

Co-operation Provides Opportunities for All - The Reddish Vale Co-operative School – A View from a Learner

Ashley Simpson

The status quo could no longer prevail, the wider social crisis had come, and a radical alternative was needed. The proposed solution was a democratically controlled co-operative school where parents, pupils, staff and community members had a voice. Critically, there was a need to engage and empower the previously isolated and disillusioned sections of the Reddish community; obstacles felt on the outside were being expressed inside the school and the effect was utter disengagement by pupils. Theory became reality in 2008 when the school became the first Co-operative Trust School in the country and with it an effective framework for an education to be underpinned by the values and principles of co-operation.

The problems that faced my school then, I believe exist for many schools today. That is the perception that schools operate as battery caged hen coops and are saturated with institutionalised boundaries. These schools do not function according to explicitly stated values of self-help, equality, social responsibility and democracy. My school now embraced those values and I believe was attempting to change that perception.

As a student at the school, encountering this new approach fused with me and my peers instantly; the emerging idea of a school being mutually run for the benefit of all the stakeholders seemed common sense. The ethics of co-operation and the structure of mutualism inspired me and I felt empowered. I felt free of the shackles of dogmatic school practices.

The educational impact of the co-operative approach at Reddish Vale was that the boundaries of learning were breached and young people felt that they could now influence and change their world. The school ethos altered completely and was bringing about a gradual strategic process of transforming lives through empowerment, engagement, participation and innovation. The value of self-help has been epitomised through young people running social enterprises and tackling their own key issues such as the establishment of a fairtrade coffee co-operative selling produce for farmers in Ethiopia and the Reddish Vale Creative Co-operative, which provides opportunities through the use of the arts and media – for the students and owned by the students.

Participation in the Reddish Vale Co-operative Trust created new opportunities for me. Initially it gave me an understanding of civil society and I became engaged politically with the Co-operative Party of which I am now the Manchester executive committee vice-chair. Moreover, my understanding of co-operative organisations and structures has catalysed my involvement in the supporters' trust movement in football. Currently I am the chair of Stockport County Supporters' Co-operative, seeking to give a democratic and representative voice to supporters. Most importantly however, it enabled me to go to university, to study politics at the University of Leeds.

Co-operation for me is about the big picture - working together to find solutions, to find long term success by investing in all our futures.

The Author

Ashley Simpson is a co-founder of Reddish Vale Co-operative Trust and undergraduate at the University of Leeds where he studies Politics. Ashley works as an associate of the Co-operative College on developing membership in co-operative schools. A further co-operative pillar of Ashley's life is football, where he chairs the Stockport County Supporters' Co-operative which aims to empower football supporters through giving them a democratic and representative voice. He considers himself a young champion of all things co-operative and mutual.