Co-operative Education and Schools: an old idea for new times?

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Keywords

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Abstract

There is a growing Co-operative Education sector in England[1], with in the region of 300 schools now describing themselves as Co-operative Schools. The growth of this sector is subject to significant debate – is it a countervailing movement for local democracy or is it simply another chain of schools that will hasten the marketisation of education? This paper draws on the relatively limited extant literature on the history of co-operative education since the 1850s to understand the key traditions of 'Co-operative Education'. Then, drawing upon an analysis of Co-operative Schools' websites and meetings, upon interviews with Co-operative College officers, and upon visits and interviews with teachers in 2 Co-operative Schools, it explores how these traditions are being taken up or resisted in Co-operative Schools in England. The paper argues that there is a risk that the autonomy that is at the heart of the Co-operative movement may lay the growing Co-operative schools sector open to co-option within existing neo-liberal education agendas. The paper argues that an important bulwark against this would be for the Co-operative movement to focus its energies in particular on the development of a movement of Co-operative *educators*, the teachers, parents, students and governors who through a 'learnt associational identity' (Woodin, 2011) can resist the reduction of education to a marketised private good. This analysis has implications not only within the context of England, but more widely in the international struggle to develop new models of democratic accountability for education in an increasingly marketised environment, and the potential role of the international co-operative movement within that global struggle.

Introduction

England is currently undergoing one of the most radical restructurings of its education system since the 1944 Education act (Stevenson, 2011; Avis, 2011). One of the core elements of this restructuring is a significant change in the management and governance of schools that sees a significant shift away from local government control. In a continuation of a process that began with the establishment of City Technology Colleges over two decades ago, English schools are increasingly becoming Trust Schools and Academies. Trust schools are charitable Trusts which own their own facilities and lands and work in partnership with a local organisation, but which continue to be supported and overseen by the Local Authority. Academies are charitable companies limited by guarantee that are independent from and unsupported by the Local Authority, being commissioned directly by the Secretary of State to provide education services. More recently, parents groups and other organisations have been allowed to set up Free Schools, which operate effectively as 'independent schools' within the state system, being resourced from the state but accountable only to their own governing bodies and the Secretary of State and able to define their own distinctive 'ethos' and

[1] Non UK readers may not be aware of the governance of education in the UK in which education powers are devolved to Scotland while responsibility for education in England and Wales remains with Westminster. This leads to very different systems in operation south and north of the border. There are also important differences between education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. This paper therefore speaks only of English schools.

curriculum. This move echoes the US development of Charter Schools and the Swedish Free School movement.

These changes are presented by the various governments who have initiated them (Conservative, Labour and Coalition Governments have all pushed this line of travel) as a way of encouraging innovation and driving up quality, in particular in schools serving low-income areas. Underpinning these changes is a familiar neo-liberal assumption that educational quality can best be achieved by bringing competition into the education system, by casting parents and students as choice-seeking consumers seeking private benefit and by promoting partnerships between state education providers and external organisations, often commercial companies (Gamble, 1994). Since the advent of the Coalition government in 2010, the process of 'Academisation' has intensified, with successful schools also being encouraged to apply to become Academies with promises of greater autonomy and increased funding. At the same time, struggling schools who do not meet certain 'basic' standards are increasingly threatened with forced Academisation by the Office of the Schools Commissioner, at times against the will of governing bodies, parents and local groups. The familiar drive to break-up the seeming monopoly of state provision of a public service is in train (Stevenson, 2011).

It is in this context that the 150 year old Co-operative movement[2] is seeking to re-enter the schools sector and is partnering with a growing number of schools in the Academisation/Trust School/Free School process. The Co-operative movement is a global economic and social movement explicitly committed to the values of: *'self-help, self-responsibility, equity, solidarity, openness and honesty, social responsibility and caring for others'*. Established over 150 years ago in Northern England, the movement promotes the establishment of Co-operative associations as a way of enabling people to meet their common economic, social and cultural needs through jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprises. Far from being a fringe economic activity, the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA) represents Co-operatives working across 93 countries with over 1 billion members worldwide (ICA, 2011). The Co-operative movement and its values are being embraced by an increasingly wide range of social actors confronting economic and environmental crises (Vieta, 2012). Co-operative ownership models are being considered as the basis for a new settlement between the state, the market and the public in the governance and delivery of public services (Simmons et al, 2009; DCSF, 2009). In announcing that 2012 would be the United Nations International Year of Co-operatives, the UN Secretary General argued that: *"Cooperatives are a reminder to the international community that it is possible*

[2] A note on terminology: there are numerous related parts of the Co-operative movement that play a role in education. First, the Co-operative Movement can be understood to be all the loosely associated co-operative organisations in operation around the world, represented internationally by the International Co-operative Alliance. In the UK, the Co-operative Group is the UK's largest mutual business with around 6 million consumer members. It includes the Co-operative Supermarket, Banking, Insurance and Funeral services and is Britain's largest farming organisation. The Group is a commercial organisation run according to Co-operative values and principles. The Group supports and works with the Co-operative College, which is a separate charitable organisation, tasked with promoting Co-operative education both within the Group and in the wider Co-operative movement in the UK and internationally.

to pursue both economic viability and social responsibility." (Ban Ki-Moon, http://social.un.org/coopsyear/2011).

For English schools seeking partners in the process of becoming Academies or Trust Schools, the idea of becoming a 'Co-operative School[3]' and partnering with one of the organisations in the English Co-operative movement promises dual attractions. It seems to enable schools to take on the freedoms (and funding) that are being promised by the Academies policy while maintaining a commitment to the democratic and social values that reflect longstanding commitments to education as a public good rather than private benefit. By the end of 2011 143 schools had become formally associated with the Co-operative College (the educational arm of the Co-operative movement) (Wilson, 2011). By July 2012, the number was approaching 300 (Schostak, Davidge, Facer, 2012). This makes the Co-operative schools sector one of the largest (non-faith) coalitions of schools in England. Given its explicit statement of social values and principles, this Sector is increasingly a repository of hope for the creation of a new movement for education as a public good in England.

As a strategy for resisting neo-liberal educational policies, however, this is high risk. The conversion of so many schools to Co-operative status brings with it the accusation from many on the Left that Co-operative Schools are diffusing resistance to neo-liberal policies and providing 'cover' for a process of marketization. At the same time, it is not immediately evident that it will be possible to retain a commitment to co-operative values within an increasingly centralised curriculum context and within a marketised education system that pits schools, staff and parents against each other via the mechanism of league tables and performance management (Brown, 1990; Ball, 2003; Grek, 2012; Grek & Ozga, 2010) The question the Co-operative Schools movement in the UK faces today, then, is whether its values can successfully build new relationships of democracy, self-reliance and collaboration between students, staff, parents and local communities or whether, in turn, this movement will become subject to colonisation by and arguably at act as vanguard for, a neo-liberal discourse of competitive marketization. This paper is a first, exploratory attempt to understand how this process is playing out. It asks:

- *What are the traditions of Co-operative education with which Co-operative Schools in England are beginning to ally themselves?*
- *How are these traditions being understood and enacted in English schools today?*
- *How far can the emerging Co-operative Schools sector be understood as a potential resource for democracy and public education in English education?*

In order to explore these questions, the paper begins by discussing the traditions of Co-operative education, its role within the wider Co-operative movement and the uncomfortable relationship that the movement has come to have with State provision of schooling in

[3] Throughout the paper, where the terms 'Co-operative' and 'Co-operation' are associated explicitly with the values and principles of the Co-operative movement, the terms are capitalized. Where, in contrast, 'co-operation' or 'co-operative' are simply understood as verbs or adverbs devoid of the associations with the movement then no capitalization is employed.

England. This discussion is based upon the limited extant research literature in the area and interviews with historians and officers of the Co-operative Archive and Co-operative College (a major provider of Co-operative education in the UK). The paper then describes the Co-operative movement's renewed involvement with English schools over the last decade and explores how the schools that are associating themselves with this movement are beginning to interpret Co-operative values and purposes. This exploration of current practice is based on a small scale opportunity sample comprising: interviews with members of the Co-operative College; analysis of Co-operative Business & Enterprise College websites; fieldnotes taken during two Co-operative network events bringing together head teachers, researchers and local officials who have been working in partnership with the Co-operative College; a visit to one Co-operative school which has been taking a 'co-operative' approach to pedagogy and school ethos for the last three years; and interviews with 10 members of staff at two Co-operative schools. The paper concludes by discussing the implications of these early days in the growth of an English Co-operative Schools sector for the wider issues of education as a public good. Such debates have implications not only within the context of England, but more widely for the international struggle to develop new models of democratic accountability for education in an increasingly marketised environment.

Education and the Co-operative Movement

The Co-operative movement is usually understood to have emerged in the middle of the 19th Century when early co-operators joined together to form formally constituted associations. These associations enabled individuals to purchase and produce goods collectively, to form Co-operative communities and to share the profits from such collective activity. At the heart of this process was a desire to mitigate the human costs of capitalist economic organisation and, for some, the desire to create a different economic, social and spiritual organisation of society.

The history of education within this movement is under-researched (Woodin, 2011, Shaw, 2011). Nonetheless, education in its broadest sense has been important to the Co-operative Movement since its inception (Wilson & Mills, 2008)[4]. Indeed, the early co-operators, including the Owenites, *'believed that the key to social transformation in the present and future lay in the sphere of education'* (Gurney, 1996, 29). The Rochdale Pioneers for example (whose establishment of a consumer Co-operative in 1844 formed the model for many subsequent Co-operative organisations in the UK) dedicated 2.5% of their profits to supporting education and by 1876 they had a library of 12,000 volumes, a full time librarian and 11 reading rooms (Gurney, 1996).

Education came to encompass a very wide variety of activities within the Co-operative movement (Shaw, 2011). These included everything from pioneering film-making and publications (Burton, 2005) to running reading rooms and schools (Gurney, 1996), from establishing degree level qualifications (Vernon, 2011) to developing informal networks and

[4] This section of the paper is indebted to the work of Woodin, Vernon and Gurney who have conducted the very limited archival research into the history of Co-operative education.

personal development through participation in co-operation (Woodin, 2011; Hartley, 2011). Co-operative Education also spanned the age range and operated internationally, running everything from early years provision to tertiary level Co-operative Colleges operating in countries around the world (Wilson & Mills, 2008). Such diversity is hardly surprising; it echoes the wide variety of areas within which Co-operatives are working and the wide variety of purposes to which Co-operative models might be applied. Just as it would be impossible to point to one form of schooling which characterised Capitalist social organisation, so is it impossible to point to one form of education that characterises 'Co-operation'. Nonetheless, it is possibly to identify four dominant education traditions in the Co-operative movement, these are in evidence both in the historical literature and contemporary practice; these are:

Teaching about Co-operation - making visible the alternatives. This tradition is concerned with providing resources and teaching people about co-operative ways of organising economic and social life. This can be read as providing a critique of capitalist forms of production by making visible the potential of an alternative mode of economic organisation, and is often tied in with the wider goal of building a Co-operative movement. This educational tradition can be seen in the early movement's significant investment in reading rooms (there were 376 in England alone by 1897 (Gurney, 1996)) and it is in evidence today in the continuing emphasis on creating resources to ensure that Co-operative economics, social theory and political theory are visible in schools and universities (Kalmi, 2007).

Training for Co-operation – improving Co-operative institutions. This is concerned with ensuring that the Co-operative movement and its institutions work effectively by ensuring that members are aware of how Co-operative institutions can best be established, managed and run. Today, this education may include training in everything from the legal basis of membership models of governance to familiar training in all areas of business. Historically, it is captured in the following observation from 1926: '*Co-operative business as a moral system of business need not be an inefficient system of business, and Co-operative societies should provide adequate educational facilities for their employees so that the Co-operative movement may be as efficient as its competitors'* (The Co-operative Union Ltd Educational Department, Educational Programme 1926-27, Manchester Holyoake House, 1926, p6, quoted in Vernon, 2011)

Learning through Co-operation – developing Co-operative identities. This tradition is concerned with giving people opportunities to participate in co-operative relationships and institutions in the workplace and beyond (Hartley, 2012). It has the broad goal of developing the habits and personal relationships of people as co-operators. It is about developing what Woodin calls a 'learnt associational identity' (2011) understood to emerge from the experience of relationships of mutuality, equity and solidarity and to develop capacities for self-reliance and self-help. It is assumed to be a central underpinning element of all other forms of co-operation in and for education.

Co-operation for education – establishing Co-operative schools, colleges and universities. This tradition is concerned with establishing, running and managing educational institutions on a co-operative basis in order to ensure access to a 'general' education. The importance of

this historically in the Co-operative movement is perhaps best captured by one American radical who visited the early British Co-operative movement and observed that *"At a very early period in the movement, co-operation set before itself the task of becoming mentally independent as being quite as important as that of becoming independent in its groceries" (quoted in Gurney, 1996 p38)*.

These different traditions are neither mutually exclusive nor necessarily intrinsically connected within the Co-operative movement. It is possible to advocate, for example, Co-operative educational institutions without advocating for a curriculum that teaches Co-operative economics, history and politics, for example. And indeed, these traditions are not necessarily subscribed to by all in the Co-operative movement. Historically, for example, there were those who sought, through Co-operative education and participation in Co-operative societies, to build a new Co-operative commonwealth to replace the capitalist system. From this perspective, Co-operative education was merely a staging post towards substantial social and economic reorganisation. On the other hand, there were those who saw Co-operative education as tasked primarily with providing people with the skills needed for economic wellbeing *within* the capitalist system and to ensure the successful flourishing of the Co-operative societies in that context (Robertson, 2010). Indeed, much of the history of education in the Co-operative movement has been characterised by tensions surrounding the relative importance of these different imperatives and their relationship with each other. Such tensions are also negotiated (or exacerbated) by another important feature of the Co-operative movement; namely, its commitment to local autonomy, an autonomy that allows local Co-operative societies to determine their own priorities in relation to many areas of operation, including education.

These tensions are particularly visible in the relationship between the Co-operative movement, the Labour movement and State provision of education in England, a relationship which provides an important context for the contemporary re-engagement of the Co-operative movement in English schools today. The relationship between Co-operative and Labour movements, for example, has at times been uneasy as the Labour movement has often seen Co-operative institutions as too complicit with market economics. In the 19th Century, however, Co-operative and Labour movements often worked hand in hand to enable local provision of education and to make the case for better education provision for all children. Gurney (1996) describes how a survey of 107 societies (out of 1420) revealed 164 co-operators on school boards and 124 school managers in England in 1897. With the Balfour Act of 1902 however, school provision, which had previously been in the hand of School Boards, was reorganised under the jurisdiction of Local Authorities. This governance of education by the State, and in particular, the loss of the link between local organisations (including co-operatives) and School Boards was not universally welcomed. Some co-operators welcomed the provision, arguing that it would enable Co-operative societies to concentrate on teaching distinctively *Co-operative* education in social and economic history while the State took care of basic educational needs. Others, in contrast, argued that state provision of education removed control of education from individuals and communities,

eroded the tradition of self-help and autonomy in education, and made it harder to present alternative narratives about the state and the economy (Gurney, 1996).

The consequence of the Balfour Act in England was to see the Co-operative movement increasingly withdraw from engagement with schooling, focusing instead on training in Co-operative institutions and on providing adult 'education in Co-operative history and theory' (Gurney, 1996, 35). In this, the relationship with the Labour Party was also critical. Indeed, despite the Co-operative Party's long and ongoing association with the Labour Party, Co-operative ideas and values were arguably marginalised from mainstream education politics and school policies from this period. As Stewart (2011) argues *'With labourism and state socialism dominating the Labour Party's ethos and political thought, co-operative values were excluded from mainstream strategy and policy formulation'* (140). Indeed, a 1923 Fabian Society booklet explicitly locates the teaching of co-operation as something separate from the purposes and processes of state education:

> *No-one, whether a co-operator or not, would urge any other course. The State and not the Movement, should supply a general education, and co-operative education, if it is to exist must take as its subjects those which do not fall within the curriculum of general education and which have some definite connection with the objects or principles of co-operation. (Dawson, 1923:10)*

Indeed, it was arguably not until Ed Balls, himself a Co-operative and Labour Party MP[5], became Minister for Children, Schools and Families in the dying days of the last Labour Government, that ideas about Co-operation re-emerged in mainstream education debates and Labour Party policy in England (DCSF, 2009). That this particular relationship between the Co-operative movement and State provision of education is a consequence of the distinctive organisation of schooling around local government in England becomes clear when we compare this situation with the history of education in Spain. In Spain, in contrast, schools owned and governed on a Co-operative basis flourished from the 1930s, often in opposition to fascism and later to Franco's rule; today there are 600 Co-operative schools in Spain, employing nearly 20,000 teachers (Wilson & Mills, 2008).

The Return of Co-operative education to English Schools

Over the last ten years two factors have led to a renewed belief that the Co-operative movement might and should play a more important role in schools. First, as formal education has increasingly taken over from workplace and informal learning as a site of education there has been growing concern that Co-operative organisational models have become increasingly marginalised. In University Business Schools, for example, researchers have argued that Co-operatives have largely been written out of economic history or relegated to studies of agriculture (Kalmi, 2007). While more recently, the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA) has argued: *"Too often young people are not aware of the Co-operative model of*

[5] The Co-operative Party is formally affiliated with the Labour Party, there are currently 29 Labour and Co-operative MPs in the House of Commons http://www.party.coop/

enterprise; they do not learn about cooperatives in school, as Co-operatives often do not figure in school curricula"(ICA, 2011).

These observations have led, in the first instance, to concerted efforts on the part of the Co-operative College to increase *teaching about* Co-operation in schools. In 2002, for example, the Co-operative Group established the 'Young Co-operatives' programme to help school students to start their own fair-trade Co-operatives in English schools. Taking this a step further in 2003, the Co-operative Group and College became partners with 10 Business and Enterprise Colleges across the UK (Wilson & Mills, 2008). The Co-operative's involvement in these schools included: representation on the Business Colleges' governing body, provision of resources, supporting a network for Head Teachers and organising regional and national activities (Co-operative Group Website, 2011). The 100 year history of the Co-operative College as a source of teaching materials, curriculum and assessment on Co-operative organisation, theory, economy and practice made such a move into producing materials for schools and partnering on this basis relatively straightforward.

The second factor that has led to a renewed interest in the Co-operative movement in schooling, as described in the introduction, is the changing policy on school governance. This has begun to undermine the post-Balfour role of the Local Authority and to open up opportunities for local and national Co-operative Society involvement in mainstream schooling again. Over the last decade, the Co-operative College and Group have begun to act as partner and sponsor for a much larger number of schools. The Co-operative Group now sponsors three Academies (Manchester, Brownhills, and Leeds) and the Co-operative College has supported in the region of 300 schools[6] to establish themselves as Co-operative Trust Schools (Kingman, personal communication). These Trust schools are established as Co-operative Societies in their own right and are now supported by and as part of a new network, which has itself formed into a Secondary Co-operative Society. As of 2011, and the publication of the new Public Services Bill which promotes Co-operative and mutual models of public services delivery (the so-called 'John Lewis Bill', see Maude, 2010), the Co-operative College is also exploring how to support the development of Co-operative models of children's services provision, music services, early years and youth provision (Wilson, 2011).

There is, therefore, a growing 'Co-operative movement' in the provision of education for children in the UK today. But given the different traditions of Co-operative Education and given the competing views of Co-operation per se as a means of ameliorating or challenging capitalist economic and social organisation, what form is Co-operative Education actually taking in these schools today? And perhaps more importantly, what sorts of resources might Co-operative education begin to offer to educators, parents, students and local communities looking to the Co-operative tradition as an alternative to the neo-liberal marketisation of education?

Co-operative education in English schools today

[6] As of 31st August, there were in the region of 261 Co-operative Trust schools, 43 associate member schools, 26 Academies and 1 Free School (Steve Kingman, Co-operative College, personal email)

The Memorandum and Articles of Co-operative Trust Schools, to which all Co-operative schools are expected to sign up, suggest that participation in a Co-operative Schools sector might provide a powerful values-base for schools and educators (Wilson & Mills, 2008; Wilson, 2011). These values and principles are as follows:

> *Values: Co-operatives are based on the values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity. In the tradition of their founders, Co-operative members believe in the ethical values of honesty, openness, social responsibility and caring for others* [There are seven principles] *Voluntary and Open Membership; Democratic Member Control; Member Economic Participation; Autonomy and Independence; Education, Training and Information; Co-operation among Co-operatives; Concern for Community – see appendix (ICA, 1995)*

As schools become Co-operative Trusts, schools are asked to work with these values and principles through the inter-related areas of school governance, curriculum, pedagogy and ethos (Wilson, 2011). When we look at what is happening in schools, we can see that these principles and values are being used to inspire a wide range of activity on the ground. For example, within the Schools network, new teaching materials and resources are being prepared in areas ranging from citizenship to ethical enterprise in action to fair trade and Co-operative history[i]; working groups are supporting each other to develop student voice, community-engagement and school councils; Board trustees are helping each other to set up Co-operative enterprises in schools and to tackle the legal and logistical issues of how to act as a Co-operative schools network.

Given the emphasis on local autonomy within the Co-operative movement, however, these values unsurprisingly take on highly diverse forms when they are recontextualised within the contexts of existing local cultures and priorities. Even the relatively small network of Co-operative Business and Enterprise Colleges, for example, represents the very different ways in which Co-operative values can be realised in different local settings. In an echo of the early religious character of much of the early UK Labour movement, All Hallows Catholic College, for example, articulates Co-operative values with religious faith:

> *Our mission statement and core values focus on the development of a 'faith-informed' business and enterprise culture with a special ethical emphasis. We want our students to reflect on:*
>
> *· the global economy and their place in it as world citizens,*
> *· the need for social justice and how they can help to make the world a fairer place,*
> *· the ethics of sustainability and how they can be good stewards of God's world,*
> *· the idea of Christians building community through serving the 'common good'*[ii]

In contrast, Forest Gate Community School associates Co-operative education with offering students responsibility and voice in the school, and with creating applied learning and real world opportunities to participate in social enterprise activities. They state: '*We think that working together is particularly important in order to be successful not just in school but in the wider community. We try to involve our students in projects to improve the school, our partner schools and the local community.'*[iii]

Sir Thomas Boughey College has a different take again and explicitly links its Co-operative identity to the history of the Co-operative movement. Notably, its website describes its students as members of: '*the millions of people across the world who form the international Co-operative movement'*[iv] Moreover, this school has adopted the Co-operative values explicitly and in their entirety as their own school values and the school is run as a Co-operative Trust on a one member one vote system. Here, the Co-operative movement is the subject for many teaching materials in the school; lessons on advertising, for example, are conducted using archives of Co-operative print and TV advertisements and students are encouraged to explore how Co-operative practices and values are expressed through these.

We can see that in these schools, different traditions of co-operative education are being taken up. Some are associating themselves with a wider movement towards a new social order (whether spiritual or economic), others with a pragmatic desire to build children's capacities to collaborate, thrive and survive in a hostile economic context.

The encounter between Co-operative Education traditions and the discourses of contemporary schooling, therefore, cannot be understood as a simple clash between two uniform opposing forces: between the solidarity of co-operativism and the market individualism of neo-liberal education, for example. Rather, the process of 'becoming Co-operative' for schools is informed by the located, lived cultures and traditions of individual schools and teachers as they negotiate the wider constraints of contemporary education discourses and as they encounter different aspects of the multi-layered co-operative education traditions. Consider, for example, the way in which the idea of becoming a 'Co-operative School' has been negotiated, resisted and appropriated in one school: Robertson[7] College.

Robertson College is a small secondary school in the Midlands. It became a Learning Trust in partnership with the Co-operative Group 3 years ago in 2009. The reasons given for becoming a Co-operative Trust in partnership with the Group were complex. They included not only the desire for more autonomy and funding for the school and the desire to own the land upon which the school was standing, but also a sense that the values of the Co-operative would allow the staff in the school to continue to try to construct education as a public good in an economically impoverished area. As one senior teacher reported:

> *I think it was seen initially as a massive financial benefit. Lots of schools are sponsored these days, so it was good to have a sponsor. But obviously, it is also interesting the way they view society in this very socialist [sic] way, and they stand for co-operation, and equality and the importance of everyone achieving what they can, and that fits in well with our school, the way we see education here. […] the Co-operative society, the whole equality and success for all, that fit in with us.*

Beyond this sense of shared values, however, it was not clear what this partnership would actually mean in practice, not only for the school but for the Co-operative partner. As one teacher said: *'[the Co-operative partners] were new to this game, they wanted to do some good, they wanted to live the values and principles of the Co-operative movement. So they*

[7] This is a pseudonym

said 'what can we do? We're not going to give you money, but what can we do?' Another senior teacher observed that the statement of values was, at this early stage, simply that, a statement:

> *When I came three years ago, the school had just formed a partnership with […] Co-operative, and I have to admit I didn't know much about the Co-operative […] But it really bothered me that you've got the values and principles and yet when you walk through the door they weren't alive, they weren't vibrant […]*

For the leadership, what 'becoming a Co-operative School' meant was associated primarily with the development of what Woodin calls the 'learnt associational identity'. In the school, becoming 'Co-operative' and was presented as being '*essentially … about the youngsters and the teachers helping each other*', about creating a culture of collaboration and reciprocity. This broad understanding of Co-operation served to build support across the staff. In practice, it also enabled a wide range of different priorities and passions to be associated with a common theme. When we visited the school in 2011, for example, it was clear that 'co-operation' had become a word to conjur with if staff were seeking a warrant for change in curriculum, pedagogy and organisation. There were a highly diverse range of activities that were associated with the shift to becoming a Co-operative school. These included: the shift towards a pedagogy of 'Co-operative learning structures'; the reorganisation of the school into faculties and houses under the name 'Second Home'; the delivery of a Co-operative 'Certificate of Personal Effectiveness' programme[v]; new restorative justice procedures; the development of a range of partnership activities with the Co-operative society partner in the Trust; the creation of a parent-teacher association; the establishment of young Co-operatives; and participation in international Co-operative movement youth activities. It is worth expanding on some of these activities in more detail:

The Head of Geography and the Parent-Teacher co-ordinator, for example, have very successfully appropriated the discourse of 'co-operation' as a basis for building new and mutually beneficial relationships between the school and its local partners. For example, the Co-operative partner provides thousands of hours of volunteer time to the school. This has included volunteers building an eco garden, painting classrooms, attending awards events, providing business and PR advice, giving speeches and running barbeques for students picking up exam results. These activities have resulted, as the Head of Geography in the school observed, in a significant improvement in school facilities for some faculties and a subsequent change in teaching and learning practices:

> *Because of the work that co-op have done with us, we can open the eco-garden – we can open polytunnels, they've given us funding for a beehive […] so we sold our own honey and beehive products. … That then means my class can change, because I've now got an outdoor classroom, so I can now teach in the nice weather, outdoors […] I have seating and a blackboard for 30 students out there. That makes a big difference. That's now widening up, because of the facilities we've now got, and that changes the ethos.*

In a school where previously there was no Parent Teacher Association and where only 12 parents responded to Ofsted's request for parents' views, the Parent-teacher coordinator used the principles and values of Co-operation to make a case for attempting to build new relationships with parents and to develop a sense of mutual ownership and responsibility for the school. For example, she established a Zoomba exercise class as a way of bringing different groups together: '*at the moment, we've got thirty to forty that come, we've got cleaners, we've got kitchen staff, we've got parents, so everyone's equal in there, we've all just come to get fit and for enjoyment'.* She has also set up, for the first time in five years, a new Parent, Teacher and Family Association, which is actively harnessing the expertise of school parents:

> *the parents are willing to supply activities as well, one lady's happy to start an art class, because our parents have got many skills, obviously, and they've got lots to offer us as well, I mean, one lady's a dressmaker and she's offered to make our costumes with the pupils' help for school performances, so its bringing their skills into school.*

Becoming a Co-operative School, from the perspective of the Co-operative movement and its local partners, however, also reciprocally involves inducting staff and students into the history and contemporary global reach of the Co-operative movement. There are panels on walls in the school telling the history of the Rochdale pioneers and students are supported with materials from the Co-operative College to set up young Co-operative enterprises. Staff and students are also encouraged to participate actively in the business and social movement activities associated with the Co-operative, ranging from attending local AGMs to participating in Co-operative Congress.

In contrast, for other teachers in the school, becoming a Co-operative School was entirely disconnected from traditions of economic and social critique. Instead, they saw co-operation as a pedagogic tool primarily articulated to a discourse of raising standards:

> *Co-operative learning is nothing to do with the Co-op, even though they have the same name, this is something that […] our DH [Deputy Head] wanted to bring in, these Kagan structures, they are an American thing, and because obviously they are co-operative by nature, that would fit in with a co-operative school.*
>
> *I don't think it is [a political agenda]. It's just about learning, it's about helping the kids. It's a godsend. For anyone thinking of going into teaching, these structures need to be taught in universities. Because if you've got an inspector sitting in the room, these structures give you a chance to show off what your kids can do, and that's what teachers need. […]*

'Co-operative learning' in this school draws heavily on the Kagan Structures (Kagan, 2008) approach. This sees children organised around 'mixed ability' tables of four, participating in highly structured group activities which require students to talk with each other and come up with agreed team answers or to work to pool knowledge and understanding between teams. This approach is credited by some of the teachers with radically transforming their teaching:

> *'every lesson has been outstanding since [starting to use the co-operative structures] ... I've been teaching sixteen years and it's revolutionised my teaching, because it involves everyone, there's no child in the room that can be left out or not feel as if they are part of the lessons […] Every team works together, so you get support for the lower ability from the higher […]the results are incredible,*

Throughout the school, classrooms are organised to allow students to sit in groups of 4, the walls of most classrooms have brightly coloured posters showing different co-operative learning structures and there is a clear sense that these constitute the preferred teaching and learning strategy for the school. When year 6 students visit the school in July before starting in September, they are taught one 'structure' a day as part of their enculturation into the school. These structures are seen as key to the school raising attainment of all pupils. As one teacher says approvingly:

> *There's no chance to get bored, no chance to switch off. Kids know that if they're not working together as a team their team will be let down, and it ties in with the reward system, the team comes first.*

In this context, the Co-operative movement also makes an appearance as a motivational device. Here, in the context of focusing on pedagogies 'that work' the narrative of the Co-operative movement is depoliticised and harnessed as a means of promoting engagement and compliance with the co-operative teaching structures. As one teacher puts it:

> *you need to start off with a history background, a little bit of an understanding of where this has come from, this is now how it's gone, it's one of the biggest organisations in the world, and look, it's a multimillion pound industry and I think that works with students, students need to know that something is successful if they're going to actually get on and do it. They don't like to be seen as a testbed. We can say, look, it's worked.*

The 'meaning' of Co-operative Education is highly variable, therefore, even in this one school. There is no uniform 'vision' of Co-operative Education, rather there is a broad church of activities and personal values held together under the umbrella term 'Co-operation'. And indeed, these different enactments of Co-operation echo the early history of the Co-operative movement and the debates over education's place within it: as training for Co-operative enterprise, as an education in alternative economic and social organisation, as the development of a set of dispositions towards mutuality and collegiality, or simply a co-operative pedagogy that better enables students to access 'educational goods'.

Discussion

While Co-operation as a concept acts as a rallying point for many educators on the Left, it is far from clear today that there is a shared understanding of what Co-operative Education actually means or whether Co-operative Schools will offer the sort of commitment to democracy, solidarity and equality that the wider movement has exemplified. Neither in the research literature (Shaw, 2011), nor in the schools who are turning to this approach, is there yet a shared understanding of how these values will take form in the ethos, curriculum,

pedagogy and governance of Co-operative Education. While this ambiguity has its benefits, enabling educators to reconstruct Co-operative Education practices to meet local needs, it also clearly brings risks. An idea that can find itself embraced by both Conservative politicians[vi] and radical democratic educators may, after all, be either a distinctively timely response to complex contemporary conditions or a hegemonic strategy that serves simply to make safe the potential resistance to the Academies programme. What then might the growth of a Co-operative Schools Sector mean for English education as a public good today?

In Robertson College, we can see the seeds of potential future trajectories. The partnership with the Co-operative Group and the discourse of co-operation has provided a useful tool to open up debate within the school about engagement, about voice and about community. At the same time, it is arguably the case that the discourse of Co-operation has been colonised by a language of competition. The wildfire growth of interest in Kagan structures, for example, makes it possible for educators trained to seek 'what works' to harness co-operative practices for the imperatives of performance management (Ball, 2003). Given a context of frequent Ofsted and Schools Commissioner inspection and competitive league tables, such co-operative learning ideas can easily be colonised within cultures of competition and control, and harnessed to the increasingly intensive pursuit of exam results in which students intensively scrutinise each others' behaviour and learning.

That the tradition of Co-operative education is multi-storied, comprising competing purposes and tensions between different priorities, potentially makes it more amenable to such selective processes. This capacity to take on local meanings can be understood as a key factor in the international success of the co-operative movement, after all. For those educators, researchers and policy-makers looking to Co-operative schools as an alternative resource for democracy and accountability in schooling, however, this quicksilver mutability may be more problematic.

One response would be to seek to standardise Co-operative Education and to more clearly specify what 'Co-operation' means in terms of pedagogy, curriculum, governance and ethos. Attempts to strictly regulate what 'counts' as Co-operative education, however, risks taming the commitment to local determination at the heart of Co-operative values. In the highly marketised climate of contemporary education in which schools increasingly seek to distinguish themselves from their neighbours through badges and branding, moreover, a standardisation of 'Co-operative Education' risks reducing professional autonomy and intensifying the construction of parents as powerless consumers, reduced to choosing between different offerings rather than claiming education as a public good and as a right over which they have ownership. Moreover, such an approach risks alienating schools and other educational philosophies with whom the Co-operative movement shares many core values.

What alternative strategy then remains? After all, a failure to set boundaries to what a Co-operative School actually is may bring practices far from the values and principles of the movement and, further down the line, facilitate demutualisation and transfer to the private sector. How then might it be possible to realise the potential for Co-operative education to act

as a powerful educational movement that adheres to these values without reducing it to a set of marketing headlines or tick boxes?

One important starting point might be to return to the early Co-operators' commitment to personal development through Co-operation, to a '*learnt associational identity'* (Woodin, 2011) that values reciprocity, mutuality and solidarity. Such a starting point – beginning with *the people* involved in Co-operative Schools – would not simply be a strategically useful position, but one that reflects important realities about educational change. Namely, that educational change is not simply a product of legislation and governance, but a process of professional development and cultural change. From the field of curriculum research, for example, we know that curriculum is produced within the specific contexts of the educational encounter (Olsson, 2000). As Goodson argues: the curriculum is always 'remediated into learning' and as such, attention needs to be paid to the role of classrooms and teachers as *'a powerfully mediating context for the message of curriculum and political economy'* (134). From the field of policy and discourse analysis, for example, we know that the construction of new forms of commonsense, of new 'taken for granted' realities whether in education or beyond, is a process of negotiation and contestation in language and through the socio-material structures reconfigured in daily interactions between people (Gramsci, 1971). We know that shifting assumptions about educational purpose is not simply a matter of marketing or legislation, but is also a detailed, day to day process of unsettling, creating and recreating new meanings for words such as accountability, democracy and governance (Laclau, 1977; Gramsci, 1971; Hall, 1986). We also know that resistance to dominant discourses is possible when such discourses seek to extend themselves and to colonise others. When the language of neo-liberalism, for example, seeks to colonise the language of community engagement (as in the UK government's Academies and Big Society programmes) it is also opening itself up to the risk that, in turn, such language will be appropriated for a reinvigoration of popular democracy (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1998).

A strategic aim of the Co-operative movement in education, then, might be to direct itself towards developing a movement of Co-operative *educators* – teachers, parents, governors, students, Co-operative partners. These Co-operative educators would have a profound understanding of what it means to Co-operate in the design and organisation of education for the public good and who are able to fully appreciate the risks of different models of Co-operative ownership and governance. And indeed, it is in teachers' changing narratives of personal development at Robertson College that the possibility of subtle but sustainable resistance to the marketisation of education as a private good begins to become visible:

> *It's quite amusing, my political background is most definitely not from the Co-operative side. So that ways, in some ways. So… driven wise, it wasn't a political basis for me. But what's good now is that it's got cross-party backing and I think that's very good. But, what drove me was that it works. And when I see something that works, whether it goes back into my political background or not, I will run with it. Um, it's worked so much so that it really has changed me as a teacher and as a person.*

To be honest when I started here […] I was only an NQT and to be honest the Co-operative I didn't understand it, I hadn't got a clue, to be honest it was the supermarket where I go that is slightly more pricey. […] then I got asked to go to South Africa, and I was like – of course! – that was the young people's Co-operative event that was taking place and we took some pupils with us as well, […] And at the Co-op event we worked with young people creating Co-operatives to make a living so that they could afford to go to school, so that they could afford clothes, things like that, and that, to me, looking at the ethos and how they were using it as a living, really brought the importance to me and to the pupils of what a Co-operative is about. And seeing how that ethos really worked for them, really made me want to bring it back to school…

Such accounts suggest the response to the question 'what is the Co-operative Education movement?' might be: 'it is the education that is *run by Co-operators* according to lived Co-operative values and principles. It is the education that happens in jointly owned and democratically controlled associations that enable people to meet their common educational needs. It is the education that values all the people involved in the education process differently, as collaborators in the process of defining, shaping and making education institutions.' Such a response would refigure teachers, parents and students in the role of Co-operators in education that has been in abeyance since the 1902 Balfour Act, which saw both Labour and Co-operative movements cede control of children's education to the State. And more importantly, such a response might provide an urgent bulwark against the attempt to recast professionals, parents and students merely as sellers and consumers of educational offerings designed in the boardrooms of international Academy chains.

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Appendix

1st Principle: Voluntary and Open Membership: Co-operatives are voluntary organisations; open to all persons able to use their services and willing to accept the responsibilities of membership, without gender, social, racial, political or religious discrimination.
2nd Principle: Democratic Member Control: Co-operatives are democratic organisations controlled by their members, who actively participate in setting their policies and making decisions. Men and women serving as elected representatives are accountable to the membership. In primary Co-operatives members have equal voting rights (one member, one vote) and Co-operatives at other levels are also organised in a democratic manner.
3rd Principle: Member Economic Participation: Members contribute equitably to, and democratically control, the capital of their Co-operative. At least part of that capital is usually the common property of the Co-operative. Members usually receive limited compensation, if

any, on capital subscribed as a condition of membership. Members allocate surpluses for any or all of the following purposes: developing their Co-operative, possibly by setting up reserves, part of which at least would be indivisible; benefiting members in proportion to their transactions with the Co-operative; and supporting other activities approved by the membership.

4th Principle: Autonomy and Independence: Co-operatives are autonomous, self-help organisations controlled by their members. If they enter to agreements with other organisations, including governments, or raise capital from external sources, they do so on terms that ensure democratic control by their members and maintain their Co-operative autonomy

5th Principle: Education, Training and Information: Co-operatives provide education and training for their members, elected representatives, managers, and employees so they can contribute effectively to the development of their Co-operatives. They inform the general public - particularly young people and opinion leaders - about the nature and benefits of co-operation

6th Principle: Co-operation among Co-operatives: Co-operatives serve their members most effectively and strengthen the Co-operative movement by working together through local, national, regional and international structures

7th Principle: Concern for Community: Co-operatives work for the sustainable development of their communities through policies approved by their members (International Co-operative Alliance (1995/2012) Statement of Co-operative Principles, http://2012.coop/en/what-co-op/co-operative-identity-values-principles last accessed August 1 2012)

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[iv] Sir Thomas Boughey School website http://www.sirthomasboughey.staffs.sch.uk/ (accessed 1st August 2012)

[v] This is offered by the ASDAN awarding body as part of their wider Certificate of Personal Effectiveness accreditation. See description at http://www.asdan.org.uk/Qualifications/CoPE_1_and_2 (last accessed 1st August 2012)

[vi] At the time of writing, for example, George Osborne was actively promoting the takeover of a large number of high street banks in the UK by the Co-operative Group. See Pallol, R (2012) Co-operative Bank Becomes

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