

Co-operative Education and Schools: An old idea for new times?

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Introduction: Co-operation - an idea whose time has come?

As the UK undergoes one of the most radical restructurings of the education system since the 1944 Education act, Co-operative schools are becoming a reality in communities across the UK today as Academies, Trusts and Free Schools. Head teachers and governing bodies, presented with financial and practical incentives by the current UK government, are increasingly leaving local authority control and turning to co-operative models as a resource for reimagining their institution. Today, there are 143 co-operative schools in the UK, with that number growing rapidly (Wilson, 2011)¹.

Co-operative education seems to be an idea whose time has come. Co-operative governance structures are heralded as offering a new response to the dilemmas of accountability and ownership in public services and co-operative curriculum and pedagogy is being seen by many as an answer to contemporary economic, technological and environmental concerns:

In the political sphere, as politicians seek to reimagine public services for contemporary conditions, co-operative governance is being embraced by all strands of the political spectrum. From the perspective of the traditional right, the mutual governance models of co-operative education institutions are seen to offer a form of localised citizen control to challenge the domination of state professionals in decision-making (Simmons et al, 2009). From the perspective of the political left, mutual governance models are represented as a bulwark against marketisation and as a resource for strengthening collective and democratic ownership of the education process by parents and children (ibid; DCSF, 2009).

Co-operative education processes are also being presented as a solution to a number of curricular debates prompted by observations of wider change beyond the school walls. Researchers and educators observing the development of ubiquitous computing systems argue for an understanding of agency not as embodied in the learner alone, but in their capacity to mobilise and work within complex networks of people and machines (Facer, 2011; Salomon, 1993). At the same time, the growing risks of highly disruptive environmental changes over the next two-three decades, lead activists and researchers to call for new educational and social values to be premised on a recognition of humanity's interdependence with material resources and environmental systems (UNICEF, 2007). In the light of these concerns, a new model of education premised upon concepts of interdependence and mutuality is increasingly seen as being at the heart not only of personal development, but global survival (Fielding & Moss, 2010).

The economic disruptions of the Western banking crisis and radically increasing economic inequalities within countries, are also leading to a search for education practices that promote ethical economic practices and that nurture community resilience (Dorling, 2010; Neary, 2011). While progressive and democratic educators have historically made the case for excluding instrumentalist economic discourses from education and promoting the value of education for its own sake (e.g. Dewey, 1916), more recently it has been argued that such a position has simply led to the dominance of neo-liberal economic assumptions in schools and universities (Facer, 2011). This results today in young people increasingly seeking certification as a basis for survival in increasingly competitive labour markets for less and less reward (Brown, Lauder and Ashton, 2010). As a

consequence, there is a search for alternative educational accounts of how to build ethical economic wellbeing for communities and individuals.

To all of these different demands and questions, the 150 year old governance models, curriculum and pedagogic practices of co-operative education have the potential to offer answers. An educational practice characterised by co-operative and ethical values of ‘self-help, self-responsibility, equity, solidarity, openness and honesty, social responsibility and caring for others’ⁱⁱ, may be increasingly ‘right’ for the current time.

While co-operative education acts as a rallying point for many different contemporary concerns, however, it is far from clear that there is a shared understanding of what co-operative education actually is, either in the research literature (Shaw, 2011) or in the schools who are turning to this approach. This ambiguity brings risks. An idea that can find itself embraced by both conservative politicians and environmental activists, by pedagogues with a concern for technological change and by community organisers concerned with local accountability and economic sustainability could, after all, either be a distinctively timely response to complex contemporary conditions or a hegemonic strategy that serves simply to recruit potentially disruptive changes to the status quo.

Such openness in the ‘meaning’ of co-operative education, this paper argues, is a distinctive feature of the long history of the co-operative movement, bringing with it both creative tensions that have ensured the survival of co-operative ideas in surprising and sometimes hostile situations and a lack of collective agreement that has at times militated against the achievement of its wider goals.

This paper explores the history of the multiple meanings of co-operative education and explores the implications of such creative tensions for the turn towards co-operative education in UK schools today. First, it describes the early growth of co-operative education as deeply entwined with the wider co-operative movement. This discussion is based upon the limited extant research literature in the area and interviews with officers of the Co-operative College (the central body responsible for organising co-operative education in the UK). It then describes the renewed involvement over the last decade of the Co-operative Groupⁱⁱⁱ and College in UK schools. This exploratory discussion of current practice is based on interviews with members of the Co-operative College, interviews with key staff at two co-operative schools and fieldnotes taken during two co-operative network events.

The purpose of this paper is not to provide a definitive or comprehensive overview of Co-operative schools today, but to explore the tensions and possibilities that are emerging at this early stage in their development. In particular, it seeks to explore:

What is the nature of the co-operative education tradition that is being drawn on in English schools today?

How is co-operative education being recontextualised in UK Schools?

The early development of Co-operative Education

Co-operative education forms an important part of the development of the Co-operative movement which promotes the establishment of co-operative associations as a way of enabling people to meet their common economic, social and cultural needs through jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprises. While mutual aid has inevitably been present throughout human history, the

co-operative movement is usually understood to have emerged in the early 19th Century when early co-operators joined together to form formally constituted associations to enable individuals to purchase and produce goods collectively, to form co-operative communities and to share the profits from such collective activity.

The history of co-operative education within this movement is under-researched (Woodin, 2011, Shaw, 2011). Nonetheless, the importance of education in its broadest sense to the Co-operative Movement has been apparent since its inception (Wilson & Mills, 2008)^{iv}. Indeed, both the early co-operators and their predecessors, the Owenites, 'believed that the key to social transformation in the present and future lay in the sphere of education' (Gurney, 1996, 29). The Rochdale Pioneers, whose establishment of a consumer co-operative in 1844 formed the model for many subsequent co-operative organisations in the UK, for example, dedicated 2.5% of their profits to supporting education and by 1876 they had a library of 12,000 volumes, a full time librarian and 11 reading rooms (Gurney, 1996).

For many in the movement the heart of co-operative education practice was a belief in the educational value of the shared experience of collective ownership. As Woodin argues, a '*learnt associational identity*' (2011) was expected to grow out of the experience of mutual support and participation in democratic practices. Co-operative education was understood not only to be education *about* co-operation, but education *through* participation in the co-operative movement. Education was not a professionalised theoretical activity, rather '*education and co-operation were at times coterminous, woven into interconnected webs of working class activity*' (*ibid*, p?)

As the movement grew, however, co-operative education resources, practices and institutions took on a highly diverse range of forms. These were developed in order to promote understanding of and participation in co-operative practice to a wider constituency and to grow the movement beyond the early initiators of co-operative activities (Woodin, 2011). Co-operative education institutions and resources, for example, came to include:

Libraries and Reading Rooms funded by subscriptions. Here, members of co-operatives could meet to support each other through reading groups and discussion and access key co-operative texts, including works of economic and social theory that might not be available in the limited public libraries of the period. By 1879 there were 55 libraries/newsrooms in Lancashire, Durham and Yorkshire alone, by 1897 there were 376 reading rooms nationally and 131 societies supported libraries stocking nearly 350,000 volumes (Gurney, 1996).

Periodicals, publications and films. The co-operative societies sought to improve access to education in the same way as they sought to provide access to food and other goods and a key means of achieving this was through periodicals which provided useful guidance and information about co-operative practices and history. By the end of World War 1 over 500,000 copies of the *Wheat sheaf* publication were being sold per week. The aspiration was to make education as available to members as tea and coffee (Woodin, 2011). Accordingly, Co-operatives were also early pioneers of film (Burton, 2005)

Lecture Tours and General Adult Education. Key figures in the co-operative movement would visit local reading rooms and libraries to share ideas and promote group discussions and dialogue. These discussions were intended to 'encourage thinking' and to counter the effects of schools that were

seen to promote uncritical acceptance of the social order (Gurney, 1996, p32). To further promote such independent thinking, there were aims to develop a co-operative higher education programme for general education. One visiting American radical observed of the British co-operative movement that

At a very early period in the movement, co-operation set before itself the task of becoming mentally independent as being quite as important as that of becoming independent in its groceries (quoted in Gurney, 1996 p38)

Schools. Gurney describes how, in 1892, a survey of 107 societies (out of 1420) revealed 164 co-operators on school boards and 124 school managers in England. With the Balfour Act of 1902, however, the School Boards were abolished and local councils took control of schools. At this time, many co-operative societies saw elementary education as having been taken out of their hands. Instead of seeking to establish a new alternative education system, then, the focus for the co-operative movement in relation to formal schooling in the UK became one of supplementing schooling by providing 'an education in co-operative history and theory' (Gurney, 1996, 35).

Training and certification. As the movement grew and as the need for co-operatives to function effectively as organisations increased, formal workplace training became more important. The Education Department of the Co-operative Union for example, argued:

'Co-operative business as a moral system of business need not be an inefficient system of business, and co-operative societies should provide adequate educational facilities for their employees so that the co-operative movement may be as efficient as its competitors' (The Co-operative Union Ltd Educational Department, Educational Programme 1926-27, Manchester Holyoake House, 1926, p6, quoted in Vernon, 2011)

A highly sophisticated staged programme of training for co-operators was developed by the Education Department of the Co-operative Union after the First World War. A formal curriculum for shop workers and administrators was articulated in textbooks and assessed by national exams. Workers were released to attend classes either in local co-operative societies or local education authority settings. By the end of the 1920s, 7,426 individuals entered for co-operative examinations and over 16,000 were registered on technical classes (Vernon, 2011). Alongside technical skills, all students were required to take classes in 'co-operation' more generally. In 1941, questions for Part 2 (the highest level) of the Co-operative examination included:

What are the main failings of the capitalist system? Can Co-operative organisations remove them?

Discuss the case for and against National Co-operative Wholesale Societies undertaking production for export. (Co-operative Union Limited, 1941)

The experience of participants in this training was patchy, however, and while curriculum was standardised there was little shared agreement on teaching and learning, with the result that over 50% of candidates failed to achieve the required standards at examination (Vernon, 2011).

Co-operative Colleges. In 1919, the Co-operative College was established in Manchester to become the focus for co-operative education within the movement. In later years, the College was

responsible for developing materials and resources to support local co-operatives in education, for running residential courses, programmes for co-operative leaders, for adult education focusing on social and economic subjects, for developing the examinations and curricula that structured the formal training and certification of co-operators, and for promoting co-operative education more widely in the UK and beyond including (in the last decade, maintaining the archive of Co-operative educational materials including 3500 of Robert Owen's original documents). The College model was widely adopted internationally, with colleges set up, for example, everywhere from New York to Sweden, and the model became part of British Colonial strategy, in particular in Africa (Shaw, 2011).

Tensions and currents in co-operative education

The preceding description may give the impression that the co-operative movement smoothly developed a set of widely agreed upon educational activities. As many observers have noted (Shaw, 2011, Woodin, 2011, Vernon, 2011, Gurney, 1996), however, the movement was characterised by important tensions.

The first tension is a product of a commitment to co-operative values. The commitment to self-reliance and self-responsibility, and the flourishing of a highly divergent co-operative movement, means that there was resistance to a universal centrally dictated model of education. Instead, there were tensions between the need to maintain local autonomy and the desire to build a wider movement, between the growth of common feelings and solidarity through locally determined societies and the efficiencies to be gained from formality and national organisation. The principle of local autonomy tended to prevail, and as a consequence, there was often scant local formal education provision (Robertson, 2010); as Vernon argues, *'[formal] education remained, largely, a voluntary activity with many societies unable or unwilling to provide classes and the majority of employees not bothered. How actually to provide education was an issue and the local organisation of classes was varied'* (Vernon, 2011, p60). While the Education Department and College produced textbooks and curricula and set exams, there was no guarantee that these resources would be accepted or picked up by local societies, or that alternative visions of education would not flourish regardless of such centrally produced educational tools.

Indeed many different visions of educational purpose and priority became visible as the co-operative movement grew. On the one hand, there were those who sought, through co-operative education and participation in co-operative societies, to build a new co-operative commonwealth to replace the capitalist system. Co-operative practice and education were staging posts towards a substantial social and economic reorganisation. On the other hand, there were those who saw co-operative education as tasked primarily with providing co-operators with the skills to ensure their employment and wellbeing and to ensure the successful flourishing of the co-operative societies (Robertson, 2010). These differences played themselves out through geographical, political and religious divides, with oppositions emerging between northern co-operators and southern, between 'spiritual' educators seeking a rejection of material goods and 'material' educators, seeking to enhance the capacity of individuals to guarantee economic wellbeing for themselves, between those advocating 'critique' and those seeking to build 'capability', between those advocating an understanding of 'theory' and those advocating 'practice'.

These different positions also informed debates over how the co-operative movement should respond to the growth in state provision of schooling and university education. While co-operative

education institutions were often precursors to state provision, the provision of mandatory formal education by the state was not universally welcomed. Some co-operators argued that state provision of schooling would enable co-operative societies to concentrate on teaching distinctively *co-operative* education in social and economic history. Others, however, argued that state provision of education removed control of education from individuals and communities, eroded the tradition of self-help and autonomy in education, and made it harder to present alternative narratives about the state and the economy. The relationship between co-operatives and state provision of education played out very differently in different countries. While in England the co-operative movement increasingly withdrew from engagement with schooling, in Spain, schools owned and governed on a co-operative basis flourished from the 1930s, often in opposition to fascism and later to Franco's rule and today there are 600 co-operative schools in Spain, employing nearly 20,000 teachers (Wilson & Mills, 2008). Indeed, the Mondragon Co-operative started with education.

Arguably, then, just as it would be impossible to identify a single set of educational practices that represented shareholder or capitalist economic organisation, so too is it impossible to identify a single educational model that can represent co-operative forms of organisation.

However, we could argue that there are three broad and interwoven currents of aspiration and activity which characterise the emergence of co-operative education from its roots in the 19th century:

- **Teaching about co-operation - making visible the alternatives.** This is concerned with ensuring that co-operative accounts of economic and social life are visible as a resource for students, activists, politicians and citizens. This can be read as providing a critique of capitalist forms of production, or simply as making visible the potential of an alternative mode of economic organisation, and is often tied in with the wider goal of building a co-operative movement.
- **Training for co-operation – building co-operative institutions.** This is concerned with ensuring that the co-operative movement and its institutions work effectively by ensuring that members are aware of how co-operative institutions can best be established, managed and run. It is also concerned with developing individuals' skills and capacities to work within and progress within these institutions.
- **Learning through co-operation – developing co-operative identities.** This is concerned with the broad goal of developing the 'learnt associational identity' intrinsic to co-operative practice by giving individuals the opportunity to experience and benefit from relationships of mutuality, equity and solidarity and to develop capacities for self-reliance and self-help. This also involves the development of networks of support and informal learning through relationships built up through participation in co-operatives.

In all of these aspirations, the aim was for the Co-operative movement to seek to create its own educational institutions and form a self-reliant learning communities not dependent upon external bodies whether the state or private, for educational provision.

The return of Co-operative practices to schools in England

The educational practices of the Co-operative movement today reflect the highly diverse cultural, economic and geographic situations of the wider global co-operative movement that has grown up

over the last century to play an important economic and social role across the world. The International Co-operative Alliance, for example, represents co-operatives working across 93 countries with over 1 billion members worldwide (ICA, 2011). The UN announced that 2012 will be the International Year of Co-operatives, with the UN Secretary General making the case that: *"Cooperatives are a reminder to the international community that it is possible to pursue both economic viability and social responsibility."* (Ban Ki-Moon, <http://social.un.org/coopsyear/> 2011)

Education is now included in the international co-operative principles, reference to young people was added in 1995 and there are now Co-operative Colleges established in countries ranging from Sweden to Lesotho. Across Africa today there are over 8000 students currently enrolled in co-operative colleges as well as renewed interest in setting up new co-operative colleges in countries such as Bahrain, South Africa, Rwanda and Malawi (Shaw, 2011). In Spain, the Mondragon Co-operatives involve teacher, parent and lecturer-owned organisations. In Poland, the establishment of co-operative enterprises is widespread educational practice. The role of co-operatives in providing both formal and informal learning opportunities for youth is becoming increasingly visible across Africa (Hartley, 2011).

In England, since the growth of local education authorities and the state provision of primary education, the Co-operative Movement had focused its educational energies outside formal schooling for much of the last century. Over the last ten years, however, there has been growing concern that co-operative organisational models have become increasingly invisible in formal education at both university and school level. In Business Schools, for example, researchers have argued that co-operatives have largely been written out of economic history or relegated to studies of agriculture (Kalmi, 2007). While more recently, the ICA has argued: *"Too often young people are not aware of the co-operative model of enterprise; they do not learn about cooperatives in school, as co-operatives often do not figure in school curricula"*(ICA, 2011).

In response, in 2002 the Co-operative Group supported the setting up of the 'Young Co-operatives' programme to help school students to start their own fair-trade co-operatives. Taking this a step further, and in response to the Specialist Schools legislation that allowed organisations such as businesses and charities to develop new partnership relationships with schools, the Co-operative Group and Co-operative College began in 2003 to establish a more sustained partnership relationship with schools.

In 2003 the Co-operative Group and College became partners with 10 Business and Enterprise Colleges across the UK (Wilson & Mills, 2008). The existence of the Co-operative College, with its already existing curricula and resources to support teaching about co-operation and the development of co-operative enterprise skills, facilitated this process. The Co-operative Group, through its local societies and with support from the College now sponsors 10 Business and Enterprise Schools. Its involvement includes representation on the governing body, provision of curriculum materials and resources, supporting a network for Head Teachers and organising regional and national activities (Co-operative Group Website, 2011).

More recently, as legislation has been put in place to allow schools to detach themselves from Local Authority control and to build new partnerships with external organisations (often commercial education providers such as Kunsapskolen and Ark), the Co-operative College and Group have begun to act as partner and sponsor for Trusts and Academies. The Co-operative Group now

sponsors three Academies (The Co-operative Academy of Manchester, the Co-operative Academy at Brownhills, and the Co-operative Academy of Leeds) and the Co-operative College has supported 148 schools to establish themselves as Co-operative Trust Schools. These Trust schools are established as co-operative societies in their own right and are now supported by and as part of a new network of Co-operative Schools which has, itself, formed into a Secondary Co-operative Society.

As of 2011, and the publication of the new Public Services Bill which paves the way for co-operative and mutual models of public services delivery, the Co-operative College is also exploring how to support the development of co-operative models of children's services provision, music services, early years and youth provision (Wilson, 2011).

There is, therefore, a growing 'co-operative movement' in the provision of education for children in the UK today. But what does this mean in practice?

Co-operative education in English schools today

The Co-operative Group describes, on its website, its distinctive contribution to its partner academies as being: *'a strong ethical stance; willingness and an ability to share our expertise, the opportunity to engage with a business; a unique way of engaging pupils, parents and local communities.'* (Co-operative Group, 2011)

The Memorandum and Articles of Co-operative Trust Schools commit schools to operating according to Co-operative Values and Principles (Wilson & Mills, 2008; Wilson, 2011) as defined by the International Co-operative Alliance Statement on Co-operative Identity 1995. These values and principles are as follows

Values: Co-operatives are based on the values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity. In the tradition of their founders, co-operative members believe in the ethical values of honesty, openness, social responsibility and caring for others [There are seven principles] Voluntary and Open Membership; Democratic Member Control; Member Economic Participation; Autonomy and Independence; Education, Training and Information; Co-operation among Co-operatives; Concern for Community' (ICA, 1995)

As schools become Co-operative Trusts, they are encouraged to embody these co-operative values and principles through the inter-related areas of school governance, curriculum, pedagogy and ethos (Wilson, 2011).

These, then, are the stated principles and values that should provide a common ground for schools taking on co-operative identities. It is clear that these are being welcomed both within schools and across the growing Schools Co-operative Network. The values are informing the design of teaching materials and resources for students and educators, for example, in areas ranging from citizenship to ethical enterprise in action to fair trade and co-operative history^{vi}. The values are also informing the active support for student voice, community-engagement and school councils. The principles of self-help and self-responsibility are also being lived by school governing bodies, boards of trustees and leadership who are sharing expertise in the challenges of setting up co-operatives in schools and tackling the legal and logistical issues of how to act as a co-operative schools network.

As with the early development of co-operative education, however, co-operative values take on highly diverse forms when they are recontextualised within the contexts of existing local cultures and priorities. Even the relatively small network of Co-operative Business and Enterprise Colleges, for example, brings together school leaders and teachers with very different takes on the co-operative agenda, as can be seen from their websites:

All Hallows Catholic College, for example, articulates co-operative values with religious faith:

Our mission statement and core values focus on the development of a 'faith-informed' business and enterprise culture with a special ethical emphasis. We want our students to reflect on:

- *the global economy and their place in it as world citizens,*
- *the need for social justice and how they can help to make the world a fairer place,*
- *the ethics of sustainability and how they can be good stewards of God's world,*
- *the idea of Christians building community through serving the 'common good'^{vii}*

In contrast, Forest Gate Community School is particularly concerned with offering students responsibility and voice in the school, applied learning and real world opportunities to participate in social enterprise activities. They state: *'We think that working together is particularly important in order to be successful not just in school but in the wider community. We try to involve our students in projects to improve the school, our partner schools and the local community.'*^{viii}

Sir Thomas Boughy College has a slightly different take again and explicitly links its co-operative identity to the history of the co-operative movement. Notably, its website describes its students as members of *'the millions of people across the world who form the international co-operative movement'*^{ix}. Moreover, this school adopted the co-operative values as their own school values and the school is run as a co-operative trust on a one member one vote system. The co-operative movement also provides the basis for teaching materials in the school; lessons on advertising, for example, are conducted using archives of co-operative print and TV advertisements and students are encouraged to explore how co-operative practices and values are expressed through these.

If there is diversity *between* schools in terms of what it means to become a Co-operative School, so too is there diversity of opinion and practice *within* schools. If we look more closely at the views of a number of teachers in one Co-operative School of 3 years standing these differences and nuances become very visible:

Sutherland College became a Learning Trust in partnership with their Co-operative Group 3 years ago. The reasons for becoming a Co-operative Trust were complex, and included not only the desire for more autonomy and funding for the school and the desire to own the land upon which the school was standing but also a sense that the values of the Co-operative were a good strategic 'fit' to the values of the school:

I think it was seen initially as a massive financial benefit. Lots of schools are sponsored these days, so it was good to have a sponsor. But obviously, it is also interesting the way they view society in this very socialist way, and they stand for co-operation, and equality and the importance of everyone achieving what they can, and that fits in well with our school, the way

we see education here. [...] the co-operative society, the whole equality and success for all, that fit in with us.

What partnership between a school and a co-operative society would mean in practice beyond this sense of shared values, however, was far from clear to all parties at the outset. As one teacher says: *'[the co-operative partners] were new to this game, they wanted to do some good, they wanted to live the values and principles of the co-operative movement. So they said 'what can we do? We're not going to give you money, but what can we do?'*

At the same time, the school itself was trying to work out what it might mean to 'live' the values of co-operation:

When I came three years ago, the school had just formed a partnership with mid-counties cooperative, and I have to admit I didn't know much about the co-operative [...] But it really bothered me that you've got the values and principles and yet when you walk through the door they weren't alive, they weren't vibrant [...]

Today, the school is involved in huge variety of activities stimulated by this desire to 'live the values' of co-operation. These include: school-wide innovation in pedagogy including a shift to co-operative learning structures in most lessons, a reorganisation of the school into faculties and houses under the name 'Second Home', the delivery of a Co-operative 'COPE' programme with ASDAN, new restorative justice procedures, a range of partnership activities with the co-operative society partner in the Trust, the establishment of young co-operatives and participation in international co-operative movement youth activities.

The different 'meanings' of 'co-operative education' are highly visible in the school. A strong current is the attempt to build mutually beneficial relationships between the school and its local partners ranging from the local co-operative partner to parents. For example, the co-operative partner provides thousands of man hours in volunteer time to the school. This has included volunteers building an eco garden, painting classrooms, attending awards events, providing business and PR advice, giving speeches and running barbeques for students picking up exam results. These activities have resulted, as the Head of Geography in the school observed, in a significant improvement in school facilities for some faculties and a subsequent change in teaching and learning practices:

Because of the work that co-op have done with us, we can open the eco-garden – we can open polytunnels, they've given us funding for a beehive [...] so we sold our own honey and beehive products. ... That then means my class can change, because I've now got an outdoor classroom, so I can now teach in the nice weather, outdoors [...] I have seating and a blackboard for 30 students out there. That makes a big difference. That's now widening up, because of the facilities we've now got, and that changes the ethos.

In a school where previously there was no Parent Teacher Association and where only 12 parents responded to Ofsted's request for parents' views, one teacher is also seeking to build new relationships with parents and to grow a sense of mutual ownership and responsibility for the school. For example, she is running a Zoomba exercise class as a way of bringing different groups together *'at the moment, we've got thirty to forty that come, we've got cleaners, we've got kitchen staff, we've got parents, so everyone's equal in there, we've all just come to get fit and for*

enjoyment'. She has also set up, for the first time in five years, a new Parent, Teacher and Family Association, which is actively harnessing the expertise of school parents:

the parents are willing to supply activities as well, one lady's happy to start an art class, because our parents have got many skills, obviously, and they've got lots to offer us as well, I mean, one lady's a dressmaker and she's offered to make our costumes with the pupils help for school performances, so its bringing their skills into school.

A second current of activity is the familiarisation of both staff and students with the history of the co-operative movement, and the contemporary activities of the movement. There are panels on walls in the school telling the history of the Rochdale pioneers, students are supported with materials from the Co-operative College to set up young co-operative enterprises and some students and staff are encouraged to participating in a range of business and movement activities associated with the co-operative, ranging from attending local AGMs to participating in Co-operative Congress. The implications of this for personal attitudes toward co-operative practice and the movement are beginning to be articulated by some of the teachers:

It's quite amusing, my political background is most definitely not from the co-operative side. So that ways, in some ways. So... driven wise, it wasn't a political basis for me. But what's good now is that it's got cross-party backing and I think that's very good. But, what drove me was that it works. And when I see something that works, whether it goes back into my political background or not, I will run with it. Um, it's worked so much so that it really has changed me as a teacher and as a person. I was lucky enough to be put forward for the co-op member of the year awards, so I got through to the final five, so I was sitting there with people who have been involved with co-op for thirty years and I've only been involved for four years [...] we had to do a resume and I said it wasn't an award for me, it was an award for the people in the school and the co-op and everything they've been doing.

To be honest when I started here [...] I was only an NQT and to be honest the co-operative I didn't understand it, I hadn't got a clue, to be honest it was the supermarket where I go that is slightly more pricey. [...] then I got asked to go to South Africa, and I was like – of course! – that was the young people's co-operative event that was taking place and we took some pupils with us as well, [...] And at the co-op event we worked with young people creating co-operatives to make a living so that they could afford to go to school, so that they could afford clothes, things like that, and that, to me, looking at the ethos and how they were using it as a living, really brought the importance to me and to the pupils of what a co-operative is about. And seeing how that ethos really worked for them, really made me want to bring it back to school...

In contrast, for other teachers, their understanding of co-operative education is primarily related to the development of co-operative learning structures as a means of raising attainment. For these teachers, there is no necessary connection between co-operative pedagogy and the partnership with the co-operative movement; they simply share names:

The co-operative learning is nothing to do with the co-op, even though they have the same name, this is something that [...] our DH wanted to bring in, these Kagan structures, they are

an American thing, and because obviously they are co-operative by nature, that would fit in with a co-operative school.

I don't think it is [a political agenda]. It's just about learning, it's about helping the kids. It's a godsend. For anyone thinking of going into teaching, these structures need to be taught in universities. Because if you've got an inspector sitting in the room, these structures give you a chance to show off what your kids can do, and that's what teachers need. [...]

In the school, co-operative learning draws heavily on the Kagan Structures approach which sees children organised around 'mixed ability' tables of four, participating in highly structured group activities which often require students to talk with each other and come up with agreed team answers or to work to pool knowledge and understanding between teams. This approach is credited by some of the teachers with radically transforming their teaching:

'every lesson has been outstanding since [starting to use the co-operative structures] ... I've been teaching sixteen years and it's revolutionised my teaching, because it involves everyone, there's no child in the room that can be left out or not feel as if they are part of the lessons [...] Every team works together, so you get support for the lower ability from the higher [...]the results are incredible,

Throughout the school, classrooms are organised to allow students to sit in groups of 4, the walls of most classrooms have brightly coloured posters showing different co-operative learning structures and there is a clear sense that these constitute the preferred teaching and learning strategy for the school. When year 6 students visit the school in July before starting in September, they are taught one 'structure' a day as part of their enculturation into the school. The wildfire growth of interest in Kagan structures potentially makes it possible for educators trained to seek 'what works' to avoid the potentially 'troubling' political and economic influences of co-operative education. Given a context of frequent Ofsted inspection and competitive league tables, this means that the co-operative learning structures could easily be harnessed to cultures of competition and control, and to the increasingly intensive pursuit of exam results in which students intensively scrutinise each others' behaviour and learning. As one teacher observed approvingly, these structures mean:

There's no chance to get bored, no chance to switch off. Kids know that if they're not working together as a team their team will be let down, and it ties in with the reward system, the team comes first.

In this context of focusing on pedagogies 'that work', the narrative of the co-operative movement can also play a powerful supporting role. As one teacher puts it:

you need to start off with a history background, a little bit of an understanding of where this has come from, this is now how it's gone, it's one of the biggest organisations in the world, and look, it's a multimillion pound industry and I think that works with students, students need to know that something is successful if they're going to actually get on and do it. They don't like to be seen as a testbed. We can say, look, it's worked.

It is worth, however, recognising that these co-operative learning structures also have a history that resists easy colonisation within neo-liberal education practices. They emerge, for example, from fields as diverse as conflict resolution, peace studies, democratic education and civil rights.

Co-operative education, then, is experienced and promoted in highly diverse ways even in this one school. It is presented broadly by leadership as being 'essentially ... about the youngsters and the teachers helping each other', a position that serves to build consensus across the staff, but which in practice encompasses everything from a standards-driven, Ofsted fuelled agenda for raising all students attainment, to the development of students' capacities to act as responsible global citizens.

In these negotiations over the meaning of co-operative education in this school we can see echoes of the debates that emerged during the earlier development of the co-operative movement and education's place within it. Some of the teachers, for example, are beginning to participate in the wider co-operative movement and to engage in the political and economic debates that that brings with it. Others are harnessing co-operative materials as a resource for building their students' employability and enterprise skills. Others again are concerned primarily with building the capacities and practices of co-operation through changing the inter-personal relations between students and staff in classrooms, hallways and school governance. There is not a uniform 'vision' of co-operative education in the school. Rather, there is a broad church of activities and personal values held together under the umbrella term 'co-operation'. The potentially transformative potential of harnessing together such ideas, however, might be visible in new practices such as the school thematic days that mobilise the co-operative learning structures around substantive global challenges:

We had Africa with an enterprise theme. We looked in humanities guild we looked at the drought, where it was, shocked the kids, showed the videos, looked at cash crops, looked at the history of that, looked at the ethical values through RE, looked at what we could do, and ended up planting up seeds and selling them in our festival day the other day and making money on them, and our students are now carrying on and thinking, what can we do now to expand this company and how can we develop it, and we're looking at developing it further and that's come from the students

Discussion: benchmarking, autonomy and educational purposes

It is likely, given the paucity of research and documentation in this area, that many schools seeking to become co-operative schools at the present time will do so with little in-depth knowledge of the history or current practice of co-operative education. This is not unique to co-operative schools; indeed, many schools seek academy partners and sponsors with little understanding of their values (Wilson & Mills, 2008). We can conjecture, however, that many schools turn to the co-operative, as Sutherland college did above, with a broad conception that co-operative education represented a set of values to which they could sign up as a school but without a detailed plan for realising such values in practice. Becoming a co-operative school, at a time when so many schools are being encouraged or forced to become academies in the face of rapid budget cuts, might be seen by many as the least worst option in the current climate and the practical realities of what co-operative education might mean in practice may be left to be worked out later. Such a rapid growth in institutions, however, brings with it risks of incoherence and dilution of co-operative education practice as local teachers, communities and schools interpret the values according to their own local preferences. It also brings with it the risk that the co-operative discourse will simply be colonised within and domesticated by the existing dominant discourses of standards and competitive inspection in schools.

Looking at the growing Co-operative Schools Network and at this one school in particular, not only is it clear that there is no uniform model of 'co-operative education' but that when co-operative partnerships and ideas and curriculum are introduced into schools, they are necessarily, as Goodson argues '*remediated into learning*' (2009, 134). Rather, the classroom itself, and arguably the school corridors, hallways and playing fields, are '*powerfully mediating context[s] for the message of curriculum and political economy* (*ibid.* 134). What co-operative education 'is' today will necessarily be shaped (in ways that are in accordance with Co-operative values) as we can see in this school, by the wider educational landscape, and by the experiences of individual teachers, their biographies as professional educators and their political and economic orientations. Curriculum design is a 'multistoried process' (Olson, 2000), and the 'impact' of co-operative education in schools cannot be understood to be independent of teachers' actions, intentions and beliefs.

A critical question for co-operative schools and the wider co-operative education movement today, then, is how to respond to the diverse ways in which co-operative education is being imagined and enacted in schools. Of particular importance is the question of whether co-operative education can function as a 'pick and mix' set of strategies – one part co-operative learning, two parts co-operative enterprise, and we'll leave the wider global movement to one side, for example?

The Co-operative College and many of the more established co-operative schools are already well aware of this question, and there are serious efforts being put in to debating what counts as a 'co-operative school'. The College, for example, is exploring the development of a set of resources for self-assessment and school improvement that emphasises the diversity of areas in which they would expect co-operative values and principles to be 'lived' in a school. These include:

- *Governance*
 - *Student voice*
 - *Parent voice*
 - *Staff voice*
 - *Membership engagement*
- *Curriculum*
 - *Subject based*
 - *Citizenship, PHSE etc*
 - *Enterprise*
- *Pedagogy*
 - *Co-construction*
 - *Group working*
 - *Student-led reviews*
- *CPD*
 - *Leadership development*
- *Community cohesion*
 - *Participation in community based activity*
 - *Participation in other schemes (eg Rights Respecting schools, Eco-schools etc)*
 - *International co-operative movement/school links*

Phil Arnold, a Deputy Head in the first Co-operative Trust School, is addressing the same question and arguing that there are risks that co-operative education will simply be harnessed within the existing standards agenda. To resist this, he proposes a framework for co-operative education that draws on Michael Fielding and Peter Moss' democratic common school, and which includes:

- *Co-operative shared values, ethics and principles – these are the tried and tested internationally shared set which underpin decisions and interactions with others for mutual gain.*
- *Co-produced interdependent social enterprise base – to reconnect learning to social, economic and political endeavours.*
- *Mutually run local public service provision – to enable radical change and new constructions of different ways of being.*
- *Points of ethical, political, social and knowledge capital exchange – open sourced and inclusive pathways for social justice and empowerment.*
- *Connectivity & personalisation – understandings, spaces and dialogue.*
- *Active global citizenship – direct action as well as words in an outward facing approach.*
- *Long term multi-generational focus – not siloed or constricted to maintain the closeness to and distance from the key ideas, concepts and interactions.*
- *Collective sustainable actions – to focus on adding timely value to the local through to the global.*
- *Co-operative learning within new technologies – recognition of the importance of working together and with advances in understandings.^x*

Attempts to articulate what ‘counts’ as co-operative education, whether emerging from practitioners or from the centralised College, however, could be seen as the precursor for attempts to standardise co-operative education. In the highly marketised climate of contemporary education in which schools increasingly seek to distinguish themselves from their neighbours and define their unique attributes, and in which schools and teachers increasingly search for ‘what works’ (Hargreaves, 2009), such a standardised approach is clearly tempting in its promise to build recognisable coherence across a ‘co-operative education sector’ and to act as a powerful marketing tool for schools.

A search for a standard ‘co-operative’ approach, however, runs the risk of ossifying educational practice around a set of prescribed ‘co-operative practices’ and in so doing, working against the principles of local autonomy and democracy at the heart of co-operative practice. In particular, it risks constructing parents in particular as powerless consumers in education, choosing between different offerings rather than playing a role in the co-construction of education with teachers and students. Moreover, such an approach risks alienating schools and other educational philosophies with whom the co-operative movement shares many core values.

How, then, might a co-operative education movement today clearly express a common ground capable of building strategic alliances between different education institutions even while maintaining a commitment to the autonomy and local democracy necessary to meet the aspirations and needs of different communities? Arguably, it cannot do so by prescribing a set of uniform practices which risk over-riding local expertise, conditions and concerns. Nor can it do so by relying solely upon statements of co-operative values to build unity (at a time when ‘wellbeing’ and ‘responsibility’ are terms colonised by PR agencies for exploitative companies, the risk of a language of ‘co-operation’ being easily colonised within other discourses is too clear).

One alternative might be to reorient the search for common ground around a set of educational purposes that are understood, collectively, to be important in achieving the overarching goal of developing co-operative values. Both the historic account of co-operative education and the

exploratory discussion of contemporary practice would suggest that there are three inter-related aspirations for co-operative education that might form the basis for this common ground, namely:

- *Teaching about co-operation - making visible the alternatives and challenging the social and economic status quo*
- *Training for co-operation – building co-operative institutions and skills as economic and social resources*
- *Learning through co-operation – developing co-operative identities, dispositions and habits*

These inter-related purposes do not replace co-operative values as the values base for co-operative education. Rather, they can be understood as the critical means to realise the development of self-help, self-responsibility, equity, solidarity, openness and honesty, social responsibility and caring for others. Historically, these different purposes – whether developing identities, building institutions or creating a wider social movement – have been prioritised by different groups in the co-operative education movement. And even in the limited exploratory discussion of co-operative schools today it is clear that contemporary educators come to co-operative education from one or other of these routes. Clearly articulating the co-existence of these three purposes for co-operative education would resist the colonisation of co-operative education within other educational agendas, and create a common ground for educators to explore how co-operative values are best realised through each of these different purposes and the pedagogies and practices that may flow from them.

The challenge for the Co-operative education movement, in this context, would be to find ways to encourage, foster and enrich this debate; to build platforms for students, schools, staff and parents to populate this debate with lived experiences, ideas and aspirations of different communities; and to explore how to achieve these interdependent aspirations in practice. Such an approach would create common ground, while ensuring that the flexibility and creativity that the movement has historically demonstrated to adapt to changing conditions and contexts remains unconstrained.

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ⁱ There are also a growing number of Co-operative Higher Education Research and Education institutions, including the Lincoln Social Sciences Centre and 'Substance' in Manchester, both of which seek to build participatory knowledge through research.

ⁱⁱ International Co-operative Alliance statement on Co-operative Identity (1995). See

<http://www.ica.coop/coop/principles.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ The Co-operative Group is the UK's largest mutual business with around 6 million consumer members. It includes the Co-operative Supermarket, Banking, Insurance and Funeral services and is Britain's largest farming organisation. The Group is a commercial organisation run according to Co-operative values and principles. The Group funds the Co-operative College to further co-operative education both within the Group and in the wider co-operative movement.

^{iv} This section of the paper is indebted to the work of Woodin, Vernon and Gurney who have conducted the very limited archival research into the history of co-operative education.

^v 1st Principle: Voluntary and Open Membership: Co-operatives are voluntary organisations, open to all persons able to use their services and willing to accept the responsibilities of membership, without gender, social, racial, political or religious discrimination.

2nd Principle: Democratic Member Control: Co-operatives are democratic organisations controlled by their members, who actively participate in setting their policies and making decisions. Men and women serving as elected representatives are accountable to the membership. In primary co-operatives members have equal voting rights (one member, one vote) and co-operatives at other levels are also organised in a democratic manner.

3rd Principle: Member Economic Participation: Members contribute equitably to, and democratically control, the capital of their co-operative. At least part of that capital is usually the common property of the co-operative. Members usually receive limited compensation, if any, on capital subscribed as a condition of membership. Members allocate surpluses for any or all of the following purposes: developing their co-operative, possibly by setting up reserves, part of which at least would be indivisible; benefiting members in proportion to their transactions with the co-operative; and supporting other activities approved by the membership.

4th Principle: Autonomy and Independence: Co-operatives are autonomous, self-help organisations controlled by their members. If they enter to agreements with other organisations, including governments, or raise capital from external sources, they do so on terms that ensure democratic control by their members and maintain their co-operative autonomy

5th Principle: Education, Training and Information: Co-operatives provide education and training for their members, elected representatives, managers, and employees so they can contribute effectively to the development of their co-operatives. They inform the general public - particularly young people and opinion leaders - about the nature and benefits of co-operation

6th Principle: Co-operation among Co-operatives: Co-operatives serve their members most effectively and strengthen the co-operative movement by working together through local, national, regional and international structures

7th Principle: Concern for Community: Co-operatives work for the sustainable development of their communities through policies approved by their members

^{vi} <http://teacher.beecoop.co.uk/>

^{vii} <http://www.allhallows.org.uk/>

^{viii} <http://www.forestgate.newham.sch.uk/?on=business-enterprise>

^{ix} <http://www.sirthomasboughey.staffs.sch.uk/pages/co-op.htm>

^x Phil Arnold, Deputy HT of Reddish Value School is conducting a PhD study on the process of becoming a Co-operative Trust school and is working with the Co-operative and the authors of this paper to explore the possibility of a set of criteria that might capture 'co-operative ethos'. This list derives from his PhD work which is being written up fully elsewhere.