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Making Co-operative Ideas Work

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ABSTRACT Reddish Vale Technology College was the first co-operative trust in England. The democratic and co-operative nature of the experiment mean that students have gained a greater voice in the organisation of the school. As a result, new social enterprises, environmental interventions, connections with the community and with the wider co-operative movement have all thrived. The importance of taking action in partnership with learners, staff, parents, partners and community all contribute to the development of a more autonomous and democratic form of education. This example is understood within the context of the Schools Co-operative Society.

Reddish Vale was England's first co-operative trust in which a one person, one vote democracy and a right to parity of voice was to be taken as a given from the start. Our story is in part a description of our struggle to create something different together. Here I offer a reflection on what has worked well, where our concerns currently lie and, finally, a wider view of the growing movement in co-operative approaches to education in England.

On March 2008, after two years work in the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) Pathfinder programme, we opened as the UK's first Co-operative Trust in Stockport, the Reddish Vale Technology College. It was 'our' co-operative. We had received lots of help and support from the co-operative movement in our endeavours to establish a different educational offer, based on an internationally shared set of co-operative values and principles (International Co-operative Alliance, 1995). We were a multi-stakeholder co-operative school made up of voluntary members from staff, community, parents and carers, and partners in the public, private and third sectors. I became the voluntary CEO. A one person, one vote democracy and a right to parity of voice were established as a given from the start. Importantly, and what made it different, was that the learners were included as full members of the co-operative. Young people had the same rights as any of the other adult members involved and these were enshrined in the articles of our new charitable trust. This co-operative charitable foundation collectively owned the land and everything on it. We worked to

develop co-operative educational approaches which were often in direct opposition to competitive norms. Our ideological starting position was based on co-operation not competition. Experiments and research followed in co-operative pedagogy, curriculum and technology. Multiple co-operative environments were created across the school and within the local community, which delivered a real tangible dividend through active engagement by stakeholders. Award winning social enterprises, environmental interventions and connections with other co-operatives grew and thrived. In a UK school at this time, it felt like we were developing a radical alternative to an education market dominated by the top down factory farming of young people. One teacher noted that:

> I have been working at the College for four months and I feel as though the school's practice of encouraging learners to be part of a democracy and allowing them to feel trusted enough to contribute to discussions, really does have a significant impact on the general ethos of the school.

Students at the school were enthused by the potential for change which this approach unleashed. Two learners cut to the heart of the shift in claiming that:

> This is about changing the world for the better through our own actions (Jordan)

> It's an education created by us specifically for us. (Lia)

Pupils at the school aimed to bring about sustainable change and connect their education to the wider world around them. Local social, environmental and economic issues were connected to wider global changes. Fundraising, the development of social enterprises and open democratic debate all contributed to this change. This interconnectivity helped to generate further commitment to this new co-operative approach. It was not a light and fluffy utopian dream, but a practical and grounded attempt to develop different choices and empower others to do the same.

Reddish Vale aims to have a long-term impact upon the wider world. Indeed, there is some evidence that those leaving school have continued to incorporate co-operative and democratic ideas into their lives. For example, one past student, Ashley Simpson, has become an ambassador for co-operative schools. In a speech to a school partnership in Essex he argued that:

> This Co-operative framework, works – I have seen the transformational effect on my community, and individuals within my community, and even me – without this democratic voice I would not be stood before you today.

Thus, educational, social and personal transformation have been closely interrelated in the years since the formation of our co-operative. Simpson

(2011) has explained more about his individual journey in an article in a special edition of the *Journal of Co-operative Studies*.

However, the student embrace of co-operative values can at times be both difficult and lead to criticisms of the school. The emphasis on values has encouraged some students to develop a voice as in the claim by one that:

> As a pupil, I quite often feel overlooked. It seems that if you are not producing every piece of work at an A* quality or failing miserably at every GCSE thinkable, you receive little or no attention at all. The clue is in the word co-operation, but it seems the main source of this is between schools and outside companies, not between senior staff and students, despite its obvious importance in a well-functioning school. I and many of my peers feel oppressed at school and there are very few staff willing to speak up and make a difference. Democracy is more of 'agree with me, or don't speak at all' policy, which is not democratic in the slightest.

Within Reddish Vale, we have aimed to develop new forms of human flourishing through specific co-operative action. These have included: addressing the issue of food poverty across the curriculum and publicising it via Al Jazeera TV news coverage and through global poverty workshops; community growing initiatives and a Green Schools programme with the Co-operative Group; and finally, bidding for more money to the Big Lottery to make a long-term impact upon sustainable living. In celebrating these activities and choices within community wide events, we raised awareness of the equity and equality rewards for those involved, as well as the gains in understanding and sharing of new knowledge. There are considerable benefits to be gained from an outward looking co-operative approach which is becoming better understood with wider stakeholder engagement and research into this area (Facer et al, 2012).

This flourishing however can easily be ignored, underplayed or not recognised as a co-constructed co-operative alternative to competitive standards improvement. One Year 11 pupil noted the dangers of using co-operation purely as a badge with little action to back it up:

> Kids do not want a handshake from a member of staff they don't know. They want to be told they are doing well, made to feel as though they are individually appreciated.

We have also found that the continuation of a competitive narrative can undermine the potential gains to be made from mutuality. There remains a danger of losing accountability within the growth of co-operative schools that, if left unaddressed, may reinforce a democratic deficit and undermine agency and collective action.

In addition, we found, in a culture heavy with competitive angst, the desire to work co-operatively within and across other schools has not always been forthcoming. For me, either the collective understanding or the will for

co-operative endeavours was not present or was being suppressed by community leaders who perceived this approach to be a threat to their position and existing power dynamics. Such actions reflect a potential conflict between collective self-interest and interest in the collective common good.

In terms of our co-operative work, some people just 'get it'. There is also the concern, however that an individual will espouse co-operative ideals while working in their own self-interest. Stakeholders quickly see through this shroud of co-operation. Their confidence in co-operation undermined, they simply and silently withdraw backwards towards a competitive status quo, falling back upon ingrained power relationships. This interplay, however, results in a reputational risk for co-operative approaches. The solution for members, in open and honest challenge, is to express their democratic voice and to expose self-interest where it suppresses the common good. Democratic fellowship is discussed by Fielding and Moss (2011), but can appear to many as counter cultural and breaking unspoken taboos, although students have articulated it in straightforward terms:

> It's about getting the small bits right together and the larger consequences will follow. (Year 11 vocational pupil)

This interconnection between specific detail and broader social change has been appreciated by many (Woodin, 2011). For instance, a school governor said of cooperative values:

> If this co-operativeness internalises then we, as a positive force, can move out into the community to fully develop a co-operative society within Reddish. We need to move from a 'voice in the wilderness' to an accepted understanding of how we fit in to a co-operative society and how by moving the community forward we benefit by moving the internal organization of school forward too.

Gail Davidge from Manchester Metropolitan University has been working with us to better understand these changes and gives us clear food for thought through her research:

> How individual members interpret the shared values and principles of co-operation remains a contentious issue and has become a recurring theme of the stories of co-operation that I have collected so far in my PhD research project (Re)considering the place of democracy in education: an ethnographic study. Cries of 'they just don't get it' have been repeated throughout the conversations I have had with a variety of co -operative school members from the youngest of students to the most experienced teachers and senior school managers.
>
> Resolving this tension is a real challenge for a co-operative model of education and for embedding a democratic approach to 21st century school life. One of the biggest obstacles to enabling a deeper engagement with democratic subjectivity within these

> schools appears to stem from how notions of collective accountability and responsibility are understood and enacted. Whilst some members take great comfort and strength from developing solidarity amongst members, others fear the repercussions of failing to attend to the pressure to 'perform' against the dominant neo-liberal educational agenda. This weakens the development of a shared co-operative culture.
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> That said, a number of students have also articulated a growing sense of agency as a result of participating within co-operative frameworks of education and demonstrate a deep understanding of what it means to have shared responsibility and compassion for others. This offers hope that despite the relative infancy of this educational model, young people are beginning to engage with the ethical and political complexities of what 'being' a member of a co-operative school could mean for developing social justice in the wider world. (Davidge, forthcoming 2014)

Utilising research to reflect back on our own school practices is proving to be a useful developmental tool.

Co-operation, Politics and School Improvement

In 2012, with Kellogg's College, Oxford and the think tank, Mutuo (2012), we met with other new co-operatives from health, housing, leisure and energy. The most successful outcomes from these different sectors had resulted from a synergy between strong co-operative leadership in alliance with grass-roots action from below. The ownership and development of successful co-operative approaches was placed within a wider community setting and framed by co-operative values and principles.

These ideas have received widespread sympathy from policy makers. It is ironic that the co-operative approach has extended well beyond the standards-based policy, yet all three political parties have expressed their support for this burgeoning movement. For example, who said the following?

> Down the road from here, Reddish Vale City Technology College is consulting on whether it can establish itself as a co-operative using recent legislation on Trust schools.
>
> The Co-op Bank is involved in supporting one of the new Manchester Academies.
>
> I welcome these initiatives and I want to see more of them across Britain.
>
> In other countries co-operative education is central to the system. Over 100 schools in Sweden are co-ops. Over 600 schools in Spain.

> So I want to explore how we can create a new generation of co-operative schools in Britain – funded by the taxpayer but owned by parents and the local community.
>
> This is the right place to make the argument for co-ops.

Answer – David Cameron, in a speech in Manchester on 8 November 2007, when launching the Conservative Co-operative Movement (Cameron, 2007).

Yet policy contexts also represent a significant constraint. The reality for many schools in England is that they must operate within a stringent three stage model for system wide school improvement operated by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted). At one end of the spectrum there is the 'unsatisfactory' competitive threat of 'naming and shaming' and the imposition of urgent and dramatic special measures. Schools may then progress to the second stage in which their systems, structures and processes meet performance targets and benchmarks and are judged to be 'good' according to a neo-liberal standards agenda. 'Highly performing' schools are able to complete this journey by moving from 'good to outstanding' through the development of appropriate standards within a 'world class' competitive frame. Inevitably, this framework has resulted in local winners and losers, plus a growth of inequality between both individuals and schools. Our own research revealed that continuing the competitive standards agenda only resulted in limited increases in performance measures.

A more challenging and democratic way forward would be to develop a co-operative values-led improvement strategy based upon mutual gains for all. The introduction of a concept of a fourth stage to this competitive policy develops a co-operative alternative to the competitive ideological norm. Even within a neo-liberal competitive position it is possible to develop a 'co-operate together to compete' outlook. The expansion of this approach offers the potential for a co-operative alternative to flourish across different sectors and communities. It paves the way to raise standards while also increasing individual equity and equality. In this way, a co-ordinated co-operative system provides a model to transform future possibilities and initiate new forms of sustainable educational and social growth.

However, without a co-operative approach, the degrees of separation between institutions, for example primary and secondary, can deepen and widen. Not working within a shared value set can result in a narrowing of focus upon simple outcome measures, levels progression or key stage attainment results. The lack of open and honest dialogue between people increases the pressures faced by schools and the individuals within them. One teacher, consistently graded as an outstanding practitioner, complained, 'I don't know how long I can do this for anymore'.

The Wider View

In contrast, there are an increasing number of schools, groups of schools and larger geographical areas, and even whole councils that have begun to work co-operatively across institutions and individuals. As the numbers of co-operative schools top 400 the question arises 'are co-operative schools the answer?' (Brown, 2012). A diverse number of communities in the UK, all from different starting points, but all within the same shared set of co-operative values, ethics and principles, are answering that it is. Sean Rogers from the Co-operative College has noted that there are 130 schools in co-op trusts in Devon and Cornwall alone. The 21 leaders of Labour's Co-operative Councils Network have set out a joint vision to 'share power and decision-making more equally to achieve the best outcomes for citizens and their communities' (Reed & Usher, 2013). This can only act to further support the drive towards the co-operative turn and increase the mutual dividend from cross sector drivers for whole system improvement as explored by Glatter (2012).

Among schools, systematic and supportive relations have been developing on a widening scale. Work between co-op schools has been supported by the Co-operative Group and Co-operative College. In 2009, this network was formalised with the establishment of the Schools Co-operative Society (SCS). As the current Chair of the SCS and one of its founder members, I would explain it like this:

- We are a fast growing number of individual co-operatives who are choosing to work together within the SCS.
- We are united by a common set of co-operative values, ethics and principles shared with a global movement.
- We exist on the individual goodwill, funding and efforts of our members.
- Our co-operative members act to bring people together locally, regionally and nationally with a common approach for mutual gain in education, economic, social and environmental wellbeing of our communities.
- Our purpose is to provide a democratic voice and opportunities for shared actions.
- We help people develop and maintain their co-operative approaches, explaining and exploring this with others. To quote a SCS head teacher, 'Together we are stronger, facing outwards from our communities we find solutions'.
- We are about turning good intentions towards unity of actions into something that creates a real, positive difference for our members and their communities. We do this through delivering training, consultancy, shared procurement and services, and finally, undertaking joint research and development activities.
- Our interactions are supported by open and honest democratic dialogue across our member networks. We share ideas, data, interventions, resources, outcomes, challenge and support to improve standards and outcomes for all.

In the establishment of this new secondary co-operative of co-operatives, we hope to build our strength, although these are early days. In order for this approach to be effective in the current fracturing of the education system (Glatter, 2012), schools need to engage in a paradigm shift towards co-operative approaches and whole system improvement.

Changes

The democratic involvement and engagement through membership within the co-operative movement is understood by doing, not by top down or arm's length, wait-and-see politics. You and your institution have to be prepared to 'get stuck in' to create open and honest dialogue where things change:

> I think one of the things that I didn't fully realise with Reddish Vale Co-operative Trust is that we need to be more outwardly focused, that we can't just be a co-operative by ourselves and that perhaps the bulk of the work that we do is not seen by us on a daily basis. Are we then too focused on what we have always done in an environment that seems to prevent the development of internal co-operativeness? If so then a reinforcement of values is needed, used and explained in everyday situations to both staff and learners. (Staff Member)

Co-operative legal models for trusts, academies, free schools and studio schools are all available, but this is only a starting point representing an initial acceptance of co-operative values, ethics and principles sitting at the heart of the institution. In our experience, active engagement in this legal process needs to have strong leadership not only to support learning, but also to challenge the dominant competitive culture. Drive needs to come from all to form and develop an effective board or governing body that works through the leadership of the institution to create the environmental conditions to develop a co-operative learning community. In work we have undertaken with Summerhill on their 90th celebration year of their democratic community, an ideas-sharing party of our pupils, staff and community members came to agree that we were in a process of preparing for a time of democratic fellowship, and we needed to just get on and do it. For both institutions and individuals the hardest part in the turn towards co-operation is the beginning of letting go of mindsets forged within a neo-liberal competitive ideology to create new ways of being.

The turn towards co-operative approaches are built around the creation of mutual advantage for those involved in pursuit of the common good. This sharing of actions is a strength that is held to account by an on-going open and honest democratic dialogue. We found that, without continuing dialogue, a sense of detachment from a co-operative approach builds and develops which can result in a lack of understanding and a lack of progression away from the current status quo.

One advantage of working daily with young people is that they force you to redefine what is possible and teach you to actively pursue your vision. For example, last year we played a small role in support of the request of the Dalai Lama wanting to talk to the youth of the UK 12 months on from the riots. Over 10,000 young people took part in what we insisted should be a free event in the Manchester Arena about the basics of establishing and engaging in dialogue within the twenty-first century (BBC, 2012). Without the support and commitment shown by young people, staff and partners, this event, and many other positive things, would not have happened.

> I thought it was inspirational and fun, it also changed a little bit of me and the others. (Josh, Year 10)

In our experience, educational strategy formed without the equity and equality through democracy between learners, staff, parents, partners and the wider community narrows and lessens any mutual positive impact to be gained in a move towards co-operative solutions. Having a stake, a voice and capital in a fair and socially just active learning environment through a living democracy is what we have been developing together. This is the foundation of the current wave of school improvement founded around a co-operative approach and is developed through self-help and self-responsibility.

We understood how we could transform future opportunities by working co-operatively together, now. Imagine over 400, 500 or 1000 schools 'getting it' too and taking a co-operative turn together, establishing an active dialogue across the UK and creating a UK network of schools with 'an education by us specifically for us'.

If you want to join these conversations and actions, go talk to your local co-op school, trust or academy and get involved. If you are not sure where they are, or just want more information, visit the School Co-operative Society's website at: http://www.co-operativeschools.coop

You can also:

Twitter: philarnold3
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Or give us a call: 0161 477 3544.

You can even write, but it's only when we put our thoughts into real actions that things change.

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