

Co-operative Education in an Independent Scotland?

Hugh Donnelly

In 2014 Scotland will hold a referendum on independence but regardless of the outcome there are long-standing and significant differences between the Scottish education system and that in the rest of the UK. Whereas in recent years England has seen the emergence of many co-operative trust schools, this has not been the case in Scotland where the approach has been more to support the placing of co-operatives at the heart of the curriculum. This has involved the support of the Co-operative Education Trust for Scotland which has developed a number of strategies. This short discussion piece briefly describes the education context in Scotland, the likelihood of the adoption of the co-operative school model, the Co-operative Education Trust for Scotland role in promoting co-operation in education and other potential opportunities for co-operation in education. It also speculates as to whether anything would change after the referendum given either a “Yes” or “No” majority.

Brief Overview of Education Politics in Scotland

The Scottish electorate is due to vote on the question “Should Scotland be an independent country?” on 18 September 2014. There has been no opinion poll in living memory to indicate the likelihood of a majority ‘Yes’ vote but there are strong indications that increased devolution would gain majority support. So whilst it may seem unnecessary to question what policies, structures and approaches might prevail under independence, it is reasonable to assume that a ‘No’ vote will not automatically mean that the status quo would be maintained. So what effect would any constitutional and political changes have on the education system in Scotland and what place would co-operative approaches to education have? My perception and the mood from schools is that currently, Scottish education is very much driven from the centre with schools feeling they have little autonomy and little scope for local innovation.

The Scottish Parliament has legislative control over education, with Education Scotland (an Executive Agency of the Scottish Government) tasked with improving the quality of the education system. State schools are owned and operated by the 32 local authorities which act as Education Authorities. Formally, there is no national curriculum but the reality is that all Scottish local authorities tend to conform to the nationally defined guidelines, the current format being contained in Curriculum for Excellence (Education Scotland, 2013). Assessment is similar to the English model and the responsibility of the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA), which is the national awarding and accrediting body in Scotland. Inspections and audits of educational standards are conducted by Education Scotland.

Co-operative Schools in Scotland?

Will Scotland follow England and enable co-operative schools to be established? In England, schools set up co-operative trusts and the land and assets of the school are passed over from Local Authority control to the co-operative trust. As well as these governance changes, the schools agree to embody co-operative values and principles. It is difficult to see this happening in Scotland, regardless of the impending referendum’s outcome. Despite fairly widespread publicity and knowledge of the English co-operative schools set-up amongst Scottish educators, I am not aware of a single enquiry from a Scottish school to go down this route. Co-operative schools now represent more than 2% of English schools (The Ecologist, 2012). On the same pro rata basis Scotland should have 54. There are currently none.

Whilst probably no one would argue against the principles of co-operative schools, the political reality in Scotland is such that it would represent a huge risk to encourage the removal of a Scottish school from local authority control. The perception in Scotland would be that these co-operative schools are being removed from the mainstream. This is the case for a small number of Co-operative Academies in England but the co-operative movement there would argue that the majority of co-operative schools are still maintained by the local authority and therefore still part of that set up. That distinction has not been well articulated in Scotland. In the 1980s, when opting-out of local authority control was available, only two schools did so. They very quickly opted back in.

East Lothian, with six secondary schools, pursued an opt-out option but dropped it fairly quickly after a public consultation. 95% of young Scots attend their local comprehensive school and the perception amongst parents was that they were happy with that service. The Commission on School Reform (2013) reached a conclusion about Scottish Education in general. It was deemed good but 'could do better'

the performance of Scotland's schools is good and remarkably consistent but that, taken as a whole, the system no longer ranks among the world's best".

The report also highlighted the need for schools to be given more autonomy, an obvious nod in the direction of co-operative schools, but stopped short of arguing the case for complete withdrawal from local authority control.

A Role for the Co-operative Education Trust Scotland (CETS)

CETS was established in 2006 to seek to embed co-operative models and values as enshrined in the International Co-operative Alliance *Statement* (1995) on the Scottish education system. CETS work is principally about ensuring that young people are taught about co-operatives, the 'co-operative difference', and co-operative values and principles. The launch of *Curriculum for Excellence* (CfE) in 2010 worked strongly in favour of these objectives and practices. At the core of CfE is the concept of working across different disciplines and arguably this helps facilitate co-operative approaches to teaching and the opportunity to focus on co-operatives as the context for learning. There are a variety of approaches that we are taking at CETS to meet our objectives and work with the existing education frameworks to embed co-operative values, particularly within the context of CfE.

Foremost, we have developed a range of downloadable resources with professional development opportunities for teachers to learn how to use the materials. From a whole school perspective, we have developed the Scottish School of Co-operation (SSC) award (Co-operative Education Trust Scotland, 2012). Schools can work to achieve this status by making a top level commitment to enshrine co-operative values and principles within their school's mission, have a young co-operative enterprise or credit union functioning within the school and hold a major co-operative event to promote co-operatives. Within the curriculum, secondary schools are encouraged to take up the CETS SQA Customised Awards in Co-operative Studies (Co-operative Education Trust Scotland, 2013) which is a major step forward in embedding both co-operative values and the co-operative model of enterprise into the existing system. Although successful, a major obstacle to a more significant uptake of these awards is that whilst the CfE philosophy looks to work across subject areas, the rest of the system has not quite caught up in terms of accreditation, timetabling or teaching qualifications. In Ken Robinson's terminology we are still running schools on the basis of a Victorian factory batch-processing system as opposed to a highly flexible, innovative, just-in-time, self-managed teams structure (Robinson, 2010).

Other Opportunities?

Edinburgh and Glasgow are developing their 'Co-operative Council' models and a parents' group in the south of Edinburgh has expressed some interest in a co-operatively owned and

managed new build. The current thrust of CETS in Edinburgh is to work with schools to achieve Scottish School of Co-operation status within the current structures; it is likely Glasgow will take a similar approach.

There might however be possibilities in terms of the creation of something new. The proposed new town development of Owenstown in Lanarkshire, which would be a modern interpretation of New Lanark, has yet to receive planning permission from South Lanarkshire Council. Should it go ahead on the scale proposed, it would require two primary and one secondary school. The education officers have expressed an interest in looking at some form of innovative, co-operative approach. However, the decision on planning rests with politicians.

“A Journey of a Thousand Miles Starts with One Small Step”

If co-operative education, as defined by CETS, is about raising awareness of co-operative values and principles, the co-operative model of enterprise, and the co-operative option in general, then it may be that the status of Scotland as an independent nation, part of a more federal UK or simply one that has some more devolved powers, is less relevant than the inclination of the electorate and Scottish political parties to move their thinking and policies.

Much of the drive behind councils becoming ‘Co-operative Councils’, is about the empowerment of local communities. I do not know of a more direct form of democracy than a co-operative, so perhaps somewhere out there is the possibility of co-operative schools taking off in Scotland.

CETS has just led a session of the Scottish Parliament Cross Party Group on Co-operatives on the future of co-operative education in Scotland. The point has been well made that the co-operative movement in Scotland has exemplified self-help and self-responsibility in getting co-operative education to its current state. If we are to make the quantum leap to ensuring all Scottish pupils are afforded the opportunity of discovering the ‘Co-operative Option’ then the Scottish Government needs to pick up the baton and truly adopt our values and principles as a major investment in our young human assets.

The Author

Hugh Donnelly is currently Director of the Co-operative Education Trust Scotland. Prior to joining CETS, Hugh spent most of his adult working life promoting and providing support to co-operative and employee owned enterprises including a period as CEO of the employee owned EOS Consultancy. He continues to promote these democratic enterprise models as a director of the European Federation of Employee Shareowners.

References

- Co-operative Education Trust Scotland (2012) *Make Your School Co-operative*. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.cets.coop/ssc/ssc.html>. [Accessed 2013].
- Co-operative Education Trust Scotland (2013) *Virtual Learning Environment*. [Online]. Available at: <http://cets.coop/moodle>
- Education Scotland (2013) *What is Curriculum for Excellence?* [Online]. Available at: <http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/thecurriculum/whatiscurriculumforexcellence/index.asp>
- International Co-operative Alliance (1995) Statement on Co-operative Identity. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.ica.coop/coop/principles.html> [Accessed 2013].
- Robinson, K (2010) *Changing Education Paradigms*. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.thersa.org/events/rsaanimate/animate/rsa-animate-changing-paradigms> [Accessed 2013].
- The Ecologist (2012) *The Rise and Rise of Co-op Schools*. [Online] Available at: http://www.theecologist.org/blogs_and_comments/commentators/other_comments/1523675/the_rise_and_rise_of_coop_schools.html [Accessed 2013].