



Co-operative, Learning and Co-operative Values: Contemporary Issues in Education. Edited by Tom Woodin.

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Co-operative, Learning and Co-operative Values: Contemporary Issues in Education

Edited by Tom Woodin

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Anyone with an interest in co-operative alternatives in education will find this book a very useful resource. Predominantly drawing on UK experiences it provides historic, contemporary and visionary perspectives and examples in pursuit of the editor's aim to further explore and expand meanings of co-operative education. It illustrates the complexity of the ambition to apply co-operative approaches in education systems and settings and sharply focuses on the need for a greater analysis and understanding of 'co-operative education'. I have used quotation marks around these words as co-operative education presents itself in many guises and the words carry with them a vast range of interpretations of meaning, practices and intellectual theories, which could explain why (with the noted exception of co-operative pedagogies), the field is so neglected by researchers, shapers of educational systems and educators. In recent years, we have witnessed a recognition and articulation of a broader perspective, interpretation and application of the meaning of co-operative education, particularly in the UK; indeed, an earlier special edition of this journal¹ sought to expose the wealth of known practice in the field and start a process towards convergence of understanding. Readers of this book will find different authors using different interpretations and uses of the terms in their contexts, some more loosely than others, and it will be helpful approaching the book with that understanding. Furthermore, the editor in his conclusion, states his purposeful avoidance of what he calls 'restrictive definitions' of co-operative education, recognising that the book reveals multiple examples of co-operation.

In giving a voice to a wide range of authors, from leading commentators on education to education practitioners, the editor states that the tensions between the promise and the reality and between the dream and the actual life of co-operation underpin the twelve essays in the book. The volume is organised into three themes which present a number of perspectives on co-operation in schools and higher education

In the editor's introduction, *An introduction to co-operative education past and present*, he sets the scene well for the essays in the book, providing some historical and socio-political background and critique regarding the place of co-operative education. There is an explanation of the context of the emergence and growth of co-operative schools in England set against a background of neoliberalism together with a useful section on the history of the co-operative movement moving through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the varied influential educational initiatives ranging from the movement's roots in Robert Owen's ideas and the Rochdale Pioneers.

From this point forward, I suggest that you might either approach the book in a sequential manner or read the chapters selectively, depending upon your interests. If you are interested in co-operative education from the perspective of the co-operative movement, you will find the chapter by Ian Macpherson followed by the one by Linda Shaw very informative.

If your focus is on the introduction and growth of co-operative schools in England, look at the chapters by Tom Woodin and Davidge et al. to get a context and good overview.

If you would like to engage with some blue sky thinking on co-operative universities, you might go straight to Stephen Yeo's chapter.

For the benefit of all readers, I will now present a sequential consideration of the book's thematic parts. Please note that it is inevitable that as the book was first published in late 2014 amidst an ongoing, rapidly changing political and educational landscape, that some of the content is now a little out of date, especially with respect to some aspects related to co-operative schools.

Part I Frameworks for co-operative education. This section has three essays where the authors develop different frameworks in relation to co-operation and schooling.

Michael Fielding in his chapter, *Why co-operative schools should oppose competition and what they might do instead*, presents a case against the destructive nature of competition in education and proposes emulating a more appropriate model. For me, the chapter is summed up in the author's citation of Bloom's words: "Since means controls ends, no right ends can be gained by means that are themselves suspect" (p24) (Bloom, 1952:141).

He suggests that the co-operative schools movement has a particularly important part to play in exposing and opposing competition, being well positioned to, "take a leading role in the articulation of a quite different narrative" and its ability to convince others being via "the daily exemplification of a different practical alternative" (p18).

To strengthen his points about co-operation and competition and as a model worthy of emulation, he analyses the post-war experience of Alex Bloom, the Head Teacher of St George-in-the-East School, a (then new) secondary modern school in a tough, poor, multi-racial area of East London. Bloom's aims were to create, "A consciously democratic community ... without regimentation, without corporal punishment, without competition" (p23) (Bloom, 1948: 121).

The chapter concludes by urging the new co-operative education movement to create spaces for those who wish to pursue more radical alternatives than mainstream co-operation generally allows.

Richard Pring in his essay, *No school can go it alone: the necessity of partnership and co-operation*, takes a broad view of co-operation in education and reflects upon a range of partnerships in education in England over the past few decades; all were successful due to the high levels of embodied co-operation but unfortunately, for a variety of reasons, all saw a demise. He laments the emergence of the 'business model' approach to education along with its 'management speak', which he says, "militates against the co-operation and the sharing which are essential where the learner's interest rather than the public image of the institution, is put first" (p36).

Pring provides a number of examples where co-operation in educational contexts would be beneficial and goes on to explain how the co-operative school movement is offering a different vision of education. He leaves us to consider a suitable model for representative participation and co-operation in local education systems and whether it is time to go back to learn from the experience of the school boards set up after the 1870 Education Act.

The chapter by Philip Woods, *Co-operativism as an alternative: choice, assimilation and challenge*, explores the positioning of co-operativism as an alternative form of education in the English school system and considers its advantages and challenges.

The author sets the context by describing recent education policy in England and what he describes as the "advance of market-oriented, performative logic of governance" (p43).

He proposes co-operativism as a response or alternative to competitive capitalism and its accompanying social fragmentation, suggesting it could act as a drive to provide a practical, workable alternative to the conventional, individualistic paradigm. He cautions however, that the practice of co-operative schooling may fall short of its ideals and like other authors in this book, highlights the need for critical reflection, professional enquiry and research, that he views as essential in probing whether the reality lives up to the aspirations. He states the value of critically considering what it means to be an alternative in a system with a strong normalising

tendency to very different values and aims. He goes on to propose a resource for this consideration in a piece on Māori education (Waitere and Court, 2009) from which he presents a conceptual model of the alternative position involving the strategic identities of choice, assimilation and challenge.

PART II Co-operative Schools. This part contains five essays which scrutinise the role and significance of co-operative schools in more detail.

The first chapter, *Co-operatives, democracy and education: a critical reflection*, by authors Gail Davidge, Keri Facer and John Schostak, provides a useful politically-oriented perspective that will be relevant to anyone involved in co-operative schools in England or those interested in political influences on education. The authors argue a case for democratic practice with the concept of freedom with equality being an essential element. They provide a useful synopsis detailing the background to the co-operative schools movement, the challenges it faces, and give some pointers to co-operative schools in how to create a democratic fellowship.

The piece claims as critical the extent to which co-operative education ideas are driven deep into cultural practices as well as the procedures and processes of day-to-day organisation, and queries to what extent democratic co-operative governance is being implemented and evaluated by the schools that have adopted co-operative status. It also draws on experiences of practitioners within co-operative schools, illustrating their small steps to the realisation of democratic and co-operative principles in practice.

Perhaps due to the newness of co-operative schools at the time of writing, the article asks more questions than gives answers and the authors conclude that there is a long way to go before a coherent and comprehensive vision and practice is realised.

Assistant school principal Sarah Jones in her essay, *Contrived Collegiality? Investigating the efficacy of co-operative teacher development* appraises the approach to teacher professional development at a Co-operative Academy, which has sought to foster and promote the values and principles of the International Co-operative Alliance and to “go deep” by embedding the co-operative values into day-to-day practice. From this premise, the school drew on a model of collegiality devised by Hargreaves (2008) and the potential that co-operation has to enhance this. The school devised a number of methods which are described, the main focus being on School Improvement Groups, where teachers participate in democratic, self-motivating and critical forums as a form of professional development. The chapter discusses the tensions in the adopted approaches and the difficulties identified, both created internally and felt externally from the political climate of schooling in England at the time of writing.

Co-operative Democracy in practice — a learner’s perspective. In this chapter, Ashley Simpson recounts his personal experiences and perspectives as a pupil at the first English Co-operative Trust School established in 2008, charting some of the processes of its establishment and his involvement. The experience had a profound positive impact on his life and he describes how the influences continue to bear on his actions today. He sets the context of the school and presents his observations of its needs together with those of the young people and the surrounding community along with his perceptions of the early outcomes of the school’s transformations. He notes that the co-operative approach to education was perceived to be a significant way of addressing the identified issues faced by the school and schooling at the time. Although not attempting to define what he means by ‘co-operative education’, he describes its potential outcomes as a way in which young people could more actively engage with civil society and politics and how it could offer an emancipatory alternative. Finally, he touches on some challenges that he considers could pose long term issues for co-operative schools.

Dave Brockington describes the particular approaches and principles followed by the organisation ASDAN² in its role as a national educational charity and approved national awarding body in his chapter, *The impact of co-operative skills and approaches on young people’s development and attainment: an ASDAN perspective.*

We learn that the organisation has promoted learning-to-learn skills, skills for employability and skills for life since its inception in the early 1990s and from the evidence given, there is no doubt that it has been successful on a number of levels. Brockington claims that a key to ASDAN's successes has been the result of listening carefully to both practitioners and learners and then reflecting the outcomes of that process in the programmes and qualification materials produced in a process of co-creation.

It is noted that ASDAN's approach, within the constraints of educational policy context, has promoted a facilitation pedagogy that achieves a, "judicious balance between encouragement and challenge in practice" (p106) and that the organisation has promoted co-operative skills and co-operative teaching and learning for three decades. Additionally, the author draws upon two pieces of research that he claims have connected co-operative teaching and learning to the raising of attainment. One of the research projects examined the impact of ASDAN's 'Certificate of Personal Effectiveness' on a large group of participants that showed a statistically significant association with improved attainment in English and maths at GCSE for those that had completed the programme. The research also considered the impact of the ASDAN qualification vehicle with its 'built in' co-operative and learning-to-learn approaches. It is regrettable that the author does not give any description of ASDAN's meaning of co-operative teaching and learning and co-operative skills, so it is difficult to gain an understanding of their application in this context.

The final chapter in this section is an essay written by Tom Woodin, *Co-operative schools: putting values into practice*.

This presents a clear, concise account of the co-operative schools movement and the vehicle of co-operative values to stimulate dialogue and action. It pays particular reference to membership and participation and the associated issues, contradictions and limiting factors and describes a number of examples of how membership is being explored and implemented.

Woodin tells us that the co-operative schools movement is developing a rich but complex inheritance for the future and is insightful when he proposes that the adoption of co-operative label is a starting point. He cautions that advances can be checked and slowed by those who are less certain about direction of travel and that over time the meaning of co-operation will need to be reinvented if it is to flourish as a succession of new school leaders replace their predecessors.

Part III Co-operative education in co-operatives and higher education. This section contains four essays, which focus on the wider aspects of co-operation and education, primarily in the world of higher education.

The first is, *The Co-operative University? Transforming higher education* by Stephen Yeo.

This chapter presents a piece of blue sky thinking, drawing on a wide range of sources and posing multiple questions in seeking the potential for the co-operative university. It is a gentle amble over time, drawing on the author's personal experience, although perhaps is not contextualised too well in the contemporary context. The author considers various characteristics of co-operatives and asks how far can we rethink universities and the Higher Education system along these lines.

Diarmuid McDonnell and Elizabeth Macknight in their essay, *Policy, principles and practice: co-operative studies in higher education* present their case in two parts. It is assumed that the author's use of co-operative education in this context is 'about' co-operatives. The first part describes a partnership project between the Co-operative Education Trust in Scotland and Aberdeen University, which was funded through the Knowledge Transfer Partnership scheme. This had the aim of embedding co-operative, mutual and employee owned models of enterprise into the tertiary curricula. The second part considers some issues for co-operative education development in the UK and proposes some actions for the UK co-operative education movement in furthering co-operative education in universities.

Linda Shaw provides an accessible piece entitled, *A turning point? Mapping co-operative education in the UK*. This chapter links well with the following one by Ian MacPherson, and echoes other chapters in the book, recognising the gap in studies of the practice and theory of co-operative education. It is assumed that the meaning of co-operative education in this essay relates to education 'for' and 'about' co-operatives. The author comprehensively reviews historical practices up to the present day. Painting a picture of great diversity and complexity, she considers both the training needs for employees of co-operatives and member education, and includes the role of societies, co-operative development agencies and co-operative development bodies. She recognises that we may currently be at a turning point and summarises some evidence for this from the perspectives of a change to business start-up support, the growth of the co-operative schools movement and the serious consideration being given to the notion of a co-operative university. With much to do in order to move forward, she calls for the movement to revisit, reflect upon and develop its own practices and theoretical understandings of education.

The final essay in this part is by Ian MacPherson and provides a clearly written account entitled *Mainstreaming some lacunae: developing co-operative studies as an interdisciplinary, international field of enquiry*. He takes the reader on a tour of Europe and then onto further international locations to describe the growth and diversity of the co-operative movement. He demonstrates how co-operative studies are intricately linked to historic and ideological influences. He laments the patronising attitude and seemingly oblivious nature of the academy towards co-operatives and the co-operative movement and the situation faced by academics, which stifles research limiting the inclusion of co-operation in the curricula of business schools. The author discusses the ideological challenges faced by the co-operative movement in gaining greater attention in the academy and beyond. He calls for co-operative studies to be a joint community/academic pursuit and proposes a number of actions to realise this hope and vision.

Finally, a somewhat incongruously placed but interesting postlude is added after the main thematic sections which draw upon the career of Tim Brighouse particularly in the context of changing education systems in Local Authorities. Under the title, *Co-operation and competition — a commentary*, he focuses on some practical examples, which include strategies about teacher professional development, school data-sharing protocols and the programme of school collaboration and improvement called the London Challenge that he suggest reconciles the tensions between competition and collaboration.

In summary, the book makes a significant contribution to furthering the understanding of co-operative approaches in education, particularly in the UK setting. It presents a diverse range of commentators' perspectives and views in relation to values, histories and institutions and offers some visions of what might be. The complexity of the wide interpretations and comprehension are evident; there is a prevailing view that co-operative education has so far failed to build a coherent identity and there is a compelling need to do so if it is to be considered more than an alternative. Is it the responsibility of the movement to take the lead and agree a UK description of the terms and distinguishing features? We can all hope that books like this whet the appetite of those with influence to make changes and the much needed research and respect for that research gains energy and momentum.

The Reviewer

Maureen Breeze is an educational consultant and a board member of the International Association for the Study of Cooperation in Education (IASCE) and has guest edited two education special editions of the *Journal of Co-operative Studies*.

Notes

- 1 Journal of Co-operative Studies 44:3 (No 133) December 2011.
- 2 Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network.

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