

# Guest Editorial

“At the moment, this is the epicentre of understanding of co-operation in education in the world.”

This statement was made by one of the presenters on the opening day of the international conference *The Transformative Power of Co-operation in Education* organised by the International Association for the Study of Co-operation in Education (IASCE) in July 2013. It was a poignant moment for the conference, which had attracted delegates from around the world to the Scarborough campus of Hull University. In partnership with the University's Education Department, the UK-based Co-operative Learning & Development Associates (CLADA) and the International Association for Intercultural Education (IAIE), the event welcomed many delegates new to the field alongside leading names and veterans in the research and practice of co-operation in education. The event also attracted a good number of young researchers, who are applying the lessons of co-operation in a wide variety of educational contexts with remarkable passion and originality. The delegates, from 23 countries in all, shared their understandings, experiences, aspirations and expertise in an event that both modelled and focused upon co-operation.

It was this conference that was the inspiration and motivation for this second special education issue of the *Journal for Co-operative Studies*. Following on from the 2011 special edition, which reviewed interpretations and meanings of co-operation in education in the UK, this current issue presents a small selection of the latest findings and understandings of co-operation in education from the international context. These push the boundaries of the field through the investigation of fresh applications and synergies that involve co-operation in education.

## What's in a Name?

There is a well-researched and mature field that embraces 'Cooperative Learning'; I intentionally use the upper-case C and L and omit the hyphen in this term to represent what I identify as a range of practical strategies evidenced by research and underpinned by academic theories. For many of the leaders in this field, such as Robert Slavin, David Johnson, Roger Johnson, Shlomo Sharan and Spencer Kagan, it has been almost their life-times' work. In describing Cooperative Learning from the perspectives of these luminaries, one might identify certain common characteristics, for example: (i) groups of two or more students learning together, (ii) engagement with methods of instruction that involve learners working towards a shared goal or outcome, (iii) interdependence between group members, such that the success of one depends on the success of the other, and (iv) where accountability is maintained for individual contributions and efforts. However, recent years have witnessed a recognition and articulation of a broader perspective, interpretation and application of the meanings of co-operation and education, and co-operative learning, particularly in the UK. Alan Wilkins (2011) presented a contextual framework where he portrayed co-operative learning from a number of perspectives: as a learning philosophy, as a form of experiential learning, as effective group working, as learning in a co-operative group, as pedagogy, as part of a social movement, as an expression of values and beliefs, as an agent for change and as social capital and self-actualisation. As additions to this list I would include co-operative learning as a personal philosophy and as a philosophy of learning. Daniela Pavan and Fabrizio Santini's article in this journal (Pavan and Santini, 2013) suggests that co-operative learning is:

part of a wider and richer educational movement which respects cultural and educational diversity and aims for greater social justice and opportunity as well as a vision for life.

For them, co-operative learning is important to their work in promoting education for sustainable development. Christine Schmalenbach, in her article about her work in a school in El Salvador, tells us that she didn't want to start with a pre-determined definition of co-operative learning but through fostering co-operative approaches, she hopes for a definition of co-operative learning to emerge from the context in which she is working.

## **A Values Base**

I view co-operation as a way of living and being, and an expression of one's lived values. Values are culturally referenced; for me the co-operative values expressed by the International Co-operative Alliance in their Statement on the Co-operative Identity (International Co-operative Alliance, 1995) act as a useful framework, namely the six organisational values (self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity) and the four ethical values (honesty, openness, social responsibility and caring for others). In an educational context, I acknowledge any practice in which co-operative values are in evidence as co-operative learning. In the classroom, the strategies and methods embraced by those I have cited above (and of many others) support this personal viewpoint, as I acknowledge they promote congruent behaviours and attitudes. In my work with the newly developing Co-operative Schools in the South West of England, educators are grappling with refocusing their classrooms in new, co-operative contexts. Although disparate approaches are emerging, the one commonality is the notion of a values base. These educators are familiar with the ICA suite of co-operative values (International Co-operative Alliance, 1995) which provide a starting point from which they can reflect upon their practice.

## **The Contributions**

In editing this special edition, I faced particular challenges in inviting writers whose first language is not English and who may not have had much experience of writing for publication. I was inspired by their courage to 'have a go'. It was important for me to work with these authors, to enable their voices to be heard and to enrich the growing international dialogue. I also wanted to give a voice to those new to the field in their attempts to understand co-operation in their educational contexts, their explorations of meanings and applications, and their experimentations with ideas. Unfortunately, not everyone succeeded in taking their work to publication however I recognise their efforts in the process. Ellen Gibson, a young leader and volunteer from the Woodcraft Folk in England, suggests that co-operation should be a philosophy embedded in all forms of learning. She proposes that engagement with wider notions of co-operation should be a more common aim in both formal and informal education and that co-operative education should not be confined to the formalised and conscious learning environments of schools, universities and other institutions.

It was also my intention to capture a cross-section of educational contexts: Laurie Stevahn from the USA and Jesika Singh from South Africa are working at postgraduate level; Daphnee Lee and colleagues in Singapore are working with teachers; Marialuisa Damini and Alessio Santini in Italy and Christine Schmalenbach in El Salvador are working with students in schools, and Julie Thorpe and Hugh Donnelly are working with systems.

The Journal contains a range of contribution styles; there are those more substantial peer-reviewed articles, such as the work at Seattle University that represent several years of work, presented alongside shorter case studies and personal perspectives, such as the article that presents a personal perspective on the education system in Scotland in the wake of major structural decisions that could influence that country's autonomy.

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## **The Richness of the Field**

I feel enriched by the work reflected in this journal and those who have undertaken it, as a small representation of the wider work that is being pursued across the globe, as exemplified by the

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contributors to the Scarborough conference. I am personally amazed by the speed of growth of co-operative schools in England and the critical mass of educators now engaged in co-operative approaches, striving to understand and make sense of their new focus. To my knowledge, there are at least four universities in England directly supporting the postgraduate professional development of these teachers at both masters and doctoral levels. They are engaging them in the exploration of ideas and practices, and through the development of a greater understanding underpinned by research, they are making a contribution to new knowledge about co-operation in education.

In my view, the field is more vibrant than ever; if it were to be suggested that it had had its time, then I would advocate taking a closer look at what seems to be an increasing momentum to the study and practice of co-operation in education across a wide range of contexts and being excited by the possibilities it can bring.

## References

- International Co-operative Alliance (1995) *Statement on the Co-operative Identity*. International Co-operative Alliance. [online] Available at: <http://ica.coop/en/what-co-op/co-operative-identity-values-principles> [Accessed 10 November 2013].
- Wilkins, A (2011) "Co-operative Learning — a Contextual Framework." *Journal of Co-operative Studies* 44 (3): 5-14.

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**IASCE**  
International  
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for the Study of  
Cooperation  
in Education

The International Association for the Study of Co-operation in Education (IASCE) is the only international, not-for-profit organisation for educators who research and practice co-operative learning in order to promote academic improvement and democratic, social processes. Established in 1979, it has an open membership and is steered by an elected international board of volunteers. It plays a number of roles including the organisation of biennial international conferences and providing a forum in which to share research and practice. For further information visit: [www.iasce.net](http://www.iasce.net).

### **Save the date**

The next conference will be in partnership with the University College Lillebaelt, Denmark, between 1-3 October 2015. You can pre-register by visiting [www.iasce2015.ucl.dk](http://www.iasce2015.ucl.dk) or via the link from the IASCE website.