

# Democracy and schooling: The paradox of co-operative schools in a neoliberal age?

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## Abstract

From the first co-operative trust school at Reddish Vale in Manchester in 2006, the following decade would witness a remarkable growth of 'co-operative schools' in England, which at one point numbered over 850. This paper outlines the key development of democratic education by the co-operative schools network. It explains the approach to democracy and explores the way values were put into practice. At the heart of co-operativism lay a tension between engaging with technical everyday reforms and utopian transformative visions of an educational future. A new arena of debate and practice was established with considerable importance for our understanding of democratic education within the mainstream.

## KEYWORDS

co-operative, co-operative schools, democracy, movement, school

From the first co-operative trust school at Reddish Vale in Manchester in 2006, the following decade witnessed a remarkable growth of 'co-operative schools' in England, which at one point numbered over 850. These mainstream state schools were established with the support of the Co-operative College and the Co-operative Group, based upon legal models that stipulated the defence of co-operative values that included not only democracy but also solidarity, equity, equality, self-help and self-responsibility. Co-operative schools mainly came together in either co-operative trusts and, less often, academies (see Schools Co-operative Society, 2018).<sup>1</sup> Schools attempted to infuse co-operative values into the ethos, curriculum, organisation and governance. Staff, pupils, parents, communities and, potentially, alumni were represented on a multi-stakeholder forum that fed into governance and leadership bodies. Rather than the imposition of an academy model, co-operative schools retained their autonomy and independence and so

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fathomed their own unique structures and purposes, with the result that multiple models emerged based upon local needs. Co-operative trusts and academies might focus upon curriculum, pedagogy, pupil and teacher participation, community involvement and other common interests. Their ideas and projects would be shared and debated across the movement resulting in interesting alliances locally, nationally and internationally. Although co-operative schools continue in existence, and may yet undergo a rejuvenation, the immediate impact, as a vibrant challenge to mainstream schooling, was to be short-lived with the main period of growth from 2006 to 2016 (Woodin, 2019). The Co-operative Group has continued to directly sponsor academy schools in England on the more traditional model in which the sponsor has a role in the overall direction of the school. Reflecting on this example of democratic innovation has implications for new and remaining co-operative schools that may expand in the future, as well as to inform related initiatives in democratic schooling.

Traditions of democratic learning have been sustained and re-discovered through time. A subterranean radical historical stream of democratic values continues to circulate beneath the surface of public debate, with occasional eruptions into palpable forms. Given the widespread problems of inequality, environmental degradation, pandemics, exclusion and unemployment, building co-operative structures, in which participants have a real stake in their organisations, holds up hope for the future. Democratic processes help people to create meaning in their lives, to re-establish a sense of popular ownership, not least in education. The experience of co-operative schools points to increasingly complex struggles that have to engage not only with values and purpose but also the nuts and bolts of organising and administration. Shostak (2016, 2019) talks of democracy in schooling as 'becoming', always in movement and never complete. It highlights the potential for working 'within and against' existing forms of schooling, asserting co-operative values as a means to interpret education policy creatively (see LEWRG, 1980).

Schooling and democracy have been stitched into historical transformations. During the Cold War, ideological divisions were much more visible. Western capitalism became associated with technical definitions of democracy, proposed by thinkers such as Joseph Schumpeter or Samuel P. Huntington (Crozier et al., 1976; Schumpeter, 1976). NATO countries were willing to foment revolutions and prop up authoritarian and oppressive regimes while paying lip service to democracy. In this context, radicals were able to assert a participatory form of democracy in stark opposition to dominant trends. At times, as in radical experiments in comprehensive education, this could be done in mainstream schools. However, the Manichean division became much less visible after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the spread of globalisation which was presented as a triumph of liberal democracy and market capitalism. Discussions over democracy, as a part of everyday life, subsequently saturated educational debate so that 'we are all democrats now' and even an authoritarian approach to standards and league tables can be presented as offering democratic accountability to parents and pupils. Co-operative schools, implicitly and explicitly, have entered into these debates.

## CO-OPERATIVE SCHOOLS IN CONTEXT

It is commonly assumed that state schooling is a fundamental component of a democratic society. The growth of state education for all has represented a cultural revolution that connects back to the improving discourses of the 19th century (Carr & Hartnett, 1996; Woodin et al., 2013). But it is a paradox that the contemporary focus upon educating everyone appears to carry undemocratic implications (Fielding, 2007; Sahlberg, 2012). The opportunities for public schooling to become a powerful and legitimate means of teaching co-operation, toleration and 'respect for reasonable disagreement' (Gutman, 1995) have been curtailed in recent years. Explaining how co-operative schools proliferated amidst the tight state regulatory regime exerted through Ofsted,<sup>2</sup> at a time when democratic popular politics have been waning, remains a conundrum.

The current context has not been an auspicious base for developing democratic ideas and practices in education as political and social life has been skewed towards the 'liberal' end of liberal democracy. A pincer movement of neoliberal and neoconservative forces has given rise to concerns about a 'democratic deficit' involving pared down popular participation in politics which is now to be left to the 'political class'; the professionalisation of community and voluntary groups; the decline of participation in civil society through a range of forms including tenants'

organisations, trade unions, co-operatives, voluntary organisations, social clubs etc.; and an exponential rise in socio-economic inequality. While education itself has been moved to the centre of political debate, marketised models have deployed league tables and led to new hierarchies and disciplinary practices in and between schools. An ostensibly inclusive and meritocratic vocabulary underlines the educability of everyone in conjunction with the argument that poverty is no excuse for poor educational performance. Contemporary changes to school governance arrangements have assumed that a streamlined group of highly skilled professionals are more suited to the job than assorted representatives of parents, communities and others (Baxter, 2016; Morgan, 2015). Technician nudge solutions and a Taylorist notion of 'delivery' have prevailed over discussions about the values and purposes of education (Barber, 2016). Evidence-based and 'data-driven' policy has similarly tended to sideline popular participation (Smeyers & Depaepe, 2006). Ironically, these changes have been presented as in line with fostering greater equality and democracy through raised standards for pupils and increased choice for parents.

Yet, the technical focus of the current educational regime, and its partial blindness to the values and purposes of education, creates possibilities for democratic education. Co-operative schools have taken advantage of the ambivalences of educational policy. The undermining of local education authorities has pitted schools' autonomy against what were presented as restrictive local education authorities, but the consequences of this have been far from clear. A lack of support structures for schools has led to a debate about the most appropriate alternative, including co-operative structures. In addition, the comprehensive and common schooling ideals and assumptions, widely debated from the 1960s, have been tenacious despite many attempts to snuff them out and obituaries written. The demand that education produces critical thinkers able to face the challenges of the new century exists in an uneasy tension with the current focus on elite institutions and individual leaders rather than collective capacity to address social, economic and environmental problems. The belief in equal educability had been closely associated with the comprehensive movement in the past but has been melded with a marketised vision of education so that learner voice and consumer voice cannot easily be distinguished. Simultaneously, the notion of equal educability has also proved to rest on a fragile base, and is being undercut by the marginalisation of a large number of children through a rise in special schools, alternative provision, pupils being 'off rolled' and via more 'rigorous' examinations (Done & Andrews, 2020; Done & Knowler, 2021; Trotman et al., 2019).

The position of co-operative ideas can also confuse existing political divides. At times, the movement both attracted and repelled people positioned on both the 'left' and 'right'. For example, Melissa Benn's democratic vision was uneasy about co-operative schools, which made central planning more complex (Benn, 2012, 2018). Both Ed Balls, a Labour-Co-op member of parliament and Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families, 2007–2010, and David Cameron, leader of the Conservative Party from 2005 to 2016 and Prime Minister of the UK from 2010 to 2016, were at times attracted to the movement, with the latter establishing the Conservative Co-operative Association with Jesse Norman, a Conservative M.P., in 2007. To some extent, these political uncertainties arose from the fact that co-operatives have operated as both private business and democratic socially owned enterprises that have blurred the spaces between the public sphere, civil society and private business. This ambiguity lent the co-operative schools movement some flexibility in plotting a course through the changing educational terrain.

## HISTORY OF CO-OPERATIVE MOVEMENT AND CO-OPERATIVE EDUCATION

The past helps to explain the paradoxical position of co-operative schools. Economics and education have been inseparable twins from the birth of the co-operative movement, being as much a movement based upon learning as economics (Hall & Watkins, 1934). The early co-operators had no problem with 'capitalism' but instituted a strict moral line that capital would be paid a fixed rate of interest and no more, leaving members to control their enterprises on a democratic basis with one member one vote irrespective of shareholding—a society of equals (Rosanvallon, 2013; Schostak, 2019). In addition, the very scale of the consumer co-operative movement at its height nurtured dreams of radical social change. Mundane and prosaic movement building was tethered to visions of a 'co-operative commonwealth', the

term that captured most effectively the less tangible utopian yearnings of activists in the labour movement (Woodin, 2011, 2019).

Although consumer co-operation went into a significant decline, particularly from the 1960s, its ideas were reborn in the 1990s under fresh guises, such as 'new mutualism', which attempted to apply co-operative values and principles to heterogeneous activities through care co-operatives for the ill or older people, football supporters' trusts, agricultural co-operatives and social enterprise models (Ridley-Duff & Bull, 2011). In 1995, the co-operative movement itself had updated its global values and principles. Despite initial wariness by New Labour governments about the traditional labour movement, it supported the 2001 Co-operative Commission that emphasised 'successful co-operative businesses' from which, it was argued, the world could learn much. The co-operative schools movement was one example of this approach, which explicitly aimed to challenge and transform state schools rather than create a marginal alternative that would run parallel to the mainstream (Woods, 2014).

Moreover, older forms of organising were being fastened to newer ideas of how people could co-operate and develop solutions to social issues. Specifically, the idea of networks has caught the imagination of a very wide range of commentators and activists, partly in response to the decline of the labour movement, shifting patterns of work and social life as well as the rise of digital technologies. Myriad perspectives coalesced on this area (for instance, Castells, 2001). In Britain, *Beyond the Fragments* (Rowbotham et al., 1979) highlighted the potential of democratic practices which prefigured a future desired state while also exerting pressure on mainstream institutions. Specifically, the coming together of the co-operative movement, primarily the Co-operative College, initially backed by the Co-operative Group, drew upon a long history of social change, bringing co-operative people, ideas, values, resources and structures into close contact with mainstream schools. While the college had been working with schools on co-operative projects, opportunistically it identified an opening in the 2006 Education and Inspections Act (HM Government, 2006) that enabled agencies such as businesses, individuals and charities to be involved in the creation and running of trust schools. New legal models for co-operative schools were developed (Woodin, 2019).

There are thus close bonds between historical shifts in the co-operative movement and the contested trajectory of liberal democracy. Differing conceptions of democracy have underpinned wide variations in the approach to education. Gallie (1955) and Williams (1961) both pointed to the conceptual space inherent in the 'essentially contested concept' of democracy that today helps us to identify contradictions in the nature of democratic education at a time when 'democratic politics is taking on strange and unfamiliar new forms' (Tooze, 2021). In the academic literature on democracy and education, meanings have proliferated so that democracy can be used as a catch-all form of radicalism as well as a way of justifying the status quo. Elements of deliberative, participatory, representational, prefigurative, agonistic democracy have been outlined (Sant, 2019). Each of these distinctions has provided new insights into democracy but they should not be understood as sealed off from one another. Indeed, co-operative democracy in schools dallied with representative structures, deliberative processes, critical analysis, popular participation and other practices, which are regularly discussed separately in the academic literature. They provide a fascinating case study of the ways in which schools have embraced democratic ideas, which is understandably a feature of much writing on democratic schooling, but also how a network of schools initiated a series of democratic changes. The movement rapidly became a broad church where ideas about technical improvements and raising standards mingled with ideas about comprehensive educational and social transformation. Part of the attraction of co-operativism has been its capacity to contain a range of perspectives on democratic education within a productive tension.

In evaluating co-operative approaches to democracy, we draw on our experience of researching and working in and with co-operative schools over the past two decades. The originality of the movement is placed alongside some of the tensions and contradictions to which it gave rise. Our 'method' involved close listening and observation, formal interviews, drawing historical parallels, being alert to conceptual issues and an imaginative engagement with the predicament of schools. Our interest in co-operative schools arises from an awareness of the great potential of this model as well as a realisation of the tensions and dilemmas to which the movement gave rise and which confound simplistic assumptions about democracy.

## VALUES AND DEMOCRATIC RENEWAL

Co-operative schools committed themselves to the values and principles based upon the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA) Statement on Co-operative Identity. There was scope for interpretation in the way that schools and educators had to give meaning to the values and principles by translating them into the processes of contemporary schooling (Woodin, 2020, p. 218). This was not straightforward. The co-operative principles, which lay out the basis for a co-operative society, raised problems for schools. 'Education, training and information', 'co-operation among co-operatives' and 'concern for community' had obvious meaning and could be directly applied to schools. Less clear were the implications of 'voluntary and open membership' and 'autonomy and independence', which raised dilemmas given the compulsory nature of education. Some schools did initiate voluntary membership schemes, although their purpose was not always transparent in the context of compulsory schooling. There were snags arising from 'member economic participation', even though there was a tendency among some co-operators to define most activities, including education, in terms of enterprise and economic activity which contrasted with educators' wariness about too close a relation to business. Finally, 'democratic member control' was a cardinal principle towards which many schools took meaningful steps, even though their scope for action was restrained by the legal and regulatory context.

Schools felt on the more secure ground with co-operative values where democracy made another appearance and was nested within self-help, self-responsibility, equity, equality, solidarity in addition to honesty, openness, social responsibility and caring for others. These were mutually reinforcing and placed democracy at the centre stage. However, democracy was not simply an empty signifier but had real implications that some schools found distasteful or too difficult or challenging and so did not join the network. Others joined up but faced immediate limitations. For example, one school leader in receipt of a 'requires improvement' judgement from Ofsted argued the need for directive leadership rather than democratic participation—a view partially accepted by teaching staff. Democratic organisations facing a crisis can indeed make a conscious decision to act decisively and swiftly.

Co-operative legal models are based upon the defence and pursuit of co-operative values and principles. Co-operative schools expressed them in everyday language, here outlined by the Co-operative Academies, sponsored by the Co-operative Group:

Co-op Academies Trust—values shared by co-operatives everywhere:

Self-help—we support learners, parents, carers and staff to help themselves

Self-responsibility—we encourage learners, parents, carers and staff to take responsibility for, and answer to their actions

Democracy—we give our learners, parents, carers and staff a say in the way we run our schools

Equality—we believe that the voice of each individual should be heard

Equity—we run our schools in a way that is fair and unbiased

Solidarity—we share interests and common purposes with our learners, parents, carers and staff, and with other schools in the communities we serve.

(Co-operative Academies Trust, n.d.)

'House' groups were named after the values which might also, for instance, be displayed prominently on planters in front of the school (Woodin, 2020). Assemblies would be devoted to the discussion of particular values and resources were provided to support such action:

the values absolutely are riddled through everything. All of our assemblies are based around the values and each of the communities are named after a value and we've got to make sure that year 7s do this year as well ... they've started their values. So the communities are called, trust, independence, democracy, equality and solidarity and there's a 6<sup>th</sup> form community as well. Each of them has a community director and an assistant. A community assistant is not a teacher and has half their week to work with them. The community identity has become strong but, because it's not the, kind of, who's the top dog, that used to exist with the 10s and 11s for instance, you know, who's going to fill this space, it is healthy competition. (Headteacher, 2013)

The values helped to create bridges to a wide range of audiences, starting from the veneer of existing understanding but probing for a more profound democratic practice. Educators began to address basic dilemmas and contradictions by discussing values among themselves and with wider stakeholders of parents, communities and pupils. Self-help and self-responsibility implied that everyone could participate and had a duty to do so. These values could assuage the fears of some educationists that the co-op model was necessarily left wing or statist, even though the idea of collective self-help was one that found traction in schools. It was supported by the value of 'solidarity', a word with a leftist historical pedigree that could be interpreted in terms of common purpose and loyalty to the school community.

In addition, the tension between equality and equity was a familiar issue for schools. For instance, one school that explicitly fostered democratic action drew upon the other co-operative values, in order to reformulate their daily practice:

It's quite interesting getting that balance between equality and equity. Equality doesn't mean the same as equity and equity doesn't mean that you treat everyone exactly the same. Students understand that... that some people require more or different to arrive at the same place. You can't punish necessarily one of the autistic children, who might have a bit of Tourette's, in quite that same way that you would a child who knows exactly what they are saying or doing. That's accepted because it's part of supporting others, social responsibility as well as self-responsibility. (Headteacher, 2013)

Some educators with implicit and long-standing attachments to comprehensive values felt an affinity to co-op schools. There are also multi-academy trusts that, although no longer explicitly badged as comprehensive, have embedded co-op school values in their charter documents, as a continuation of formerly comprehensive education values. The values provided a resource for educators who retained a sense of shared educational purpose while adjusting to changes in cultural expectations and formal accountabilities. One of the first purpose-built comprehensives in the country viewed co-operation as a means of extending its traditions, while being alert to the external judgements, such as those of Ofsted:

so it was founded upon a very strong set of values. We had been on a long journey of school improvement and had arrived ... at the point where we had had an Ofsted that gave us a good with 17 outstanding. So a very strong... endorsement of an institution that has a significant number of youngsters that have special educational needs, difficulties and social/emotional difficulties and high levels of looked-after children. (Headteacher, 2013)

For many schools that became co-operative, the co-operative values were accepted as a familiar part of English education rather than as a novel development or a burden. This could work both ways and could provide an excuse to do very little as well as a stimulus to intensify the role of democracy in education. Some educators saw co-operative schools as a space for alternatives to the dominant market-oriented culture of state-funded schooling while others simply identified technical opportunities to try out new ideas or take advantage of business cost savings between schools. Indeed, co-operative schools encompassed diverse motivations, from a way of working together to thicker forms of

democracy as part of a dialogue embedded in daily practice. There were benefits to be gained from co-operative practice even if these had to be carefully attuned to the demands and restrictions of contemporary education policy. In order to encourage and intensify co-operativism in schools, a 'co-operative identity mark', assessed levels of engagement with the values. The growth of co-operative schools helped to release an energy to trial democratic ways of working.

Learning through experience and action animated the co-operative schools movement. Some teachers experienced a sucking in of the oxygen of fresh hope (Brighouse, 2009) as they were exposed to different kinds of curriculum, pedagogy and democratic participation. The reception and application of values were related to generational shifts in experience and knowledge. Co-operative schools became places where values could be experienced and lived. In different settings, generational, political and professional factors could fertilise one another. Some teachers upheld and strove for participatory democracy, others craved for more explicit collaboration or professionalism. In particular, co-operative schools embraced different generations of teachers some of whom recognised these values from their own early careers in contrast to those who encountered a new aspect of schooling.

Generational memory and historical forces were called upon to further the debate. Older teachers detected a resonance between the ideas underpinning co-op schools and those of schooling in England prior to the onset of marketisation from the early 1990s when collaboration between schools may have been commonplace. A few even consciously drew upon the often forgotten history of the co-operative movement, which had been a tangible aspect of working-class communities and played a similar role to the nonconformist chapels as part of a conscious historical ecology of working-class associationalism that might have lessons for the present (Yeo, 1987).<sup>3</sup> Through this process, co-operative democracy was attached to contemporary education policy. The co-operative past showed what could be achieved in relation to a participatory democracy. To some extent, it reflected the extent to which the public sphere in England had historically incorporated educational schemes that originated with the co-operative movement, in adult education, university extension and libraries (Woodin, 2019).

Working with co-operative values and principles was not, however, simply a repeat of the past, rather echoes from those previous moments were being invoked to inspire and fashion new ideas about education. For younger teachers whose careers were permeated by market-oriented schooling, the ideas from the co-operative movement that underpinned co-operative schools could come as a revelation. Co-op schools, and the collaborative cultures and practices they promoted, brought new experiences. Here was a space where co-operation between schools, teachers, parents, pupils and communities was encouraged, not just valued but expected. For one section of younger teachers, while less familiar with notions such as solidarity, they nevertheless felt an affinity with the values, which helped them to make sense of recent changes to English education. Some teachers not particularly critical of government policy could respond on a practical and technical level in trying out their own ideas about collaborative action in education and finding out what 'worked' in the classroom. In general, teachers desired a sense of professionalism in which positive human relationships could thrive. Thus, the inherent ambivalence and elasticity of values meant that contradictory, radical and more moderate ideas jostled closely with one another.

Generational shifts are illustrated by two case studies. 'Andrew' was a chair of governors of a community college in a small market town, some distance from metro centres, with a tradition of self-help and mutual support. The school, which became co-operative in 2012, is a small mixed-gender secondary comprehensive with 620 pupils aged 11 to 16. Its vision and ethos included 'a commitment to uphold and work within the values and ethos of co-operative schools'. Andrew was a retired lifelong teacher and former union representative and very committed to comprehensive and community education. His long-held values immediately resonated with co-operativism and suffused his thinking and living; this was evident in the way he supported community development, fair trade town status and a concern for pupils and their families, past and present. For Andrew, co-operative schooling offered the possibility to live out, with renewed vigour and enthusiasm, values he remembered from his early years in the teaching profession. He talked of the co-operative schools movement as a 'renewal', a revival of all things good in education, centring a commitment to humanity, collaboration and participation for all in society.

The transition of this particular school to co-operative status is an example of where 'becoming co-op' was informed by its location, lived culture and multifaceted educational traditions. For Andrew, the move towards co-operative ways of schooling became a repository of hope for a renewal of education as a public good. It disrupted the relentless focus on individual attainment and the accountability agenda that he had witnessed in the previous 20 years (Hargreaves et al., 2010).

At the other end of the age spectrum, 'Cara' was a teacher, fairly new to the teaching profession. She had worked in health and care placements before gaining her teaching qualification and taught post-16 BTEC classes. Cara began her teaching career in a school where the focus was on the Teacher Effectiveness Enhancement Programme (TEEP), 'a teaching and learning framework designed to improve teaching and school outcomes', which drew on research and 'best practice' to improve outcomes and build a collaborative culture (SSAT, 2021). The TEEP framework underpinned all teaching and learning at the school, and Cara was very well versed in its discourses and practices; she would say she was a 'disciple', following the mantra.

Cara then experienced a change in school leadership that set the school on the journey to being a co-operative school. There was a 'new religion' in town, she said. All the prayer books and song sheets changed, and they were all now singing from the co-operative school book, with a new set of rules to live and work by. Cara set out on a research project to compare the two approaches to teaching and learning: the co-op and the TEEP framework. It was not long before she experienced what she called a 'conversion' to the co-operative school ways of working and relating. She was excited about working with students as 'equal' humans and she became enthused with the opportunities opening up around her to work in ways which she saw as quite different from the previous regime. Cara involved students in the development of a BTEC course and helped to develop a learning programme for students and tutors to help them understand the co-operative principles. Through this work, she was amazed to find out how little pupils knew about democracy and democratic processes. The co-operative school context and co-op learning practices being encouraged in classrooms, she argued, offered a framework that gave licence for her to introduce democratic relations with students, continually testing out the limitations and openings presented by the Ofsted framework. Indeed, other educators reflected that Ofsted criteria could in fact be mapped onto co-operative values and practices even though the benchmarks and targets for improving results set by the agency were unrealistic. This again suggests that the contemporary dominant educational discourse was not a completely alien force but in fact had re-articulated traditions of common education into a rather authoritarian discourse.

## Co-operative structures

Each co-operative school/network was a separate independent entity that had to define its own approach to democracy. Within the co-operative legal models, there were many options for schools. Co-operative schools, however, were not fully co-operative, which would be impossible given prevailing legal frameworks, but rather hybrids (Woodin, 2015, p. 6). The application of democratic ideas to schooling did not result in uniformity and simplified structures but arose from local contexts and the ethos and dynamic of groups of educators. Trusts and academies became 'deliberative arenas' (Woodin, 2020, p. 226) in which many ideas, practices, pedagogies, curriculum changes and networks were launched and debated. As a result, co-operative schools developed in different ways and the journeys to becoming a co-operative school varied.

Democracy was located not just in individual schools, but in wider groups of schools across England. At its best, it was a supportive network based upon reciprocity among pupils, teachers and staff, schools and others. These self-help networks may be separate from, or sometimes aligned with, other 'imposed' frameworks for support or collaboration such as school improvement partnerships. Some schools had felt isolated, cut off from mainstream developments and the advantages enjoyed by other schools. They were caught in unhealthy local hierarchies, might have lost out from new buildings that others had enjoyed from Building Schools for the Future or were on the borders of other supportive



local authorities in more desirable areas. The ways in which regulations, metrics and comparators played out in local settings against national averages increased the vulnerability of certain schools (Headteacher, 2013).

The co-operative network provided a model of organic growth in which the sharing of key ideas and practices became widespread. It was consciously established as a mutual and reciprocal learning and support network in a context that encouraged democratic inventiveness. Educators were keen to share ideas and resources with other schools that were on a similar journey. Associating with schools further afield took them out of a locally competitive environment and provided an open and supportive space in which to explore ideas and common concerns and, as a result, new alliances emerged. There were parallels with the religious networks of the Catholic Church and Church of England, which also blended values and faith with structure, resources and organisation.

The new movement took a critical but positive approach to research and expertise. Partnerships developed between schools, researchers and academics, for instance with Plymouth University, the IOE, UCL's faculty of education and society, and Manchester Metropolitan University, as well as scholarly groupings such as the British Educational Leadership, Management and Administration Society (BELMAS), all of which stimulated PhD studentships, seminar series, conferences and a range of publications targeting academics and practitioners. Internationally, connections with co-operative schools and educators were made, for instance, with groups in Italy, Spain, France, Poland, Canada and further afield such as South Korea, where the English initiative stimulated a lot of interest.

From 2014, in the South West of England, The Cooperative Education Research Group (CERG) attracted staff from co-operative schools and academics who aimed to be a genuinely collaborative research community, using co-operative principles and values as a guide for research and practice, a space of 'radical collegiality' (Fielding, 1999). The work was challenging given the fiercely uncooperative and uncollaborative environments in which the group was working and these tensions were addressed explicitly. In pursuing community-based research for social change (Stevahn, 2013), they identified 'shared passions, commitment and embodiment of the values' (Breeze, 2011).

Within schools and trusts, more or less successful models of participation emerged based upon teachers, pupils, governors, parents and communities. Both formal and informal collaborations allowed stakeholders to make changes while learning about co-operation. Co-operative schools offered spaces to envision and practice collaboration on a number of levels—among and between classrooms, schools, communities and universities. They represented an experimental space for participation and emulation rather than simply implementing ideas provided by policymakers or experts.

Schools introduced democratic structures and innovations such as 'voice panels', student fora and a pigeonhole in the staffroom for every member of staff whatever their role. Classroom groups might vote for their representatives and help to make decisions about the school. Multi-stakeholder forums were created in which staff, pupils, communities, parents and potentially alumni discussed shared concerns. They informed the work of senior leadership groups and boards of governors who frequently listened and acted on suggestions. The most successful work was developed with pupils (Ralls, 2019). In some cases, this could be for relatively minor things, such as non-uniform days or the choice of soap in student washrooms. Equally, more weighty topics would be the subject for whole school discussions on the implications of the 2010 Equality Act or even the appointment or staff, when a group of students would be delegated to carry out parallel interviews and feedback on their findings. The significance of these examples is not always straightforward to judge. Making a specific, albeit limited, change could result in a shift in consciousness and sense of empowerment among pupils (Pupil Presentation, 2015). It was arguably a form of prefigurative democracy in which full control could be ceded to pupils. Despite the claims that the time and space needed for this kind of democratic practice are not to be found in 'mainstream' schools, some co-operative schools managed to do just this.

Although ostensibly democratic innovations were introduced, operating them successfully threw up many challenges. Democratic structures could be problematic, for instance, the school forum idea was not always widely adopted by schools which found the new structure unwieldy and difficult to put into practice, especially in terms of involving the community and parents, which required long-term change. It was possible for some co-operative schools to subscribe to the values but to make only surface changes to the daily structures and routines of the school. Others attempted to construct collective solutions and enrich democratic participation. Achieving co-operation across all areas of a school

represented a major transformation. Schools comprised a wide diversity of teachers and not all were initially sympathetic to co-operativism or necessarily understood it very well. Moreover, reciprocal bonds in the network had to be continually nourished. It proved hard to sustain a network based upon mutual self-help in a context where schools felt vulnerable and were desperate for guidance, additional staff and resources. It required energy and vision to take full advantage of the co-operative form.

Moreover, democratic practice is continually reinterpreted in unanticipated ways. People create meaning out of what is available at the time and the context in which they find themselves. New language was deployed to express older themes. Asking questions about democratic practice did not always elicit rich responses and could be met with miscomprehension. But asking about 'leadership' unlocked a stream of what could be considered democratic experience, a reflection of the way that it was being articulated in terms of democratic participation (see Woodin, 2020). This could lead in unexpected directions so that students might emphasise that the value of democratic participation lay in gaining vocational skills and influencing people; some even started disciplining other students as they gained a sense of ownership in the school. The negotiation of democratic forms could mean that democracy was not always a clear-cut alternative. Fostering co-operative behaviour inevitably overlapped with the disciplinary regime, from which it was inseparable:

I think we use those values as well in our discussions with students around supporting behaviour for learning and improving behaviour. Our sanctions/tariffs are based on whether the students have displayed the co-operative values and it's an embedded part of language in the school now I think. (Headteacher, 2013)

Democratic education has to face this dilemma at some level as all schools need to maintain order and structure irrespective of the purpose and content of learning.

There were significant external pressures on school leaders to become co-op schools quickly in order to avoid being forced into what were seen as 'predatory' academy chains as a result of government policy. This could contribute to a sense that co-operativism was simply another quick fix. Co-operative leaders were concerned not to be simply 'job hopping' and propping up 'brutal regimes' but were attempting to establish a 'resilience of leadership' (Headteacher 2, 2012). Nevertheless, with the co-operative school movement gaining momentum, a flurry of materials sought to provide support for school leaders, classroom teachers, governors and school communities as to what a co-operative school was and did. 'Off the shelf' teaching schemes, such as those of Spencer Kagan, a psychologist from the United States and his Kagan Company (Kagan & Kagan, 2009), attracted some teachers. Schools did successfully adopt and adapt co-operative learning to their own purposes in creative ways based upon unique pedagogical practice (Dennis, 2019; Woodin, 2015), although co-operative learning required a 'radical reconceptualisation' of what learning involves and of classroom relationships (Kohn, 1992). Without adequate time and resources, there was always a danger that co-operative learning could become another fad, incorporated into the language of markets and technical fixes.

In addition, the looming presence of Ofsted threatened the autonomy and independence of co-operative schools. Externally, there was a noticeable decline in the number of co-operative schools after 2015, following a concerted attempt to force them into hostile academy chains, which the Conservative Government applied to all schools that were not improving in line with government expectations and considered to be 'coasting schools'. It was compounded by the withdrawal of effective support by the Co-operative College and Co-operative Group from around 2016 (Woodin, 2019). Invariably, these challenges were coterminous with more hopeful expressions of co-operativism, discussions and actions around co-operative values.

## CONCLUSION

Democratic experiments in education are diverse and need space in which they can express and address contradictions. From 2006 to 2016, the remarkable growth of co-operative schools promised to shake up the educational landscape. Despite the decline in the number of co-operative schools since then, a significant number have continued to develop along co-operative lines. They have successfully navigated the contemporary educational landscape, focusing on 'raising standards' while maintaining an interest in wider aspects of learning, in pupil and community participation which, although fledgling, has nevertheless been of some significance. Deliberative arenas have extended across and beyond schools and provided succour and a source of inspiration for those who feel isolated and vulnerable. The leaders of the co-op schools movement at times envisaged all members of the school, pupils, staff, parents and communities as active collaborators in a democratic process. The existence of a co-operative network encouraged more wide-ranging visions in which there was an equality of voice. In a Deweyian sense, schools became models or social laboratories where members could explore their powers, strengthen their habits of co-operation and develop their collective capacity for democracy. These initiatives bore out the idea of prefigurative practice which holds that relatively minor organisational forms can be arranged in ways that anticipate a future society and raise difficult questions about the future (Fielding & Moss, 2011; Rowbotham et al., 1979; Woodin, 2007).

Co-operative democracy, as applied to schools, is not simply a structure or an end state but a forward-looking process involving widespread communication, research, understanding and action that scrutinises forms to support the development of individuals and groups. It exists in sharp contrast to the contemporary technical assumption that 'delivery' is everything, that we already know the answer and have a clear vision of the desired end state. By highlighting the way in which apparently neutral administrative frameworks can have real social impacts, it illustrates how institutional politics cannot be separated from cultural and intellectual change, that means are in tension with ends. The whole process of becoming co-operative is influenced by factors such as locality and lived cultures, traditions of schools and teachers and the multilayered nature of co-operation and the sporadic yet continuing history of democratic education. Teachers, learners, governors, members of communities and school leaders associated with co-op schools were caught up in a dialectic of being and becoming—seeing, experiencing and actively making other ways of organising schooling based upon reciprocal relations and mutual support.

The co-operative model illustrated the importance of developing people within a supportive collective context while removing psychological, social and financial barriers to participation. The potential for a supportive network to release the energy and enthusiasm of stakeholders is not to be underestimated. Schools attempted to infuse co-operative values, dynamic and ethos into their daily life. They contributed to an atmosphere where there was an expectation and responsibility to develop co-operative forms of education. As a result, many new opportunities were pursued by pupils and staff in particular, but some attempts were also made to connect with parents and wider communities. The movement thus brought into dialogue people and organisations that would not normally be associated with radical alternatives. Innovations in curriculum, pedagogy and organisation were a part of this process. Allowing teachers, pupils and others to try out specific solutions without the burden of wider philosophical implications attracted people who could develop at their own pace. In time, they might then start to ask deeper questions. Some in the movement identify co-operative education as a staging post towards fundamental democratic social transformation while others view it as a means of providing citizens with the skills needed to thrive within existing systems—actually existing democracy alongside a democratic utopian future. The schools movement spoke both of these languages and established a fruitful dialectic that explored the notion of co-operative democracy and crucially tried it out in practice. Although head teachers accepted the need to focus on standards, many of them revealed an ambiguity about the direction of education policy that constrained their visions. It calls into question an exclusive focus on a dramatic democratic transformation based upon a change of government, revolutionary shift or some other climactic alternation that need to be complemented by long-term pressures, accretional changes in consciousness and incremental variations in circumstances.

The movement has also been beset with dilemmas and obstacles. The self-help aspect of the network has made it difficult to address the fact that schools were crying out for more resources. Creating a society of equals is a tough nut to crack in the context of formal schooling, which is characterised by hierarchical organisational structures and external influence over policy and curricula. There was, of course, some decline in the network after the initial growth in which a lack of nerve was apparent among those who had never been closely associated with the movement who did not always fully appreciate its potential value.

It is also a practice that is still available today and for the future. The co-operative schools network provides an interesting model. It has blended top-down guidance with the expectation that co-operative action would be initiated and filled out by schools and communities. It took some time for school leaders to realise that they were to develop their own schemes rather than following directions from others, an example of the cultural change implicit in democratic transition. Were the power of significant agencies, and even the government, to put its weight behind such a programme with all its capacity to raise awareness and funding of support and advice services, popular inventiveness could be nurtured. For instance, current education policy tends to perceive teacher initiative as a problem rather than a resource. Regulatory frameworks might be adjusted to allow for such experimentation. This apparently contradictory notion of self-help from above is an approach to policy making that releases energies and enthusiasms to define and develop an area of practice, creating new forms of social value—public service reform but not as we know it (Wainwright, 2009). It is also one replete with danger given the power and inclination of the state to stifle and over-regulate democratic activity.<sup>4</sup>

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> State schools in England receive funding through their local authority or directly from the government. The most common ones are: **Community schools**, or local authority maintained schools are not influenced by business or religious groups and follow the national curriculum. **Foundation schools and voluntary schools** are funded by the local authority but have more freedom to change the way they do things—some are supported by religious groups; they may also become a **trust school** by establishing a charitable trust to bring in other partners. **Academies and free schools** are run by not-for-profit academy trusts, independent from the local authority and directly responsible to, and funded by, the Department for Education. They have more freedom to change how they run things and can vary the curriculum. They have to follow the same rules on admissions, special educational needs and exclusions as other state schools and students sit the same exams. Some academies are directly guided and supported by sponsors such as businesses, universities, other schools, faith groups or voluntary groups. Converter academies may be schools that have good results and chose to become an academy, while sponsored academies are often forced into an academy following an 'inadequate' judgement from the inspectorate. **Academy trusts** are not-for-profit companies. They employ the staff and have trustees who are responsible for the performance of the academies in the trust. Trusts might run a single academy or a group of academies. **Grammar schools**, which can be run by the local authority, a foundation body or an academy trust—they select their pupils based on academic ability and there is a test to get in. <https://www.gov.uk/types-of-school>

<sup>2</sup> Ofsted is the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills. They inspect services in England, providing education and skills for learners of all ages including schools (Fielding, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> 'Nonconformist' has long been used as a description of Protestant Christians in England and Wales who were not part of the Church of England and included certain groups of Baptists, Methodists, Quakers and many others.

<sup>4</sup> The primary research reported in this article received ethical approval from the University of Plymouth, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Education Research Ethics Committee and the UCL-Institute of Education Ethics Research Committee. The participants in the research consented to the publication of material from interviews.

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**How to cite this article:** Woodin, T. & Gristy, C. (2022) Democracy and schooling: The paradox of co-operative schools in a neoliberal age? *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 1–14.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9752.12690>