
Co-operative Problem-Solving at the Royal Docks Community School

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ABSTRACT This article responds to Henry Tam's article in this issue of *FORUM* by exploring opportunities for co-operative problem-solving for staff and students of the Royal Docks Community School in the London Borough of Newham. Becoming a co-operative trust helped the school move out of special measures and develop a strategy of participation and improvement based upon co-operative values and principles. Co-operative problem solving at the school has focused upon curriculum, student voice, behaviour and the development of student co-operators.

The Royal Docks Community School is an inner-city comprehensive school in the London Borough of Newham. It is in the poorest ward in the borough, the third poorest borough in the country. The school has a very high mobility rate as there are surplus places in schools in this part of the borough. The school has been on a journey of steady improvement. It was in special measures from March 2009 to March 2011. In June 2010 it became a Co-operative Trust School, and since the removal of the school from special measures in March 2011, we have used the co-operative values to underpin the ethos of the school. We are gradually moving from an autocratic system of leadership to a more democratic model which includes co-operative problem-solving.[1]

In this article [2] I will examine four particular aspects of a more co-operative problem-solving approach to the development of the school – the staff working party on the curriculum review, led by my Deputy Head Teacher, Anita Sarkar; the development of the student voice through the learning council, led by Assistant Head Teacher, Michala Aylward; the behaviour panel, led by an Associate Assistant Head Teacher, Steve Nichols; and the development of a group of student co-operators led by the Literacy Co-ordinator, Dawn Smith-Langridge.

A group of staff joined a staff working party on reviewing the curriculum for September 2013. We did not determine who should be part of the working

party and any one was able to join irrespective of their role in the school. A set of guidelines and terms of reference were agreed and the 'big question' posed was what do we want our students to be like when they leave school at 16, referring to skills and abilities, qualifications, and personal qualities. There were a number of vested interests represented at the working party as the outcomes would represent subject choices on offer for Year 10 for September 2013, the size of some departments, and the extent of teaching of some subjects across the school. All members of the working party agreed that all discussions would be respectful, confidential, honest and open. The working party met regularly – either weekly or fortnightly – after school and divided into two groups, one to discuss KS4 and one to discuss KS3. The principles of a broad and balanced curriculum and one which would meet the needs of all students were adopted. The outcome was an agreed curriculum and new timings of the school day based on a two-week timetable.

At the beginning of the academic year, the senior leadership team decided that we needed to do more work around student voice, based on the co-operative values of democracy, openness and honesty, and a number of groups were set up. A learning council comprising of 40 students from Years 7 to 11 was established; the focus of all discussion is learning and how students learn best. Initially the group was put together from nominations given by every head of department. After discussion had taken place about learning and how students learn best, the larger group has divided into smaller sub-groups to feedback to students during assemblies, to feedback to the senior leadership team, and to a whole staff briefing.

The feedback at whole school briefing informed staff that students liked getting immediate feedback and liked the way that Year 11 lessons really prepared them for their examinations. Some teachers have used that feedback to improve some aspects of practice. Other sub-groups have taken responsibility for display and created posters depicting positive learning traits, such as determination, organisation and co-operation, and these posters are displayed around school. Another sub-group will observe some lessons in the core subjects and feedback at department meetings later this term. Another group is writing a Learning Bulletin which will be published on the school website. Students from the Learning Council also spoke to the stakeholder's forum recently. The stakeholder's forum is made up of groups of school stakeholders – parents, staff, students, and members of the local community – and it is a key part of the co-operative trust organisation of the school. The stakeholder's forum gives the opportunity for staff and students to tell parents and others what is happening in the school and receive comments and views on the strategic direction of the school. This was also important during the discussion on the new curriculum.

Another important student voice group is the Behaviour Panel, this is made up of older students whose behaviour was poor when they were in lower year groups. They have been allocated to students in Year 8 and Year 9 whose

behaviour needs to improve. They mentor their students weekly, check their reports, and give them strategies and advice to improve their behaviour.

A Year 11 student is part of the student behaviour panel chosen to mentor Year 9 students with behaviour issues. He was chosen because in Year 8 and Year 9 he was in trouble in school and did not settle down until Year 10. He, along with the other members of the behaviour panel, meets his mentee every Friday morning, and during tutor time he looks at his report and talks through any problems around behaviour he has had during the week. If necessary, he takes his mentee to a teacher to talk through problems. They set targets for the next week and talk through how to prevent a problem. This is how the student describes how the process continues to help him:

As a mentor I have to watch that I don't do silly things because everything I do affects my mentee. I feel much better in myself that I can help others do what they need to do. I was always a confident student, my confidence has now been directed in a more positive way.

A key group in the stakeholder's forum has been the student co-operators. They first met together during tutor times in the last academic year. The purpose of this was to solve the problem of what membership of The Royal Docks Community School Co-operative Trust should be and how it could be explained to parents, the community, students and staff. We started with a mix of Year 10 and Year 8 students. This resulted in them putting together a presentation and leaflet to encourage parents and the community to become a member of the Royal Docks Co-operative Trust. This has now been presented at stakeholders meetings, a Year 11 parents' evening and the Elders tea party.

The members of the students' co-operators group say that they have benefitted from being a co-operator as they have got more involved in the life of the school, for example explaining what the Co-op is to parents at parents' evenings. Other students said:

The co-operative group has helped me to develop my English skills such as writing and speaking in front of different audiences, also it has helped me to find new friends and meet people who I haven't met before.

Being part of the group has made me realise what goes on in school and how the school system is improving our education. Being in the co-operative group taught me how to speak out loud and how to put my ideas into action.

Since the end of the last academic year the Year 10 students have increased from 4 students to about 10 when every student attends. Recently a number of Year 7s have been attending after school since they have developed relationships with the Year 10s. This academic year, whilst students are still working on how to develop membership of the Co-operative Trust, they are

also undertaking other projects. The first project was to set up a provision that should help other students and staff in the school which could be classed as a co-operative enterprise. After some research students realised that a number of students were eating crisps and chocolate for breakfast or having no breakfast at all. Therefore they decided to set up a breakfast club which was completely funded from their own money. Different students brought different products that were needed like tea, butter, sugar, cups, bread and jam. They then used the profits to continue to fund the buying of provisions. The hope is that the profits will be able to fund other co-operative enterprises, such as a gardening enterprise.

The project that they are now working on is how to engage with the needs within the community. So far a group of students have registered with Litter Action in order to set up a litter picking group, to show that the Royal Docks students not only care about their community, but also the environment in which they live. Although the students have started to set up projects they are still eager for other students to join the groups so that they can do more within the school and community. They are still working on developing membership and will be attending the coming Year 9 parents' evening to speak to parents. They also want to continue to encourage students to become part of the Co-operative Trust as well. They would love all Royal Docks students to be engaged in any extra-curriculum activity that has co-operative values at its heart.

These small activities at the Royal Docks Community School have already impacted on the behaviour and attitude of students at the school – for many they have signified a greater 'buy-in' to the direction of the school. It is developing their confidence and their independence. As a school in special measures, improvement had to be driven rapidly, and even when we came out of special measures, it was important to me as head teacher, and the rest of the senior leadership team drove on improvements. However, now that we can see that our improvements are more secure, I have spent more time encouraging staff to contribute more to the future direction of the school. Recently there have been two more examples of co-operative problem-solving. Staff at all levels have been invited to join a working party to look at the problem of low pupil numbers coming into the school, and staff have given a number of suggestions on promoting the school more positively in the community. Middle leaders are being asked to give more direct feedback on how they think the school should improve further and they are given the opportunity to do this in organised meetings and through informal meetings with the head teacher. The Royal Docks Community School consists of a team of highly committed and dedicated staff who want to see the school succeed – it has been a difficult and challenging journey, but being a co-operative school has helped us on that journey as we work towards greater success.

Notes

- [1] The notion of 'cooperative problem-solving' used here is based on discussions at a conference held at Cambridge University in 2012, and the joint position statement subsequently issued by the participants (see: <http://henrytam.blogspot.co.uk/2012/10/cooperative-problem-solving-key-to.html>). A more detailed exposition is given in: Henry Tam (2013) Cooperative Problem-Solving and Education, *FORUM*, 55(2), pp. 185-201.
- [2] My thanks go to the following teachers for their contributions to this article and the work they are doing in leading these groups: Michala Aylward, Justin Hopgood, Dawn Smith Langridge, and Steve Nichols. Most of all I would like to thank the following students for their contribution to this article and who are brilliant ambassadors for The Royal Docks Community School: Anita Sarkar, Raheem Smiles, Hana Saeed, Ilona Mackeviciute, Monee Kazeem, and Taylor Mulhern.

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