



Co-operative Schools in the UK



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An overview of recent developments in the application of a co-operative values-driven approach to the ethos, governance, curriculum and pedagogy of a growing number of schools across England (150+, primary and secondary). What are the threats and opportunities for co-operative schools in a marketised state education system?

The emergence of co-operative schools in England has attracted recent media attention (Mansell, 2011) as a potential alternative to the Coalition Government's marketisation policy which is pushing both secondary, and now primary, schools down the route to Academy status. Meanwhile, some within the co-operative movement have expressed serious fears about the movement becoming entwined with the neoliberal project that has been mapping changes in the school system since the 1980s.

Public schools funded by the state but run by private providers are a feature of many national school systems (Hatcher, 2005) with the US charter schools and Swedish 'Friskola' providing the blueprint for the model being propagated by David Cameron and Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Education since May 2010, despite doubts over the success of the US and Swedish experiences (Allen, 2010). Similarly, the top-down reform of the English school system begun by the Tony Blair administration, and the 'standards agenda', failed to produce any major improvements despite a narrowing focus on academic and economic success as measures of educational achievement. The record number of top grades awarded in GCSE and A-levels mask a widening equality gap, and a failure to address those qualities and capacities which should define "an educated 19 year-old in this day and age" according to the *Nuffield Review* (Pring et al, 2009).

The direction of travel is clear: from the illusion of parental choice created by the 1988 Education Act, endorsed and expanded through the Labour administration's city academies, to Michael Gove's statement that he has "no ideological objection" to businesses making profits from the new generation of academies and free schools (Barkham and Curtis, 2010).

Meanwhile the changing nature of work, growing inequality, the ethical issues raised by the banking crisis, and the threats posed by climate change, demand a response which must begin in our education system if we are to achieve sustainable social and economic security for both communities and individuals.

The earliest pioneers of co-operation recognised education as fundamental to community wellbeing and as key to building the capacity to transform the social and economic order of the nineteenth century (Gurney, 1996). This mainly took the form of adult lectures and classes, libraries, reading rooms, and vocational training. A handful of co-operative schools were established in the latter part of the nineteenth century by local co-operative societies. In 1872 the Wallsend Co-operative opened a school with 130 children, aged 5 to 12, drawn from streets adjacent to its store. The school was managed by an education committee elected by the Society's members (Rogers, 2010). However, the need for such provision of elementary education disappeared as the state began to assume responsibility for this.

With the slow decline of co-operatives business in the UK during the second half of the twentieth century not only did the movement's own education provision diminish but its place within the school curriculum became consigned to the occasional mention in the history syllabus. As early as 1928 A V Alexander MP, a Co-operative Party supported Member of Parliament, described a visit he had made to a school:

I asked them if they could tell me how many wives Henry VIII had and what were their

names. The majority of boys in the class could answer that question straight away, but when I asked if they could tell me who was Robert Owen and when he was born, or on what day the British co-operative movement was founded, they could not give me any answer.

Co-operatives as a form of economic organisation disappeared almost entirely from business and enterprise education in both schools and higher education courses (Kalmi, 2007).

With the turn of the millennium, and the UK co-operative renaissance, the idea that co-operatives had a place in the school curriculum, and even in the governance of schools, began to re-emerge. The first proposal for mutual school governance models came in 2003 with the suggestion that the movement could sponsor specialist Business and Enterprise Colleges, develop ongoing links with schools, and explore avenues into enterprise education (Wilson and Taylor, 2003). The idea was taken up by the Co-operative Group, the UK's largest consumer society, which, the following year, launched a strategic initiative working through the specialist schools programme to explore how co-operative values could contribute to policy concerns about raising standards in schools. Within four years the impact on the sponsored schools was showing clearly, with rising examination scores and improved Ofsted gradings reported:

Schools are not just about examination results, they are about developing the whole person. Because we have been able to base our citizenship and PSHE on co-operative values we are developing very good skills for young people. When Ofsted came in to judge us on Citizenship they said it was one of the significant reasons why attainment in this school has increased so dramatically. – Dave Boston, Head Teacher, Sir Thomas Boughey Co-operative Business and Enterprise College (Wilson and Mills, 2008).

Schools from the specialist business and enterprise colleges group have worked closely with the Co-operative College to develop a range of curriculum materials. These have included resources to support the Young Co-operatives programme, a scheme through which young people can set up and run their own co-operative businesses. Young Co-operatives business models include horticulture, waste management and recycling, and fair and ethical trading activities. Many of these teaching resources have been widely distributed to schools across England through the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCFS) funded Enterprise Network (Enterprise Network, 2011), beginning, in a small way, to address the absence of the co-operative model from the mainstream curriculum. A pack on co-operatives and Fairtrade was, for example, distributed to over 4000 primary schools and a great deal of positive feedback received.

Whilst the success of the specialist business and enterprise colleges was significant it was also fragile. Anecdotal evidence suggests that co-operative values had begun to play a major role in the ethos and improvement of these schools. But it was clear that a change of headteacher, or of the political complexion of the governing body, could easily reverse the process.

Following the 2006 Education Act, a new breed of school emerged in England. Trust schools share many features of the faith-based voluntary aided and voluntary controlled schools. They embody the Blairite belief that bringing in the 'great and the good' to help run schools would address the ongoing problem of standards where previous initiatives had failed. Under this model, local authority assets – buildings and land – were transferred to trust ownership, and the trust took on the responsibility for the employment of all the school staff. Trust partners included further and higher education institutions, health, sporting and business enterprises.

The trust model offered the co-operative movement the opportunity it needed to cement relationships with schools on a long-term basis and to embed an ethos based on co-operative values (International Co-operative Alliance, 1995) – self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity, and solidarity. A variant on the standard trust model was endorsed by then education minister Ed Balls, in which external partner trustees were joined by others elected from a multi-stakeholder membership co-operative. The constituencies of membership included parents, carers, staff, students, and the local community. The first co-operative trust school, Reddish Vale Technology College, opened in February 2008. During the three years that

followed, the concept spread by word of mouth and by the summer of 2011 150 schools across England had joined co-operative Trusts.

I am part of the Co-operative Trust here at RVTC. At first there was a lot of debate whether or not turning our school into a co-operative would benefit us (the students) in the long run, but as the school changed, so did everything else. Students gained a powerful voice that became just as equally heard as the voice of the teachers is. RVTC became 'our' school, and not just another dictatorship-like ran school (even though Head Teachers, or anyone else for that matter, don't like to use the word dictatorship when in reference to 'their' school). Jordan, Year 11, Reddish Vale Technology College (Co-operative College, 2010).

Each co-operative trust school has its own approach to membership development. Campsmount Technology College is located north of Doncaster and serves the ex-coal mining communities of Askern, Campsall and Norton. The community has struggled to recover from the devastating impact of the closure of the pit in the 1980s by this dominant employer. Headteacher Andy Sprakes believes the co-operative trust will ensure that the community, learners and other stakeholders have a key strategic role in the development of learning opportunities and service provision that will impact on educational standards and improve life chances across the community. At Birches Head High School in Stoke on Trent the co-operative trust has become a focus for community engagement with the school. Meetings take place each month and include items such as agency presentations, partnership mapping, wanted and offered, funding, gender stereotypes and networking. Over 50 individual members from 25 agencies have attended meetings over the last year. The Trust has been developing a community involvement model in the form of a spider diagram, for use online by parents and the wider community.

The majority of co-operative trusts are constructed as clusters – groups of schools working together for the benefit of the local community. Following decades of encouragement to compete to fill places, many have found the idea of working closely with their neighbours somewhat alien. Primary schools harbour suspicions about the motives of their secondary colleagues and are wary of losing their autonomy. The benefits – mutual support, shared procurement and services, co-ordinated curriculum, smooth transition (from primary to secondary), and a strong local voice, have proved to outweigh these fears and these trusts are now offering parents and students a seamless school experience from five to 18. Many are now looking for ways to involve nursery and further education providers either formally or informally in their Trust. A pathfinder project to develop a mutual model for the further education sector is now being pioneered by Stockport College.

As the number of co-operative trust schools has grown a clear need has emerged for more formal curriculum inputs and appropriate training for teachers to embed their understanding and application of the co-operative values. Working with awarding body ASDAN¹, the Co-operative College has developed materials providing a progression in co-operative studies, from Stepping Stones for primary age children through to the Certificate of Personal Effectiveness through Co-operative Studies (CoPE), a GCSE equivalent-qualification. All the awards develop both theoretical and practical understanding of co-operative values through hands-on, group-based tasks. The CoPE programme has received the thumbs-up from staff and students alike. Scott Taylor, Director of Alternative Curriculum at Sir Thomas Boughey High School is enthusiastic about the award:

I don't give them anything. I say here's the blank, go and do it. They learn from doing it themselves and overcoming any problems together. That's worth an A* in anyone's book. School is not just about A*s and top sets – it's about where students have ended up from where they started. Everybody has got a role to play and that is what being co-operative is about.

Sir Thomas Boughey student Leigham Reilly also believes the ASDAN programme has helped him develop a new range of skills:

It has helped me bond with people inside and outside of school, especially older people who have a stereotype of teenagers that we all drink and litter. The most important thing is being able to see how much we have improved our school – we can show our school off now and the rest of the school comment on how well we've done and made the school better as a place. I can speak as an individual and as a team now. As the weeks progressed we have really got to know each other. We're like a family at school – it is something to look forward to on a Monday. We stick up for each other in and out of lessons. We listen to each other and help each other out with anything that might be a struggle.

Lipson Community College in Plymouth is a school where co-operative values are enshrined not just in the governance and curriculum but in every aspect of teaching and learning. Principal Steve Baker believes that the financial crisis has really highlighted the need for schools to work with ethical partners. "Working with a Co-operative Society as opposed to a PLC means people, not profit, are the bottom line. It is about aspiring not to have more, but to be more." Baker argues that the co-operative model is "not about the privatisation of education but about giving local people a greater say in how their schools are run". Lipson's work in the development of a unique pedagogy for co-operative schools in the UK is described elsewhere in this journal.

Joining the global co-operative movement has opened up a range of international opportunities for schools. Three co-operative schools in Yorkshire have recently linked up with three schools in a rural and seriously deprived area of Kwazulu Natal, South Africa, and are working towards curriculum, teacher, and student exchanges. A mapping of the incidence of school co-operatives in other parts of the world is flagging up a wide range of models in countries from Poland to Malaysia, and Spain to Argentina. Whilst governance structures and curriculum interests vary, the underpinning values provide a common platform for future international collaborations. The first exchange of teachers between English and Spanish co-operative schools is planned for 2012.

The capacity of a strong values-driven approach to bring about school improvement is becoming widely recognised by a range of professionals (Pring, 2009), both in terms of government's favoured measures (GCSE targets, Ofsted inspection grades, and now the E-bac) and equally in developing individuals and communities with the skills and attitudes needed to face the current and future social and economic challenges – The Brigshaw Co-operative Trust on the outskirts of Leeds is aiming for each of its eight schools to be outstanding within two years (Lepkowska, 2011). This will be achieved, it believes, with collaboration and mutual support. Development Director of the Trust Peter Laurance believes the co-operative ethos allows children to take on more responsibility and to shape what happens in their school. "There is ample evidence to show the impact this has on behaviour and attendance", and a strong referral and pastoral system has all but eliminated exclusions.

The basic principles of the co-operative trust school – stakeholder membership and democratic participation in the school governance, community engagement, a co-operative-values driven ethos, co-operative learning structures, and the visibility of the co-operative model as a form of economic and social organisation within the curriculum – have begun to define a more generic model of co-operative school. Following the success of its sponsorship of the Business and Enterprise specialist schools, the Co-operative Group has gone on to become the sponsor of three 'type 1' academies (those managed by an external business 'sponsor') in Manchester, Stoke-on-Trent, and Leeds (The Co-operative Academy of Manchester, 2010).

Michael Gove's invitation to successful schools to convert to academy status (Department for Education (DfE), 2010) was viewed by many community schools as tantamount to inviting turkeys to vote for Christmas. A number of co-operative trust schools recognised the inevitability of the Coalition Government's plans and decided it would be preferable to jump before they were pushed. In summer 2011 a co-operative model for converter academies, retaining the features outlined above, was approved by the DfE, and the first co-operative converter academies joined the 'peculiarly English muddle' (Cook, 2011) of the school system. And whilst many in the co-operative movement remain deeply suspicious of the Free School idea, community groups wishing to start their own new schools for a variety of, sometimes compelling, reasons have recognised that co-operative values and principles provide just the sort of foundation they want for their schools.

There is no single, one-size-fits all, model of a co-operative school. A range of co-operative governance models have emerged and a growing number of schools are shaping their curriculum, pedagogy, and ethos based on the values and principles established by the co-operative movement. These values provide the common thread which links the schools together. This common ideology is at the core of the newly established Schools Co-operative Society (Schools Co-operative Society, 2011), a secondary mutual providing shared services, procurement, support and advice to co-operative schools whilst also acting as a mouth-piece for this growing sector.

Whilst the previous Labour Government supported the idea of co-operative schools, Conservative policy also found the concept attractive as David Cameron set out in his speech launching the Conservative Co-operative Movement in November 2007:

We know that if parents have a say in how their school is run, if they feel that their view matters and their wishes count, the school is always better. What better way, then, to give parents direct involvement in their school than to give them ownership of it? To make them not just stakeholders, but shareholders - not of a profit-making company but of a co-operative built around the needs of local children? (BBC News, 2007)

Under the Coalition Government the DfE has proved rather less enthusiastic, stymying the development of the co-operative school movement at every opportunity. It is possible that Education Minister Gove has recognised the potential contradiction that co-operative models pose to his project of opening up the school sector to the free-market (whilst publicly maintaining that education will remain 'not-for-profit'). Confusion amongst the DfE's officials about the way in which the mutual model fits in the overall programme of converting all local authority schools to academies is certainly not helping those schools who have clearly identified the model as one with the potential to retain 'community' as central to their ethos.

As Cook suggests (Cook, 2011), "rule and regulation" may well be the policy stick that continues to be used to beat schools. To win ongoing Government support, co-operative schools will need to translate success measured against values-based criteria into league-table and English Baccalaureate scores. The longest-established co-operative schools have already shown that this is possible and the Schools Co-operative Society provides a framework through which they have the opportunity to share their experience with the new converters to co-operation, whether Trusts or academies. One school that became a co-operative Trust at the end of a summer term was asked to demonstrate the impact this had on the results of exams taken the previous June. Meanwhile Michael Gove is threatening to intervene in academies that do not demonstrate rapid "improvement". The fundamental transformation of educational aspiration and achievement, rooted deep in the community, will not happen overnight but co-operative schools deserve a chance to prove their potential to do this.

The Author

Julie Thorpe worked in a publishing co-operative in the 1980s and has been active in the co-operative movement ever since. She joined the Co-operative College in 2007 and heads the School and Youth Programmes team, working to mainstream co-operative values in the education system across the UK. This includes the development and deployment of co-operative governance structures for Trust schools and Academies, and supporting programmes to help develop their co-operative ethos through staff, student, and parent membership and community engagement. Having worked with the Woodcraft Folk for many years, she has a strong background in informal, peer, and co-operative pedagogies.

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Note

- 1 **ASDAN** (Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network) is a British organisation with awarding body status

