

The Role of the Woodcraft Folk

by Dr. Douglas Bourn

A number of youth organisations refer to collective and co-operative activity, most notably the Scouts and their patrol system. But the Woodcraft Folk is unique in placing co-operation as central to its work with children and young people.

The Woodcraft Folk grew out of the 'woodcraft' scouting movement of the early 1900's. Leslie Paul, the founder of the organisation, had been a Boy Scout and had joined other groups which were experimenting in outdoor activities with children, notably the Kibbo Kift Kindred ⁽¹⁾. He founded the Woodcraft Folk in 1925, because he saw the need for an organisation which combined the best of the 'woodcraft' scouting tradition, with a progressive philosophy. Labour socialists like William Morris were particularly influential on Paul and his contemporaries.

The Marks of the Folk

The Co-operative movement with its traditional support for progressive cultural and educational activities became a natural source of support for the Woodcraft Folk. But to Paul, the links with the Co-operative movement were more than just financial. In 'Republic of Children', he emphasised co-operation as part of a child's social and physical development ⁽²⁾. Co-operation was stressed through outdoor work, camping was seen as the ideal co-operative community, with everyone helping each other to create a community where everyone was equal and supportive to one another. Ceremonies, customs and creeds were also seen as ensuring a co-operative outlook and spirit.

But above all, what identified the Woodcraft Folk was its emphasis on a structured educational programme. To some this was seen as denying individual rights and needs, yet experience has shown that for co-operative activity to be successful, clearly defined structures are essential. For example, a camp has to have a daily programme, people have to have specific tasks and children and adults have to know where and when activities are going to take place.

Despite some modifications in recent years, the basic outline of Woodcraft Folk activities, both at group night and at camps, has not radically changed. The 'badgework' system, taken in many ways from the Scouts and Guides, has however changed considerably in recent years. The role of ceremonies and customs has become less important with changing attitudes and a noticeable influx of newer leaders over the past decade.

Changes in Programmes

What has happened in the Woodcraft Folk has been the development of more overt social educational programmes and activities. This has partly been because of the changing nature of the organisation, with a greater input from educationalists, but also because leaders have felt that if the Woodcraft Folk is to be successful with its objectives, it has to be more sophisticated in its approach and work with children and young people.

Co-operation over the last decade has therefore become even more central to the work of the Woodcraft Folk. Its Constitution now refers to developing 'a co-operative and sharing attitude to life'. Co-operation is not seen just in terms of living communally at camp or understanding about the consumer movement. It is about educational skills and attitudes and this has been most clearly developed through new approaches to games and play.

Games and play have always been a central part of Woodcraft Folk activity, but in its early days they were related mainly to physical activity and the development of a healthy body. Today, the emphasis is on promoting a sense of participation, of everyone feeling equally involved, working against individualism and a competitive ethos. For example, team games have become adapted by changing players in each team after every point, so that taking part becomes the prime consideration, not winning.

Influence from North America

These developments in the Folk were influenced by the growth of the 'new games' and 'co-operative games' movement in North America. Terry Orlick, the author of probably the most influential book in this area, says that competition is irrational and is linked to an excessively goal orientated society⁽³⁾. Pitting children against each other, he suggests, can lead to rejection. This competitive spirit is instilled in children from an early age and they become conditioned into believing that 'winning is what is important'.

Orlick poses that children nurtured on co-operation, acceptance and success have a much greater chance of developing strong self concepts, just as children nurtured on a balanced diet have a greater chance of developing strong and healthy bodies⁽⁴⁾.

Co-operation Intrinsic to Human Behaviour

It is often said in answer to these points, 'but isn't competition an innate social condition?'

The answer to this is that competition is socially conditioned. Indeed if anything is intrinsic to human behaviour, it is co-operation. As Will Watkins

has pointed out, "co-operation is part of social behaviour. We are dependent on each other for survival. Co-operation is part of universal human experience. It is not an alternative, but should be a central educational principle"⁽⁵⁾.

In the Woodcraft Folk when these ideas were first discussed in the late 1970's, there was a fear that 'co-operative games' would become a principle above the needs of children. For example some of the games can appear to be rather artificially contrived. What has happened over the past decade however has been not the implanting of new games necessarily, but training and experience in promoting the importance of a co-operative spirit and atmosphere within groups and camps. Competition may exist, we cannot ignore it, but above all the co-operative spirit seeks to cultivate a sense of being involved, of not feeling threatened or no good. It is about sharing and being mutually supportive. It is this co-operative sense, through the individual child and young person to the group as a whole, which the Folk has learnt to be the main consideration.

From a re-examination of its approach to games and play, the Woodcraft Folk has therefore developed 'co-operation' to be a universal principle, a goal to achieve through activity and play. This could be through specific activities, or a camp, or in most cases an overall objective for a group over a period of time.

Not a Package of Material

What has been a danger however is seeing 'co-operation' as some package of material which is mastered through the development of skills and access to information. There has been some interesting discussion on these points in the work of the World Studies Project for the formal education sector. Co-operation is seen as 'students' being able to appreciate the value of co-operating on shared tasks and to work co-operatively with other individuals and groups in order to achieve a common goal⁽⁶⁾.

There is an acceptance that co-operative skills can only be developed through activity and practice. You cannot teach someone to co-operate. He or she can learn only through experience. The problem with the World Studies Project material, which is excellent in many of its ideas and methodology, is that it covers only a small part of the school curriculum - if that now with the new Education Act.

The recently published booklet on 'Work with Schools' from the Co-operative Union Education Department deliberately takes a more limited, and probably more realistic role in looking at the promotion of Co-operatives within the school curriculum⁽⁷⁾.

It does refer to 'co-operative methodology', but notes the limitations which the present school system gives us.

Importance of Activities out of School

This is why 'out of school' activities become so important, because they can create the opportunities for developing co-operative styles and approaches in a far freer environment. Activities, if they are based around games and play projects with a clear end product and social purpose, can ensure that co-operative ideals have a greater chance of being promoted.

Co-operation and working together have to be seen within the context of children's and young people's daily lives. What youth work can do is develop those skills they already have, and encourage independence and a sense of confidence through a mutually supportive environment. What is essential is that co-operation is integrated into everyday experience. This can be suggested in a number of different ways from projects to going to stay at a youth hostel for a weekend.

For example, the Woodcraft Folk's development education packs have been very successful because they take as their starting point the individual child and move out from there to look at their friends, their community and the wider world. Co-operation is built into this process through activities, be it games, discussions or projects. It is interesting to note that a wide range of other youth organisations, including Scout and Guide groups, have taken up this material and are actively promoting it in their units ⁽⁸⁾.

Co-operative learning has therefore to look at not only the content, but the form of the activity. It should ensure equal involvement. Leadership is necessary, but it has to be about dialogue. Paulo Friere uses the term 'liberating teachers' and he suggests that 'liberatory education' is about developing people to think for themselves, to look at their society critically and to encourage those who wish so, to change their environment ⁽⁹⁾. The Woodcraft Folk, for example, now encourages collective forms of leadership. A group would have 3 or 4 adults who would act as leaders, have differing skills and expertise and share tasks and responsibilities.

Co-operation and Society

Finally, co-operation should not be divorced from the wider context of the society in which we live. Co-operation, from Robert Owen to the present day, has been an integral part of the struggle for social change. The Woodcraft Folk refers to 'education for social change' and sees co-operation as an essential part of this process. It is the linking of this desire for co-operation through

individual and group action to wider social issues that can be the most difficult, but because it is not easy, it is therefore even more important. This is why the Woodcraft Folk can play such an important role because it can provide this link from the individual child to group activities to social and political awareness and, hopefully, to social change.

References

(1) For further information on the early life of Leslie Paul, see his *Early Days* (1980).

(2) *Republic of Children* (1938)

(3) *Co-operative Sports and Games Book* (1978) pp. 5-6.

(4) *Ibid*

(5) *Co-operative Principles: Today and Tomorrow* (1986) pp. 10-11

(6) See S. Fisher & D. Hicks - *World Studies 8-13* (1985) pp. 66-8; R. Richardson *Learning for Change in a World Society* (1976)

(7) *Work with Schools* (1988)

(8) *Getting on with Others & Images* (1987)

(9) P. Freire *Politics of Education* (1985); P. Freire & I. Shaw *A Pedagogy for Liberation* (1987).

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