

Co-operative Schools: A Quiet Revolution

Julie Thorpe

An update on the recent rapid growth of the co-operative school sector in the UK, this article explores the conditions that have led to the quick-growing interest in, and adoption of, the multi-stakeholder co-operative model of school governance. It reflects on the challenges of embedding values and implementing co-operative approaches in education in landscape of competition and uncertainty for schools.

Writing for this journal just two years ago (Thorpe, 2011) I introduced a relatively new concept on the English education scene — the Co-operative Trust School. At the time, the possibility of full privatisation of the school system was still being denied by the government. This summer it became public knowledge that Education Minister Michael Gove, has every intention of letting private companies take over the running of schools for profit (Cusick, 2013).

Whilst the reforms which have been imposed on the school system in England over the past seven years have clearly represented incremental steps towards a free market education economy, schools in many parts of the country have sought protection in numbers — grouping and working together in a hitherto unprecedented way. As public spending cuts have removed services formerly provided by local authorities, some schools have looked to private education companies for support whilst others have begun to explore the benefits of mutuality.

Driven by a desire to keep schools accountable to the local communities they serve, and led by a small group of pioneering head teachers who had been experimenting with operating their schools with a co-operative values-based ethos, a new model of school governance emerged in 2008 — the Co-operative Trust.

Schools which adopt this model acquire a Foundation — their land and assets transfer from the local authority to a locally-run charitable Trust. Written into the constitution of these Trusts is a commitment to operate the school in accordance with the values of the global co-operative movement namely, self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity, and solidarity.

Democratic accountability is ensured through membership. Stakeholders in the school: parents and carers, staff, students, and local people, can become members and elect representatives to the Trust Board. They hold the school to account for the way in which it implements its co-operative values.

Whilst it remains early days, there has been a growing interest in the initial successes and future potential of co-operative schools amongst education academics:

Emblematic of the opportunity to embed structures nurturing an alternative ethos in the education system is the growth in recent years of co-operative schools within the state system in England. They institutionalise values and ways of working which express co-operative ideals of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity (Woods, 2011).

At a time of significant change in the education system, members see the co-operative model as an imaginative answer to their desire for both institutional freedom and to contribute to the good of all young people in their local area. The model they have developed provides a civic governance alternative to both traditional bureaucratic democracy in the form of local authorities and more recent market-oriented alternatives (Audsley et al, 2013).

The first co-operative Trust, Reddish Vale School in Stockport, was established in 2008. Since then, of course, further reforms have been enacted and successful schools have been encouraged to move to Academy status — with full independence from local authorities and

direct funding from central government. A co-operative model for converter Academies was devised in 2011 as an alternative to Gove's self-perpetuating oligarchy governance model.

Growth has been rapid and today there are over 600 co-operative schools, with many more currently in the process of conversion. Whilst the first Trusts were single schools, most now comprise clusters of schools across a geographical area with the structure providing a framework for sharing expertise and resources, ensuring smooth transition, bulk procurement, and stronger schools supporting weaker ones.

Whilst there is no blue-print for the education provided by a Co-operative Trust School, and no 'top down' imposition of time-tables, curriculum options, holiday dates, or uniform colour — as prescribed by some of the academy chains.

Each Trust is an independent co-operative in its own right and as such must make its own decisions about how the values are applied in the day-to-day activities of the school. Implementing the co-operative ethos may be seen vividly in the classroom practices in one co-operative school and more strongly in the engagement with the local community in another. Pupil and staff democracy may be emphasised in yet another school, whilst a strong co-operative and social enterprise curriculum may feature elsewhere.

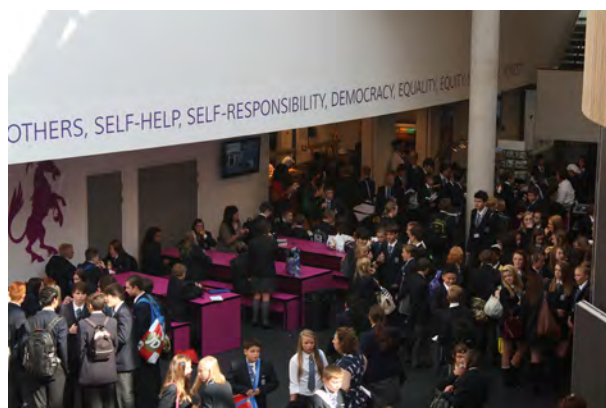
The vast majority of co-operative schools have only been established in the last two or three years so it is premature to expect concrete indications of the impact of the adoption of a values-driven ethos. Of course, many of the schools that have chosen the co-operative model were attracted to it because they recognised a close fit with their existing values. In such cases it may be difficult to perceive any significant changes although even many of these have taken the opportunity to restate their beliefs to parents, staff and students, make the values a visible part of the fabric of their school.

For other schools, sometimes those working in the most challenging circumstances, the adoption of Co-operative Trust Status has provided an opportunity to turn over a new leaf and set new standards and expectations. These schools have welcomed opportunities to learn from those which have already travelled further on their co-operative journey, to share best practice, and adopt tried and tested approaches. Conferences, forums, training events, and staff exchanges have become popular as the growing network of schools have recognised that many of the solutions to the 'problem' of school improvement are to be found in other like-minded schools.

Three years ago the Schools Co-operative Society was established by a number of the pioneer co-operative schools, working with the Co-operative College and the Co-operative Group. The Society exists to provide services and a voice for the sector and as its membership has grown a regional structure has begun to emerge — providing opportunities for mutual support between Co-operative Trusts at a local level. Forums to share teaching and learning practice, buying consortia, and school improvement services are emerging in response to local need



Staff and students at Corelli College – a co-operative Academy in Greenwich, London – sharing the way the values have been incorporated into their new branding with the late Professor Ian McPherson.



The co-operative values on display in the communal areas at Passmores Academy, a co-operative school in Essex.

and context. The Schools Co-operative Society has also been able to help schools with 'performance' issues — including some facing forced academisation because of unsatisfactory Ofsted reports or poor exam results.

Late in 2012, the Co-operative College launched the Co-operative Identity Mark for co-operative schools. This 'quality standard' involves a process of self- and peer-assessment within a framework that explores the application of each co-operative value across all aspects of the school operation: governance, curriculum, pedagogy, staff development, and community engagement. Early adopters of the Mark have been enthusiastic about its potential to provide a road map for their development as co-operative schools:

We like the fact that we will be able to gather information about our school and show how the school provides benefit to the local community.

I am particularly looking forward to researching what other schools do — where is the best practice and what is out there that we can adopt.

The Co-operative Identity Mark is already part of our School Development Plan, and therefore part of our budget overview, and this has raised the profile of our commitment to our status as a Co-operative Trust school.

Our Trust partners are already committed and enthusiastic, and again through full engagement, they will be able to further contextualise the values in the wider world, therefore embedding them for our pupils.

Co-operative schools are, of course, subject to the same external assessment processes as other state-funded schools. Reports from Ofsted, and the results of pupils, have shown the benefits of using co-operative values as a framework to deliver the breadth of curriculum areas and personal development undertaken in schools.

A number of the co-operative National Challenge Trusts (schools previously identified as facing severe challenges and with consistently poor results), such as Tong in Bradford, Blackburn Central High School and Cressex in High Wycombe that have all moved from very low levels of achievement to close to 50 per cent five A*-C with Maths and English have made remarkable progress.

A co-operative primary school in Liskeard, Cornwall, part of the Liskeard Co-operative Learning Trust, has received notification that it is one of the top 105 performing primary schools in England compared to 'similar' schools in the 2012 School Performance Tables. Menheniot Primary School was ranked number one in its table, and more than 20 per cent more students received a Level 4 in English and Maths than is typical of its intake.

Being part of a Co-operative Trust has impacted on the William Shrewsbury Primary School in Burton upon Trent and this was acknowledged in the school's latest Ofsted report, which judged it to be good with outstanding features.

The report states that the school makes good use of the Co-operative Trust, to which it belongs, to help it improve teaching and learning" and that

good use of expertise from across the Co-operative Trust to make sure that assessments are accurate and pupils' progress continues to improve". Ofsted also praised the "excellent teamwork throughout the school

which "contributes greatly to the outcomes for the pupils", and identifies "a very attractive learning environment in which they work and play" (Ofsted, 2013).

In Plymouth, a group of the city's primary schools have formed the South-West Plymouth Educational Trust, with the schools also coming together to form a secondary co-operative to support a wider range of services. Heads say that working as a collaborative cluster has helped the schools to develop a common set of aims and values, and to raise expectations and standards across the partnership.

A flavour of the atmosphere in one co-operative school is captured in a good practice case study on Ofsted's website featuring Lipson Community College in Plymouth:

It is evident from the start of the day that the atmosphere in this school is unusual. The tutor period starts right on time at 8.30am; students in the music room have come in early to be ready with their instruments so they don't lose a minute of their 'Big Band' practice time and two Year 11 students have come into school to join in, even though GCSE examinations are over. One says it's because 'I like to start my day with this' and 'it gives me energy and the younger ones need my help'. Elsewhere, others are in their kit ready for a game of football. In the dance studio, another group are already practising.

Students say that this innovative approach means that 'we all belong — everyone has a place and no-one is left out'. Constant dialogue about how best to implement the values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity means that students and staff describe the school as being 'a family'. Ethical values — honesty, openness, social responsibility and caring for others — underpin relationships. As a result, each member of the school community is treated as an individual and takes responsibility for their own and others' learning, behaviour and wellbeing. (Lipson, 2012)

As would be expected across such a large number of schools there are ups and downs in performance and the co-operative schools took their share of knocks in the erratic 2013 round of GCSE results. Proof of a causal relationship between the application of co-operative values and lasting improvements in attainment will be a significant marker of success if it can be established in the coming years. One of the main challenges facing the co-operative sector however, is to reclaim the public and political definition of successful schooling. It will be equally important to demonstrate that, in addition to good exam results, co-operative schools are producing well-rounded young people, actively engaged in their communities, committed to lifelong learning, possessing a range of skills for success in the labour market, and with a critical awareness of the society in which they live. School communities driven by co-operative values seem well placed to deliver such outcomes.

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 is currently Lead for School Programmes and Digital Learning, working to mainstream co-operative values in the education system across the UK. This includes the development and deployment of governance structures for Co-operative 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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