principles. Unsurprisingly, progress has been variable across the whole movement. But the success of many schools has established models for others to follow and nurtured a belief that co-operation could be shared more widely. Indeed, the 10 Minute Bill is evidence of a mounting conviction within the Schools Co-operative Society that a new approach to education is possible. Co-operators are now not only responding to existing policy, but are beginning to make proactive proposals for change, a shift that can be expected to escalate in the slow build up to the next general election. Co-operative sympathisers are asking for a 'level playing field', noting that the odds have been historically stacked against co-operatives. Confident assertions can also be heard that the experience of co-operative schools might be extended across the education system, including early years and Sure Start, further and higher education. Meg Munn's Bill reflects this optimism.

By contrast, the death of Thatcher immediately transported many of us back to the stark social conflicts of the 1980s. Her funeral certainly did not mark the end of the old world or the demise of Thatcherite ideas. As a politician, she had not been particularly sympathetic to co-operatives, but at times she saw them as a means of weakening the grip of local authorities on public services, as in, for example, the creation of successful housing co-operatives in Glasgow at West Whitlawburn and elsewhere. It was Thatcher who most dramatically put the state under a critical spotlight, albeit in terms of undermining common ownership and establishing the conditions for an extension of the market into new areas of social life. However, while private and public have been dramatically reconfigured in recent decades, this process has revealed how each of these categories carries contradictory potential. It is well-known that, during the 1980s, state spending increased while unelected and centralised forms of power became commonplace, not least in education. Thatcher's governments were all elected by a minority of the population and unleashed considerable discord and opposition. Defending public services became one element of this opposition which continues today in a more muted form. Some campaigners have even feared that co-operative schools might lend credence and support to policies which undermine local accountability and help to clear the ground for profit-making companies; 'privatisation by the nice guys' in the words of the Anti-Academies Alliance. In particular, the academies programme, under the current secretary of state for education, Michael Gove, has forced unwilling schools into academy chains run by business people among others.[4]

A different response to Thatcherism drew on longer traditions of 'private' democratic organisation and action, encapsulated by co-operative, mutual and voluntary associations. The potential to develop civil society on the basis of co-operative values and principles, including solidarity, equality and self-responsibility, appealed to many actors across civil society. Despite the apparent synergy with ideas about a 'third way', the Blair governments, initially at least, met co-operative and mutual enterprises with a mixture of indifference and limited support, although they certainly later welcomed the emergence of co-

operative schools. The gradual expansion of co-operative and mutual enterprises raised awareness within the so-called 'political class' that they might be onto a vote winner. By the time of the 2010 election, the Labour Party had developed a policy of mutualisation which was pitted against the Conservative's Big Society. Neither of these was to be developed in a coherent manner.

Yet, defending public services is not necessarily diametrically opposed to co-operative education and co-operative schools have helped to open up a democratic debate. In particular cases, teacher unions and the Schools Co-operative Society (SCS) have established dialogue and mutual understanding. In this special issue, Patrick Roach outlines the background and nature of an agreement between the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) and the SCS, which represents a significant coming together of differing perspectives within the spectrum of what was once known as the 'labour movement'. UNISON also signed an earlier agreement with the Co-operative Schools Society to defend employees' pay and conditions.<sup>[5]</sup> As co-operative schools become an established part of the educational landscape, and with the incessant chipping away at state education, such dialogue will become more necessary.

The co-operative route has offered a lifeline to many schools that were previously facing enforced academisation. Although co-operative education needs to be understood within the policy context of a greater role for private partners, as well as growing centralisation, it represents the fruits of creative thinking and action away from government. New developments have tended to emerge in spite of government edict rather than in response to it. It would indeed be contradictory to impose self-help from above and, historically, such attempts have tended to wither on the vine. Part of the strength of co-operative education is that it has grafted both old and new perspectives; although well-attuned to contemporary issues, co-operation has deep roots in British society. Anyone casting an eye over the pages of *FORUM*, from its formation in 1958, might even recognise in co-operative schools partial echoes from campaigns for a truly comprehensive system of education which valued all pupils in an expanding democracy. Of course, many different incarnations of co-operation can be identified within this burgeoning movement, a result of the fact that a democratic and co-operative framework must necessarily encompass diversity. The recognition of autonomy and independence helps to ensure that multiple interpretations of co-operative values and principles can thrive. The open and transparent publication of a 'statement of co-operative identity' fosters such open and democratic dialogue as schools become more accountable to those communities in which they are rooted. In an important sense, these changes connect to earlier socialist traditions and offer one means of helping us to renew local democracy, which is a key point. It will be interesting to see, both within the co-operative and socialist movements, how different narratives speak to and learn with and from each other.

This special issue can be read as part of a global renaissance of co-operatives across the world. It developed out of two conferences which focused

upon co-operation in 2012, the United Nations Year of Co-operatives. 'Mainstreaming Co-operation – An Alternative for the 21st Century' was held in Manchester and Rochdale in July 2012 and attracted delegates from around the world. The conference was premised on the claim that co-operation had been silenced for too long and that there was a need to critically assess its role in broader social and political change. It was notable that the education strand attracted a wide range of educationists and academic speakers.[6] The second conference was held at the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, to examine the role of co-operative problem-solving in public and social life, which resulted in the production of a joint statement.[7] Again, it attracted a range of international speakers from a number of different perspectives.

Co-operative development has been seen as one way of addressing widespread and deepening social and economic problems. Henry Tam previously worked as a civil servant in the Home Office under David Blunkett and now operates under the banner of the Cambridge Forum for Youth Participation and Democracy. He identifies co-operation as a core theme of human development which can be translated into specific ideas and principles which are capable of being applied to a wide set of problems. The importance of participation, democracy and dialogue are all emphasised by three responses to Tam's article: Wendy Drewery draws upon experiences of restorative justice in New Zealand working with Māori, Anne Walker highlights the relevance of the Workers Educational Association and adult education, while Ruth Martin examines the work of the co-operative Royal Docks Community School in East London. In each of these areas co-operation is making a difference.

Co-operative schools are developing a rich range of case studies. Sarah Jones and her colleagues and students at Lipson Community College in Plymouth offer fascinating insights into a serious attempt to apply co-operative learning, ethos and practices across the operation of a whole school. Students describe their participation in school co-operatives and reflect upon the history and contemporary state of co-operation. Hannah Wills considers the relevance of Robert Owen for contemporary times, Claudia Marshall writes about her work on a student council, and Tristan Horrell reflects on his participation in the 'Co-operative Big Band', also established as a successful co-operative business. A teacher, Jennifer Hayward, writes about the considerable attention devoted to tailor-made continuing professional development at Lipson. The process has been one in which, by engaging with co-operation, growing levels of participation have prised open 'Pandora's box' revealing complexity and further problems. A second important experience is recounted by Phil Arnold, the current chair of the Schools Co-operative Society and the deputy head of Reddish Vale Technology College which became the first co-operative trust in the country in 2008. He reflects on the participation of pupils, teachers and the wider community in the school since its inception. Criticism and dialogue with the wider world beyond the school gates are noticeable features of this journey. Arnold also connects his analysis to community participation, fair trade and the work of the Schools Co-operative Society.

Gail Davidge assesses the initial findings of her ethnographic research and provides insights into the contradictions faced by many co-operative schools, underlining the range of understandings and meanings of co-operation within a school setting, among those who 'get it' and those who do not. In doing so, she brings to the surface some of the tensions inherent in the co-operative project, emphasising the difficulties in creating democratic forms of subjectivity.

The interconnections between past and present have been a notable feature of co-operative education and this is also apparent in these contributions. Nigel Todd offers a brief glimpse of the world of the 1870s when the Owenites of the Wallsend Co-operative Society established a school. The experiment was short-lived as state regulation and provision took hold, but it reflected a moment of unfulfilled potential. The ambiguous relations between co-operatives and the state are also taken up in Keith Vernon's article which focuses upon the effects of the 1902 and 1918 Education Acts. These created both opportunities and problems for co-operators who attempted to utilise consequent funding, but often found themselves overpowered by the expansion of state education – in some cases willingly passing co-operative resources on to local government. Finally, Ander Delgado draws upon the rich experience of Basque, *euskera* speaking, co-operative schools established in the 1960s and 1970s during the Franco years. He faces the difficulties of embracing multiple stakeholders and examines conflicts between parents and teachers which were further complicated by political divisions within the Basque nationalist movement. Recent English initiatives can learn much from this account.

We round off with five short pieces that remind us of our roots, alert us to the dangers, as well as the possibilities of the present, and that, together with our earlier contributions on co-operative education, point towards a future that is potentially more just and creative than the violations of these values from which we currently suffer. Clyde Chitty and Jane Martin celebrate the life and work of Caroline Benn, one of the great pioneers of the comprehensive education movement in the United Kingdom. Following on from the very successful 'Picking Up the Pieces' Conference of November 2012, John Bolt introduces 'A Better Future for Our Schools' – a positive, far-reaching ten point response to the iniquitous policies of the current ConDem government and a rallying cry for future action. Inclusion of news of the British Humanist Association's landmark victory over Michael Gove's bullying intransigence reminds us of the importance of small victories in longer campaigns. Finally, Clyde Chitty's searing review of *Unleashing Greatness: getting the best from an academised system* reinforces the need to challenge the current neo-liberal consensus, a challenge exemplified by the values and practices explored in a range of ways by a number of contributors – teachers, school students, activists, policy advisers, and academics – in this special issue on co-operative education.

## Acknowledgement

Tom Woodin would like to acknowledge a small grant from the Society for Educational Studies to research co-operative schools.

## Notes

- [1] B. Brecht (1976) 'New Ages', in *Bertolt Brecht Poems 1913-1956*, p. 386. London: Methuen.
- [2] *Hansard*, 17 April 2013, col 329.
- [3] For background see T. Woodin (2012) Co-operative Schools: building communities for the 21st Century, *FORUM*, 54(2), 327-340.
- [4] For doubts about co-operative schools, see <http://www.educationfortomorrow.org.uk/2012/11/11coops.html> and <http://wembleymatters.blogspot.co.uk/2011/11/preston-manor-to-take-coop-route-to.html>
- [5] UNISON (2011) Unison and Co-op Schools Network Sign National Agreement, September 9. [http://www.unison.org.uk/asppresspack/pressrelease\\_view.asp?id=2429](http://www.unison.org.uk/asppresspack/pressrelease_view.asp?id=2429)
- [6] Other articles are due to be published in T. Woodin (Ed.) (forthcoming 2014) *Co-operation, Learning and Co-operative Values*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- [7] See <http://henry-tam.blogspot.co.uk/2012/10/cooperative-problem-solving-key-to.html>