

## **Co-operative education, history and neoliberalism – the dilemmas of building alternatives**

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In the early twenty first century, co-operative schools have become a significant presence in the English educational landscape. Following experiments with a number of specialist, business and enterprise colleges, the first co-operative trust was established in 2008, enabled by the 2006 Education and Inspections Act. Since then numbers have grown rapidly to over 800 by 2015. The legal models for co-operative schools are based upon loyalty to co-operative values and principles which have been codified by the International Co-operative Alliance (1995). These values are self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity. The principles relate to the running of a co-operative in democratic and transparent ways connecting to the needs of members and the communities in which they are located. In addition, co-operative schools should make provision for the representation of key stakeholder groups in governance structures – staff, pupils, parents, communities and, in some cases, alumni. In adapting these models, educators have fashioned a range of structures to suit their needs, mainly comprising co-operative trusts and academies. The movement has been hailed as one which offers the kernel of an alternative to neoliberal education although less ambitious visions have also been apparent (Thorpe, 2011; Woodin, 2012; Facer, Shaw and Thorpe, 2012; Woodin and Fielding, 2013; Woodin, 2014; Davies, 2015).

Exactly how this movement of co-operative schools relates to neoliberalism is a complex issue. Accounts of neoliberalism are centred upon the major historical transformations in political, economic and social spheres which have been clearly perceptible over recent

decades. The post war years of relative economic prosperity were bounded by the rigidities of the Cold War and the emergence of the 'third world'. In Britain, business, government and labour worked together within a fragile corporatism as part of a political 'consensus'. This framework was to be dismantled in the 1970s and 1980s with the rise of the new right, notably in the UK and USA. In the wake of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the breakup of the Soviet Union, capitalism appeared unassailable, a context which enabled Francis Fukuyama to imagine the 'end of history'. Moreover, the emergence of market and capitalist reforms in post-Maoist China under Deng Xiaoping, and subsequent leaders, nurtured intensive capitalist processes on a global scale, a development also manifest in other so-called BRIC nations, notably India.

This argument identifies a tectonic movement in global politics, from Cold War to neoliberalism and from post war partnership to global corporations crowning themselves king. A new stage of capitalism materialised, facilitated by international institutions such as the IMF, World Bank, EU and OECD. Competition, privatisation and financialisation became keywords in the new settlement. State provision of welfare and other services was challenged in favour of a mixed economy of welfare in which a number of different agencies, business, charitable and state, compete to provide a narrowing range of services with specified targets. Theoretically the state's role has been limited to defending the rule of law, individual liberty and freedom, private property and efficient markets, as promoted by Freidrich Hayek (1944), Robert Nozick (1974) and others. In reality, the state continued to play an active role in regulating institutions and maintaining market 'efficiency'. The significant role of the state is often cited as a distinctive feature of the modern world, putting the 'neo' into neoliberalism although this perspective tends to underestimate the role of the state in maintaining markets in the past. Moreover, market forces are not simply a means of distributing goods and

services but play an ideological role in justifying an array of political decisions and the weeding out of opposition across society – the idea, simply, that There Is No Alternative (TINA). Market reforms have simplified a complex range of business models, not least co-operative businesses, the largest 300 of which have a combined turnover of almost \$2.4 trillion, the size of the Brazilian economy (Meek, 2014; ICA/Eurisce, 2015). In other words, a new common sense has emerged, in Gramscian terms, and has been imposed upon diverse historical, national and regional cultures and ways of life, demanding devotion to a new planetary discourse (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2001).

There has been no shortage of commentators eager to understand the pernicious educational implications of these changes which have been eagerly plotted onto the neoliberal map. A global educational discourse which is all about implementing the strategies ‘that work’ pays only limited attention to national diversity. In England, the growth of markets in education has seen the creation of new school types and structures creating a choice for parents, in theory at least. The gradual weakening of local education authorities, leading to proposals in 2016 that all schools should become academies, may result in their ultimate eclipse although the Conservative Government subsequently prevaricated over their initially draconian proposals. In place of accountability to the electorate through local authorities, lines of communication were affirmed between parents and central government, informed by league tables so that schools could be easily compared. The disciplinary power of categorising schools as ‘failing’ has been immense. As a whole, the school system has become more available to ultimate privatisation (see Stevenson, 2011; Ball, 2013).

Yet the results have not always been uniform and within global outlines, multiple patterns of practice are played out. Education has always been an area where conflicting tendencies were in play, a site of struggle (Simon, 1994). Some accounts of neoliberalism only make a passing reference to the topic. Commentators such as David Harvey and Philip Mirowski have touched upon education but its importance to the overall story is largely told according to broad outlines rather than detailed histories (Harvey, 2007; Mirowski, 2013). In addition, continuities in the ‘grammar of schooling’ (Tyack and Cuban, 1995) have ensured that reforms have been reinterpreted on the ground in ways that go against prevailing ideas. Remembering the recent past demonstrate how change has been partial (Goodson, 2015). Like other areas of welfare, education has housed entrenched opposition to the initial hopes that it might simply be fed to the market as part of the privatisation agenda (Harvey, 2007; 61). Alongside these stubborn continuities, the long-term upheaval in schools for almost three decades has led to a number of unpredictable results. The 1988 Education Reform Act illustrated well the tension between marketization in opening up parental choice and devolution to some schools while centralising power and introducing a national curriculum. These tensions remain visible today and confuse neoliberal ideas. For example, the initial political spats over this issue reveal that some Conservative politicians find it hard to argue that successful schools, especially in their own constituencies, should all be forced into academies, thus prising open the contradiction inherent in a centrally directed market system (Hansard, 2016). They can also be understood historically.

### **Historical relation to education**

Part of the problem in discerning the significant areas of conflict and diversity within neoliberalism has been the purposeful neglect of historical understanding which is crucial to

exploring the recent past in a meaningful way (Harvey, 2007). It is unsurprising that the spread of ‘year zero thinking’ in education has been coterminous with the wider assault on historical understanding. Certainly educational policy documents are marked by the absence of historical awareness. To some extent, the very innovation and rapid propagation of co-operative schools has obscured historical connections that need to be made. Detecting a time when things were different can help us to recognise points upon which alternative ideas might be developed. Venturing into educational history can illuminate how seemingly fixed contemporary practices may be of recent origin and could actually have a truncated future. Longer term continuities and changes may help us to understand the sense in which co-operative schools bring into question dominant ideas and assumptions in education, that change is constant. Apprehending the fluidity of the past helps us to capture potential for times to come; Raymond Williams deepened this insight in suggesting that history might also offer access to ‘almost every kind of imaginable future’ (Williams, 1983).

A long view helps us to capture the key tensions running through neoliberalism. While international developments have converged, significant national, regional and cultural specificities cannot be wiped from the slate so easily (Hirst and Thompson, 1999). Critical thresholds, such as the introduction of fees in higher education certainly provide important evidence for the neoliberal revolution. But it has also taken place on the back of an expansion of mass higher education which cannot be categorised in these terms. Indeed, we have witnessed a fascinating transmutation around the idea of who should be educated and why. In the process, similar language used across historical periods has masked subtle yet substantial contrasts. For example, the idea of human capital became popular in the early 1960s as part of modernisation theories where education helped to explain economic growth, a contention which fuelled increasing educational expenditure, not least on common forms of schooling.

By contrast, in the early 2000s, it was clear that the same concept of human capital had been reworked as the key to economic growth and competitiveness, as a vital means of attracting inward investment. Learning was being disaggregated into discrete 'skills' that individuals were expected to acquire in order to ensure economic success in an inherently competitive economy.

This conceptual slide was matched by the changing fortunes of the little discussed notion of 'educability', in other words who can be educated. The concept was implicit in postwar debates when the hope of 'secondary education for all', introduced by the Butler Act of 1944, was undercut by the reality of a tripartite system that categorised most children as 'failures' before they entered secondary school. Divisive assumptions persisted and, even with the introduction of the CSE examination in the early 1960s, following the Beloe Report of 1960, it was still assumed that 40% of the school intake were 'non-examination' pupils. So-called 'Newsom children', named after the eponymous 1963 report, were to be catered for with alternative forms of education based upon hobbies, crafts and provision relevant to their daily lives. Once the school leaving age was raised to 16 in 1972, these kinds of course dissipated in favour of examination routes which in turn invigorated the debate on educational standards (Woodin, McCulloch and Cowan, 2013).

In the 1940s and 1950s, equal educability represented a radical force in educational thinking, that there were potentially no barriers to what could be learnt by everyone. Rather than 'exceptional' working class children being plucked out of their surroundings (Hoggart, 1957), all were to be educated in comprehensive schools. It was a position championed by Brian Simon who campaigned vigorously against the grammar school system and selection through

IQ tests. His educational vision placed teachers at the heart of the learning process and viewed the individual child as part of a social setting where a number of avenues remained open

The teacher who sets out to *educate* the children under his care, meets them as human beings. He first searches for ways of welding his class together into a group, knowing that learning is not a purely individual affair which takes place in a vacuum, but rather a *social activity*; and that the progress of each child will be conditioned largely by the progress of the group as a whole... As the work of the class takes shape, however, individual children will make varying contributions; some may draw well, others may be good readers, others may be quick with figures. The teacher's task is not, of course, to see that the children who are good at some particular activity shine to the detriment of their companions, but rather to see that each child contributes to and enlivens the work of the class as a whole, and that all encompass the necessary basic skills...

The teacher who approaches his task in this way starts from a point of view diametrically opposed to that of mental testing. His attitude is essentially humanist. He recognises that learning is a process of human change, not merely the formal acquisition of knowledge. Above all he starts out with the conviction that all the children under his care are *educable* (Simon, 1954: 90).

Simon followed Marx in blending political sympathies with a humanistic understanding of education as a force for social change. The concept of educability would be gradually adopted as a realistic option for increasing numbers of pupils as part of the spread of comprehensive schools. For instance, in tune with the times, a 1967 Labour Party political

broadcast featured the head teacher of the David Lister School in Hull, Mr. Rowe, arguing that all children deserved the chance to flourish and find themselves while also celebrating the fact that so-called 11+ ‘failures’ were picking up handfuls of ‘O’ and ‘A’ levels and progressing to higher education (Labour Party, 1967).

The rejection of this vision involved a re-formulation of educability. The demise of most grammar schools and the onset of comprehensive schemes would invigorate critics who claimed a decline in standards was taking place. The position was popularised by Cox and Dyson’s *Black Papers on Education*. Through the debate on standards, detractors were able to tarnish comprehensive schools with claims about a poverty of expectation and poor organisation that seemed to be creeping into the wider society. The ‘non-examination child’ would be gradually banished from educational discourse as standards became the key debating ground and the economic need for skilled labour increased. As more children were seen as capable of achieving, so more were being failed if they did not meet rising expectations. By the turn of the millennium, the progressive and radical lexicon was being ransacked in the name of raising standards. The assertion that everyone could be educated had appeared revolutionary in the 1950s and 1960s; once the labour movement had been debilitated and a competitive set of individualistic economic assumptions held sway, it became commonplace. The likes of Michael Gove, secretary of state for education under most of the Coalition Government of 2010-15, came to speak of constant improvement in education as a struggle for civil rights, and presented academy schools ‘as the great progressive cause of our times’ (Gove, 2012a), strongly rebuking those who claimed that ‘poorer children are destined to do worse than others’ (Gove, 2012b). We were all now expected to ape the ‘restless achievers’ he claimed to have found in Hong Kong and Singapore. But in comparison with earlier incarnations of equal educability, the concept had



become a procrustean bed in which all children were to be measured and fitted according to a single standard. The resulting pressures of performativity placed upon teachers has been considerable, so much so that schools are beginning to face a recruitment crisis.

However, the insistence on equal educability and standards created a set of contradictions that had to be carefully managed. The danger was, and is, that such ideas could be connected to democratic claims about equal worth and, ultimately, more equal outcomes. Instead, equality in contemporary educational policy has been contained within limited frameworks. The insistence upon equality of opportunity, despite rising examination results, has a diminishing impact in a society which is becoming more unequal (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010; Dorling, 2014). For example, the belief that pupil premium grants for ‘disadvantaged’ pupils levelled the playing field, always had a hollow ring to it and there are clearly limits to the technicist applications of school improvement (Mortimore, 2000). Indeed, the measuring stick for social mobility tends to focus upon the makeup of the student body at elite universities rather than thinking about how everyone might live more fulfilling lives. By contrast, the policy-driven top down model of education has given rise to concerns about a democratic deficit which are only likely to increase with the proposal to replace parent governors with people who have the correct skills (DfE, 2016). It is these contradictions which have created a fertile ground for co-operative ideas in education.

### **Co-operation as an alternative?**

Co-operation has provided one means of engaging with this changing educational ecology. The movement as a whole had always had an ambiguous relationship other visions of social change, as a ‘third wing’ of the labour movement. The birth of the movement was located in

the midst of nineteenth century spate of laissez-faire liberalism. The first successful consumer co-operative society, the Rochdale Equitable Pioneers Society dated back to 1844 at a time when the influence of the ‘dismal science’ of political economy was extending. Consumer co-operatives grew as a business and educational force throughout the nineteenth century and received the acclamation of economists and commentators from J. S. Mill to Alfred Marshall. The attempt to moralise business for collective well-being found expression in a set of values and principles. Values were evident in films, meetings, publications and even products such as ‘equity boots’. In 1937, the values and principles were first codified and have been updated regularly since that time, most recently in 1995. This longer history provides a basis for useable pasts which have become more relevant with the return of liberal economics (Yeo, 2002; Woodin et al, 2010; Woodin, 2011).

At the turn of the Millennium, a sense of renewal infused the co-operative and mutual sector. The Co-operative Commission of 2001 emphasised the relevance of ‘successful, co-operative businesses’ with an equal emphasis on all three words. There were attempts to apply co-operative values and principles to a range of settings including sport, leisure, health care and housing among others and the term ‘new mutualism’ was coined. Some of these experiments have been stronger than others and perhaps the most significant development of recent years has been that of ‘co-operative schools’. The accumulated knowledge and material resources of the movement, were harnessed in developing workable legal models. Co-operative schools have benefitted from the support provided by a wider movement but also suffered as that movement itself went through significant setbacks (Woodin, 2015).

Co-operative schools have responded creatively to the historical and policy contexts described above, partly by ‘refracting’ policy injunctions (Goodson, 2015). Although co-operative schools represent a hybrid or incipient co-operative (Woodin, 2015), they are accepted as part of the co-operative movement and the model allows schools to shape their own destiny, albeit within the prescribed policy limits. It assumes that schools are community institutions in which democracy and participation are central (Glatter, 2015; Tinker, 2015). They harness the resources not only of external partners but also stakeholder groups in order to deal with the continuing stream of policy initiatives and to raise standards. However, in the current context, the democratic impulse to involve communities, parents, pupils and staff in the educational process nurtures an intensification of working practices and increases the expectations placed upon the shoulders of these groups, redefining their sense of identity and educational purpose. Distinguishing between these entangled motivations is not straightforward. The limited successes of the co-operative schools movement is built upon this lower level work where co-operative education can be seen to be contesting dominant meanings and practices – taking hold of current assumptions and allowing new learning communities to adapt and meet new purposes.

The very specific case of a ‘peer tutoring’ co-operative, taken from a school that is not a co-operative school, illustrates the tensions between countering an agenda of performativity on the one hand and building solidarity and common understanding between pupils on the other. It also works with the enduring historical concern with standards. For instance, The Tuition and Education Co-operative (TECH) was introduced at Hatcham School by Deri O’Regan who had previously worked at another co-operative school, Corelli College where peer tutoring had also been practised. This reflects the way that co-operative ideas and adaptations are spreading by word of mouth and the movement of teachers. This scheme has similarities

to other in-school co-operatives that may be based upon dance, music, fair trade and supplying stationery needs of students, among other examples of Young Co-operatives. But, in this case, it addressed head on the challenge of raising standards. In its first year, sixth form students, via TECH, delivered 1,225 hours of one-to-one tuition to 106 students from years 7-11. A meeting of 70 sixth-formers appointed an organising committee which gradually built a co-operative structure. On a Saturday, over 80 students elected their representatives. From the beginning, the co-operative was based upon co-operative values which were openly stated. The project received funding from an educational charity, SHINE which helped to enable 'disadvantaged' students to take advantage of the tuition. As an indication of the diverse educational landscape, this charity is bankrolled by CAPITA Sims a company which, among other interests, markets its data management systems to schools. (SHINE, 2016; CAPITA Sims, 2016)

The results for 2013-14 appear to have been, on the whole, successful in terms of academic performance. It was estimated that over 75% of participating students in years 10 and 11 progressed one or more grades following tuition. Across key stage 3, 63% progressed by 2 sub-levels, well above expectations although slightly below the target of 75%. External recognition and validation has followed, especially for those who have had contact with outside organisations. Students have given presentations to delegations of Chinese teachers, the Southwark Co-operatives Business Partnership as well as a seminar at the UCL Institute of Education (TECH 2014).

The successes of the project has not simply been measured in terms of crude data but also reveal how pupils have negotiated the institutional demands they face. The personal

reflections of pupils illustrate how they themselves have taken on the mantle of responsibility for achieving results rather than always having teachers and professionals talk for them, involving increased responsibility and power. For instance, ‘Adam’ spoke about benefitting from TECH in relation to the continuing discourse of raising standards as central to success in life:

I personally was struggling four months prior to my GCSEs, I had just come out of my mocks with a D grade in maths and D grades in English language and literature. I struggled to comprehend the work as there were so many students in a class and a teacher can only be capable of so much. I was eventually funded to attend TECH by SHINE and this has helped me shape the rest of my life. After four months of attending TECH I sat my GCSEs and got an A in English language, a B in English literature and a B in mathematics (TECH 2014).

Achieving in exams enabled this student to see his life in a longer term perspective. The personal attention given by his peers contrasted with the impersonality of the classroom where only limited attention could be devoted to individuals. Progression for pupils was also tied to a collective purpose and a shared vision and sense of solidarity was built up; echoes from the 1967 political broadcast mentioned above are resonant. According to one participant, working with the co-op, ‘changed everything for all of us’ (UCL IoE 2015). By the same token, one parent felt that it had been a ‘wonderful experience’ for her daughter:

It has really developed her as a person and helped with her confidence. She has made new friends and learning how to teach younger students has inspired her to become a teacher. She has also deepened her own understanding of mathematics through this work (TECH 2014).

Giving responsibility to pupils enabled them to see the world differently and even to find a purpose in life. The process of improving results paradoxically unlocked a wider sense of humanity, perhaps reflecting the power of dominant discourses in pupils' lives. 'Serena' had just joined the school and enjoyed the tuition because her tutors understood the position of the learner: 'I like the tuition because we do the same thing as in class but it's better with a 6<sup>th</sup> former as they can explain things better!' (TECH 2014). As they learnt about each other, friendships formed, across year groups, around a collective purpose: 'that community thing that the stats don't show you, but you feel it' (UCL IoE 2015). The impulse for mutuality and sharing as part of a common purpose led to increased learning and an awareness of the situation of others. The first 'CEO' of the co-operative was also motivated by a sense of social justice: 'For me, the most appealing factor of the concept was that it would help to level the playing field, as it offered free tuition to those who needed it most and couldn't afford it otherwise' (TECH 2014). To some pupils, inequalities in school are highly visible and TECH offered pupils a practical way to address these concerns. Similarly, a 16-year old finance officer brought together technical and social aspects within the co-operative:

Being the finance officer has taught me how to organise other people and chase people. It has really taught me how to get things done. It has taught me how to work with the adults in the school finance department to make sure everyone's details are up to date and accurate so that all the tutors will get paid on time. These are skills that someone of my age doesn't normally get taught at school.

I have also learned about being part of a co-operative. I like the way that this project empowers students to help themselves earn some extra pocket money while at the same time giving something back to younger students – particularly those who find school a struggle (TECH 2014).

The precise focus upon learning employment related 'skills' is married with the purpose not of simply making a profit but of helping others and, more importantly, supporting people to help themselves.

Yet, these successes also point to a number of tensions. Its initial success had to be managed in practical terms. Unexpected management and administrative tasks immediately became visible. Overnight a 'workforce' of 60 was created who were paid monthly and trained in tutoring by qualified teachers and the co-operative also had to deal with the significant human resource issues which this created, for instance, pupils could not contact parents directly without supervision. In upsetting the boundary between learner and teacher, the co-operative provided a challenge to the sense of professionalism of teachers, which has already been under considerable threat, not least from neoliberal forces. The language of standards, skills and outcomes has been utilised in an attempt to redefine the educational process. The need to monitor and support this initiative, on a Saturday morning, represents an example of intensification in which more and better results are being demanded and delivered by encroaching upon the 'free' time not only of teachers but also students, perhaps imitating the high achievers of South East Asia where the proliferation of night schools constitute the hidden underside of their high position in league tables. Taking over the agenda for improvement has involved new burdens as well as new discoveries and opportunities.

### **Conclusions and neo liberalism**

The example of a peer tuition co-operative within a school exposes the complex ways in which co-operative practices are challenging neoliberal ideas in education. This specific case represents one way in which co-operative ideas are enabling educators to reclaim the idea of

equality and democracy in a school setting, albeit not on terms of their own making. Exposing pupils to the benefits of working together for a common purpose remains a possibility inherent in compulsory education. In this sense, co-operative values are playing a role 'in and against' dominant educational ideas (LERG, 1980). The influence of neoliberal ideas in education is necessarily partial given the long contested educational inheritance on which it works. Imposing new labels on partially transformed practices – education is a business, learners are customers and so on – exposes inconsistencies that can be contested. The contestation is not always comfortable but the example of co-operative schools shows that broad principles can go hand in hand with workable examples and that such contradictions can be channelled creatively.

Enforcing a binary opposition between neoliberalism and co-operation has value keeping alive the necessity for an alternative vision that, on a societal level, has been lacking. The recession following the financial crisis of 2007-8, witnessed a partial return to Keynesian economic ideas. But in the absence of clear alternatives, it is unsurprising that neoliberal ideas have continued to flourish. However, enforcing the need for such a divide poses the danger of missing the ways that co-operative values are given new meaning in specific settings. Small and prosaic steps may also be taken while acting on broader values and envisaging a very different democratic future. Co-operation tends to be a bottom up movement capable of expanding beyond immediate circles of learning. However, this is not to argue that co-operative initiatives can only work on a small scale and the history of the movement should warn us against such simple ideas. The co-operative schools movement as a whole has spread much wider than the specific example shown above and regional and national structures have emerged as well as partnerships with teacher unions and other bodies. Trust schools and co-operative academies have developed new business models and



international partnerships. Equally, one can see how such examples can be potentially integrated into forces less sympathetic to the co-operative movement. At one level, neoliberalism requires weaker forms of co-operation in order for markets to function. In theory, it can feed from the beneficial humanising effects of co-operation although this is a fragile balance which can have unintended consequences.

Historically, we need to consider the continuities with the earlier ‘comprehensive revolution’ that certainly did represent significant widespread change in abolishing structured forms of selection across schools although in reality this was often achieved by implementing sharp differentiation within the new schools themselves. Today, the spread of the ‘growth mindset’, the expectation that everyone is capable of learning virtually everything, can easily be misinterpreted as the idea that everyone can achieve everything if they have the right disposition and character. The application of co-operative values has connected these ideas with wider versions of education based upon democratic models and collective benefit. Co-operative education thus contains multiple strands of possibility that will continue to be contested.

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