

## CASE STUDY

### A Quiet Revolution: Co-operative schools in the UK

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#### Table of Contents

Section 1: Co-operative Schools in the UK.....	2
1.1. Context and history.....	2
1.2. A new governance model emerges.....	5
1.3. What makes a co-operative school? – institutional, governance and ethical perspectives.....	7
1.4. External relations .....	10
1.5. Economic data.....	12
Section 2: Analysis of the case .....	14
2.1. Impact analysis.....	14
2.2. Lessons learned and replicability .....	15
Bibliography.....	17



Image from 'Co-operative Schools – where values make a difference':

<http://stories.coop/stories/co-operative-schools-%c2%96-where-values-matter-animation/>

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## Section 1: Co-operative Schools in the UK

This case study discusses the growth of a new co-operative sector in England during the past ten years which has been one of the movement's success stories. The development of more than 700 schools as multi stakeholder co-operatives has been aptly described as 'a quiet revolution'. Moreover, this 'revolution' has occurred during the past decade against what might at first sight seem very unpromising circumstances given a rapidly changing educational environment with frequent major policy shifts and unremitting media attention. Schools have been under constant pressure to continually improve performance and examination results.



Students at Passmores Academy – a co-operative school

This case study examines the emergence of co-operative schools in England, explores how they function and assesses their wider impact.

### 1.1. Context and history

Education and schooling systems are shaped by national histories, cultures and identities. So, whilst this paper tackles current developments in education in the UK, taking a 'long view' will help us to unpack some of the key drivers for these changes to fully understand the nature of the new sector and the different models that have developed.

In the UK as a whole, the 1944 Education Act laid down the arrangements for the policy setting, for the funding and for the delivery of state funded school education for over fifty years. The Act divided responsibility for education between central government, which was to set national policies and allocate resources; the local education authorities (LEAs), which were to set local policies and allocate resources to schools; and the schools themselves, whose head teachers and governing bodies would set school policies and manage the resources.

These arrangements meant that in practice local municipalities, who appointed the LEAs, played a central role in the operation, ownership and management of local state schools. There were other actors in the English education system which evolved in partnership with the mainstream Christian churches, whose involvement in the provision of education pre-dated that of the state. The result was, under the 1944 Act, that the churches maintained a key role in the state sector and their ability to establish schools in response to demand from parents. Today, around a third of government maintained schools have a religious character and are popularly known as faith schools. Faith

schools are mostly run like other state schools. They have to follow the national curriculum except for religious studies, where they are free to only teach about their own religion. The admissions criteria and staffing policies may be different too, although anyone can apply for a place. Around two thirds of faith schools are connected to the Anglican Church.

Despite the importance of education for nineteenth century co-operators such as Robert Owen and the Rochdale Pioneers, by the twentieth century a considerable distance has evolved between the co-operative movement and schools. By the early 20th century, the practice was that co-operatives provided education primarily for adult co-operators. The movement had willingly conceded a pre-eminent role to the government in the provision of primary and secondary. As a Fabian society pamphlet put it in 1923:

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)

This division of educational responsibilities was to continue largely unchallenged for the rest of the century so that despite the importance of education to the movement, education about co-operatives remained largely absent from the school curriculum and the movement played no role at all in the governance of schools. There were some individual initiatives by certain co-operative societies to do some work in schools on co-operatives and co-operation but these initiatives remained very fragmented and often short lived.

### **A changing environment**

The 1944 Act did not establish a single national curriculum and national examinations were the responsibility of a number of different awarding bodies often linked to universities. Schools chose a curriculum in part to meet the requirements of the awarding bodies. It was not until the 1980s, under the Thatcher government, that major changes started to happen. Firstly, in 1987, a national qualifications framework for workplace based learning was established (although the framework did not include schools, Higher Education or Professional Status qualifications). Then the following year, 1988, saw the introduction of a national curriculum for schools together with standardised national testing on attainment measured against the curriculum. A further key change was a growing emphasis on more local management of schools giving greater budgetary power to individual schools and shifting power away from the local education authorities.

Four years later, in 1992, league tables were introduced which measured the annual performance of schools in national tests and examinations against each. The stated aim was to give parents more information and choice about schools but in reality they have also been synonymous with greater central direction over schools as different governments have used them to drive change and set attainment targets for schools. Although criticised for their narrow focus, they have since remained an essential part of the education landscape.

A second major round of schools' reform in England started under the Labour government in the 1990s which culminated in the 2002 Education Act. This allowed schools much more freedom to manage their own affairs with schools now able to control 85% of their budget and a further lessening for the role of local authorities. The Act also opened the doors for more involvement of the private sector in state provision and enabled a greater diversity in the provision of secondary education by allowing the development of new types of specialist schools for 11 - 18 year olds.

During the same time, there was a rekindling of interest within the co-operative movement about working in schools and a number of new initiatives began to be developed. Firstly, in 2002, the Co-operative Group supported the setting up of the 'Young Co-operatives'. This was a programme to help school students to start and manage their own co-operatives, which sourced and sold Fairtrade products. The programme proved very popular with hundreds of such co-operatives set up. It is still running today and the range of activities undertaken by the co-operatives has expanded to include recycling and horticulture. Secondly, a series of educational and curriculum resources on co-operatives and Fair trade were developed by the UKCC to introduce the concept of Fairtrade and co-operatives to their students in both primary and secondary schools.

An example of these resources is the Young Co-operatives Action Kit<sup>2</sup>, which was recently updated in 2013. It covers a range of topics including how to decide what activities to undertake, holding meetings, budgeting, making the rules and selling its products, and right up to evaluating the project. There is a teacher's guide and separate activity packs for younger and older age groups. Just as importantly, it introduces what co-operatives are, where they came from and what makes them different to other types of businesses, as well as providing case studies from other Young Co-operatives as inspiration.

Later in the decade, the College also worked in partnership with one of the UK examination agencies, ASDAN, to produce a range of accredited programmes and curriculum materials to support the introduction of co-operative studies into the curriculum. These programmes provide a framework of qualifications, based on this co-operative curriculum, for students from primary through to secondary level.

Thirdly, and in response to the 2002 Education Act, which allowed organisations such as businesses and charities to develop new partnership relationships with schools, the Co-operative Group and Co-operative College also began to explore related possibilities for co-operative development. In 2003, the UKCC worked with an educational charity, CfBT Education Trust, to research options for co-operative and mutual models in the English education system. The findings were made available in the 2007 college publication 'Education and Learning', which drew on a number of international examples and also contained a chapter on running schools as co-operatives. (Wilson and Mills, 2007)

In 2004, the Co-operative Group sponsored eight (later ten) secondary schools, called Business and Enterprise Colleges, specialising in co-operative business and enterprise and which were supported by the earlier curriculum resources commissioned from the college. Curriculum working groups were established across the network to explore how links with the co-operative movement could

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<sup>2</sup> <http://school.coop/new-young-co-operatives-action-kit/>

enrich the curriculum in the three core subjects: Information Technology, Maths and Business Studies. The resulting resources, which include a pack dedicated to the father of social enterprise, Robert Owen, are freely available to download from [www.school.coop](http://www.school.coop).

Additional support for these Business and Enterprise Colleges from the Co-operative Group and the College has included the provision of a sponsor governor in every school, organising regional networking activities, staff training and curriculum development.

## 1.2. A new governance model emerges

In England, the education reforms continued with another Act in 2006 which devolved further powers to schools. This enabled a school to own its own assets, employ staff directly and set its own admission arrangements. To do this, schools needed to set themselves up as an autonomous body as an independent trust using a model similar to the one used by faith schools.

In response to this, a co-operative trust model, called a Foundation Trust, was developed. This permitted the school to become a multi stakeholder co-operative that provided a real voice in governance for parents, carers, staff, learners and the local community (in contrast to standard trust model) together with external institutional partner organisations who also appoint trustees. Institutional partners could be drawn from with a wide range of local organisations such as further and higher education institutions as well as enterprises. Each trust is therefore an independent co-operative in its own right.

More recently, more legislation has been put in place to allow schools to detach themselves completely from Local Authority control and to build new partnerships with external organisations (often commercial education providers such as Kunsapskolen and Ark) and set up as ‘academies’ reporting directly to the Ministry of Education. A similar multi-stakeholder co-operative model for academies received government approval in 2011. To date, these reforms apply only in England and not in either Scotland or Wales.

The changes in the legal and policy environment have therefore created opportunities for the genesis of new co-operative governance models in education.

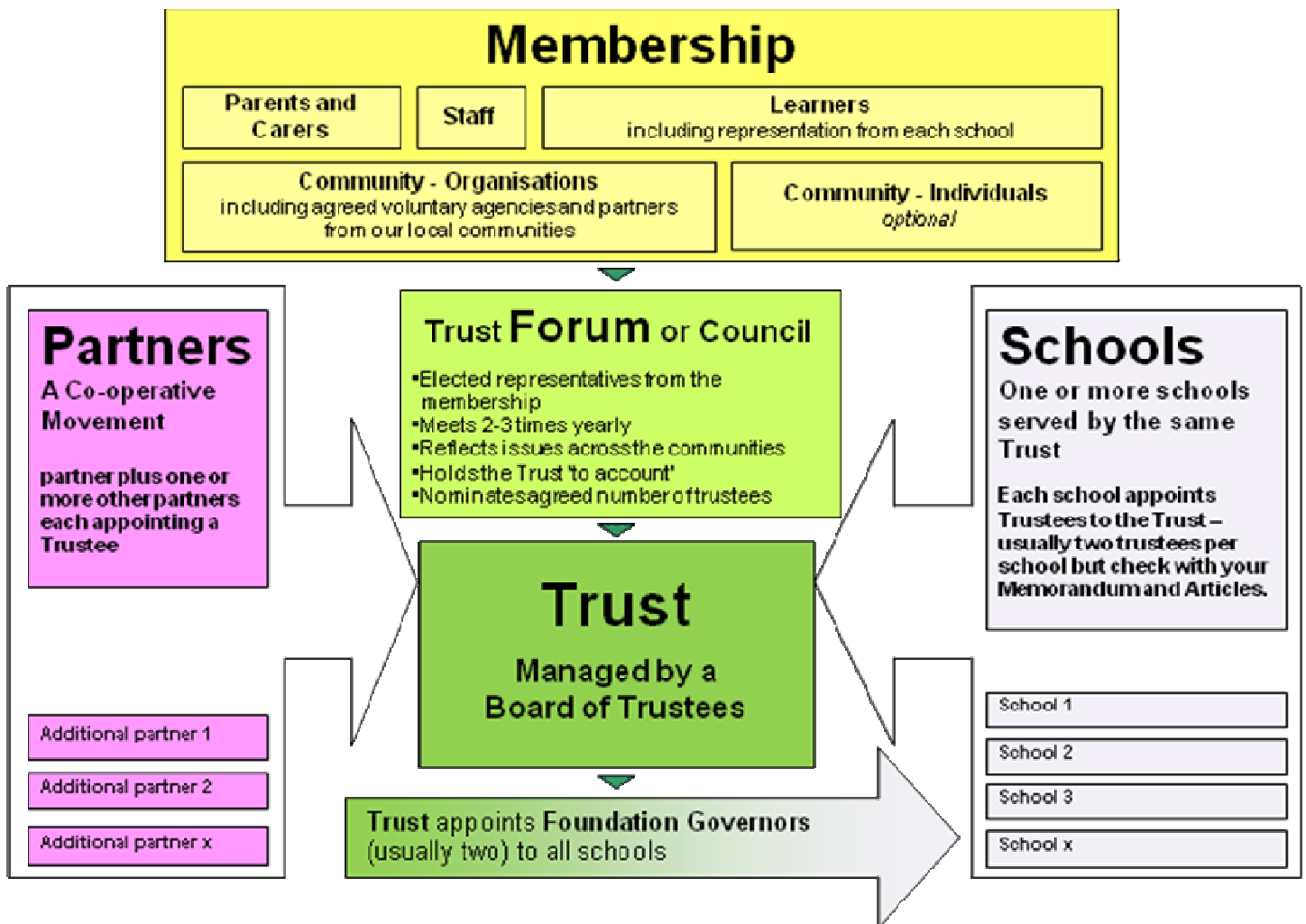
Legally, however, the situation is a complex one. The ownership of the school’s assets is passed from the local authority to the school itself (though not in the case of converter academies) when the school legally adopts the new model though there are a number of restrictions in place on ownership rights such as the disposal of assets. In effect, the members of the co-operative own the assets in the trust, which cannot then be sold off and can be substantial (over £50 million in the case of a cluster of schools).

To recap, two legal models for co-operative schools are operational: Foundation Trusts and Academy Trusts. Both use a multi-stakeholder co-operative model which aims to provide a voice in the running of the school of all interest groups – staff, students, parents and the wider community. Membership is drawn from all these groups and includes even the younger pupils.

Trusts can be a single school or have a membership of several schools. The governance structures are complex. In the case of a co-operative school, the Trust Board is responsible for maintaining the ethos of the school and setting the strategic direction. Its membership is drawn from external stakeholders as well as the various members of the trust (e.g. staff, students, local communities) who appoint their representatives via stakeholder forum which represents the various interest groups that comprise the trust membership as Figure 1 below shows. However, although student representatives can attend and participate in academy trust meetings, if under the age of 18 they cannot be appointed as directors of the academy trust in line with current legislation relating to charity trustees.

This does, however, offer the opportunity for student representatives (possibly from each year group) to work as equals alongside adults, and to engage in discussion and debate in a way that will have a real impact on the nature and content of their own educational experience and that of other students.

Figure 1 - Governance model for a co-operative trust school



Again, trusts can be single school or have a membership of several schools. Each school is its own autonomous co-operative. In effect, the members of the co-operative own the assets which could be substantial e.g. over £50 million in the case of a cluster of schools. These schools are contracted by local and national government to provide state education which is free at the point of delivery.

The model can also be used in different types of schools which include those for children from the ages of 5 to 18 that is at both primary and secondary level. Many of the schools established in 2013 were clusters of primary schools (for children aged 5 – 11). The co-operative model has also been used for schools for children with special needs. In a further development, the co-operative model can be used for other forms of service delivery in education. A group of primary head teachers Plymouth, for example, set up a co-operative to deliver a range of services such as training and curriculum development.

At the national level, an apex body, the Schools Co-operative Society (SCS), was established in 2011 to provide services and a voice for the sector.<sup>3</sup> It operates as an independent co-operative owned by its member schools and each school receives an invitation to join the society, which coordinates a number of regional networks. It is also setting up procurement opportunities for members in relation to green energy, banking and other services. In addition to providing support and resources, the SCS can also assist member schools facing performance issues including those facing a process of forced academisation because of unsatisfactory grading from the schools inspection service, Ofsted.

### 1.3. What makes a co-operative school? – institutional, governance and ethical perspectives

Gaining legal recognition is only the start of a journey for a co-operative school. There is no single universal template for all co-operative schools and the day-to-day policies and practices in co-operative schools remain widely divergent. As co-operative schools have been set up in response to

local needs, and with such a rapidly growing sector, no single blueprint for a co-operative school has emerged or indeed is likely to. There is no centralised imposition of timetables, uniforms or curriculum options, for example.

Establishing the co-operative ethos throughout the work of the Trust, its stakeholders and partners, clearly needs to be a key priority. In many schools, there may be a limited understanding of the co-operative movement and its values among the new membership.



Meet the Pioneers Day 2012 – event held in Rochdale for local schools

<sup>3</sup> See [http://www.co-operativeschools.coop/about\\_us](http://www.co-operativeschools.coop/about_us)

Central to the development of any co-operative is membership and in this respect, schools are no different. Following its incorporation as a co-operative school, the new Trust Board will need to find ways to engage with staff, pupils and parents as well as the wider community. Each trust needs to make its own decisions about the ways in which it applies co-operative values. There are many ways that schools can achieve this goal. Some, for example, focus on what happens in the classroom, while others look to better connect with local communities.

From the point of view of the College, it is clear that at least part of the answer lies not just in adopting a new legal status but that co-operative schools are ones which share a number of features including:

- An ethos acknowledged in their governance documents that is drawn from the globally shared co-operative values.
- Governance mechanisms that engage key stakeholder groups, parents and carers, staff, learners, and the local community through membership.
- A curriculum and pedagogy that embraces co-operation, using the global co-operative movement as a learning resource, and drawing on co-operative approaches to teaching and learning.

To this end, and to assist in the embedding of co-operation through all the activities of a school, a Co-operative Identity Mark (CIM) has been developed by the college working in collaboration with a number of co-operative schools. The CIM provides a framework to help schools to determine the extent to which they put co-operative values into practice. It provides a 'quality' framework for continued development that incorporates elements of peer support and practice sharing with other co-operative schools. The CIM is validated and quality assured by The Co-operative College. The framework covers the following aspects of the school:

- Governance and membership
- Curriculum
- Pedagogy
- Staff development
- Community engagement

The CIM is intended to help schools assess the level of their current practice in each aspect, and with respect to each of the co-operative values, intending to stimulate debate about how the school embeds the co-operative values and to what extent they affect the day-to-day practices of the institution and its stakeholders. The CIM involves a peer review process where the schools involved in the programme themselves visit other schools in the scheme to benchmark their progress.



There are already many other examples of good practice by schools to embed their co-operative ethos<sup>4</sup> including:

- Strategies for active engagement with local co-operative enterprises -providing incentives for them such as discounts on room hire and use of facilities at the school (ASPECT Trust)
- Combining the Trust AGM with a dance and drama performance by pupils to bring in wider audience of friends and family to watch the performance (Thomas Boughey Co-operative Trust)
- Development and delivery of a 6 week programme on trust membership for all students (Royds Hall)
- Taking a staged approach to membership development and use of an interim trust forum which works to develop a wider membership (Royds Hall)

Students can be powerful champions of the values at the heart of co-operative schools. Co-operative schools can offer the opportunity for some young people to work as equals alongside adults, and to engage in discussion and debate in a way that will have a real impact on the nature and content of their own educational experience and that of other students. Different trusts have taken different approaches to developing student voice:

- Developing democratic student run companies with budgets and capacity to develop their own student led pastoral projects (Da Vinci College)
- Engaging student voice through the use of technology and social media e.g. learning platform, twitter, Flickr, Youtube, as well as ‘flip learning’ where students access information via online media at home, leaving more time for classroom interaction between students and teachers (Whalley Range)
- Students assisting with the selection of the Headteacher (Ashton Park)

How to embed co-operative values throughout the curriculum is another critical challenge for co-operative schools. It is not just the content of the curriculum that needs to be considered, but also the pedagogical approaches used.

- Students work in carefully structured groups with each student taking a specific role and developing social skills through teambuilding activities. They are able to have a voice and vote about key changes to the curriculum and have the opportunity to provide weekly feedback on their classroom experience (Lipson College)
- Stakeholder partners contribute directly to students’ learning. This includes a partnership with the local professional football club that uses football as an inspiration for literacy work. (South West Bristol)
- Handing over the school library to be run by students, which has helped improve reading levels. (Burnt Mill)

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<sup>4</sup> These examples are drawn from *Your Co-operative Trust – making it work* Manchester:Co-operative College

These examples provide examples of some of the ways in which some co-operative schools have begun to embed co-operative values within their co-operative governance framework. However, proof of a causal relationship between co-operative school status and sustained improvement has yet to be established. In addition, the extent to which such practices can make sustainable changes and bring tangible benefits to the school and its local community remains yet to be ascertained and clearly provides a fertile ground for research – an opportunity which has not gone unnoticed with a growing number of ongoing but still early stage research projects.<sup>5</sup>

With such a rapid evolution of co-operative schools in England, and a fluid policy regime, it is currently difficult to identify any definitive impact as yet or even develop a typology of the different approaches to embedding co-operative values within a school.



Members of Unicorn worker co-operative visiting a nearby co-operative school at Whalley Range

#### 1.4. External relations

The map of external relations is a complex and a changing one. There is wide political support for co-operative schools and their values base as evidenced in the House of Commons adjournment debate on co-operative education held in October 2013. Politicians from both sides of the political spectrum were united in their support for co-operative schools. The debate provided an opportunity not only to highlight the progress made by co-operative schools and the growth of the sector, but the potential for co-operatives and mutuals in other parts of the education system.

The adjournment debate was secured by Steve Baker, Conservative MP for High Wycombe, who had witnessed at first hand the positive impact that adopting a co-operative structure had on a school in his constituency. This has included dramatically improved exam results together with a growth in its

<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.co-op.ac.uk/2014/02/introducing-phd-student-joanna-dennis/#.UyxSToWeZqM>

spirit of autonomy and independence. During the meeting, other MPs highlighted the ways in which co-operative models had been adopted to meet the diverse needs of their communities.<sup>6</sup>

Following this debate, a House of Commons report on School partnerships and co-operation, was produced by the House of Commons Education Committee. The report describes co-operatives as 'an increasingly important part of a self-improving or school-led system' stating that collaboration benefits all schools involved and has great potential to continue driving improvement to the English education system.<sup>7</sup>

However, the public awareness of co-operative schools remains limited and many misunderstandings remain even in the education press. The Times Education Supplement, for example, reported in 2012 that it was the consumer co-operative the Co-operative Group that directly controlled and ran co-operative schools.<sup>8</sup>

This view was also common in many trade unions working in the education sector. The perception was that co-operative schools were part of a wider private sector encroachment upon education. Trade unions have also actively resisted the way in which local education authorities have been undermined in recent decades.

This perception has now begun to alter with a change of heart by several major unions. In the summer of 2012, for example, one of the major teaching unions, the NAS/UWT, changed position in relation to co-operative schools. It announced publicly that it would be promoting the co-operative model to give schools "a safe place from predatory, profit-making private providers." Later that year a ground-breaking agreement was signed between the NAS/UWT and SCS.<sup>9</sup>

The co-operative movement also started a dialogue with other teaching unions and with the national union apex body, the TUC. The Board of the SCS has worked with the UNISON trade union on a living wage campaign and called for its members and all co-operative schools to consider and implement a living wage policy.<sup>10</sup>

Importantly, the emergence of co-operative schools has helped to inform and foster growing and better relations between the co-operative movement and trade unions especially over public sector mutuals. This



College, SCS and TUC representatives at Congress House in London following the signing of the agreement on co-operative schools, December 2013

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.co-op.ac.uk/2013/10/debate-co-operative-education/#.U2oYgnbNOZQ>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.co-op.ac.uk/2013/11/report-school-partnerships-co-operation/#.U2oXZ3bNOZQ>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.tes.co.uk/article.aspx?storycode=6262524>

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.nasuwt.org.uk/consum/groups/public/@journalist/documents/nas\\_download/nasuwt\\_010379.pdf](http://www.nasuwt.org.uk/consum/groups/public/@journalist/documents/nas_download/nasuwt_010379.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.co-op.ac.uk/2013/11/co-operative-schools-urged-adopt-living-wage/#.U2od1nbNOZQ>

has resulted in an agreement and statement of joint principles between the TUC and Co-operativesUK and some best practice guidelines for mutual conversions from the public sector.

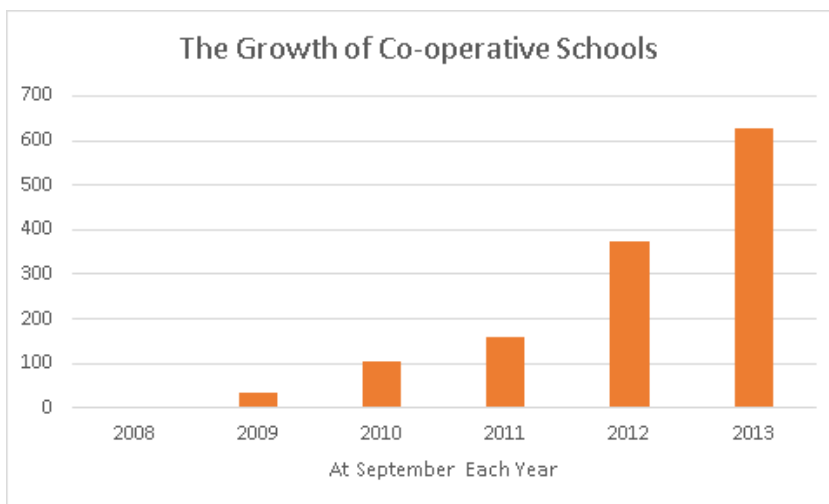
More specifically, an agreement between the TUC affiliated education unions and the co-operative movement (the SCS and the College) was signed in December 2013. Frances O’Grady, General Secretary of the TUC, welcomes the agreement and the opportunity it offered for a genuine partnership between the co-operative movement and trade union movement in educational institutions, especially the growing number of co-operative schools. The agreement was based on a common understanding of the importance of the shared values of the union and the co-operative movement that should be at the heart of the ethos of all schools, including equality, solidarity, democracy and social responsibility. The agreement could help to ensure that school leaders and school staff worked in partnership to ensure that co-operative schools are fully accountable to local communities, pupils, parents, carers, and teaching and support staff.<sup>11</sup>

The College has also produced some online resources, drawing on the National Co-operative Archive, which illustrate the common roots of the trade union and co-operative movement. They are freely available online at <http://www.archive.coop/hive/common>.

### 1.5. Economic data

The take up of this new model has been rapid. The first school to adopt it was Reddish Vale school in Stockport (near Manchester) in 2008. The speedy take up has been assisted by support from the co-operative movement. The college offers assistance to schools to aid them through the conversion process, which can take many months. There are complex consultation and registration procedures involved before legal recognition is achieved. Nonetheless by 2010, the numbers had grown to 108 and have kept increasing since then.

The diagrams below help to illustrate the rate of growth and overall numbers and types of school, which have made co-operative schools the largest new co-operative sector in the UK.



**Diagram A:**  
Growth of co-operative schools

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.co-op.ac.uk/2013/12/national-agreement-tuc-co-op-schools/#.U2ogBHbNOZQ>

**Diagram B: Number of Co-operative Schools**

Co-operative trust schools	September 2011	September 2012	September 2013	November 2013	March 2014
Secondary Schools	63	83	94	95	99
Primary Schools	76	207	389	399	475
Special schools <sup>12</sup>	6	23	30	38	40
Associate Members <sup>13</sup>	30	36	72	75	105
Co-operative Academies	September 2011	September 2012	September 2013	November 2013	March 2014
Sponsored by the Co-operative Group	3	3	6	6	6
Sponsored by SCS				1	1
Converters	5	18	33	35	36
Secondary Schools			22	23	24
Primary Schools			9	10	10
Special Schools			2	2	2
Co-operative sponsored Business & Enterprise Colleges (other than Trusts or Co-operative Academies)	5	5	5	5	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>188</b>	<b>373</b>	<b>629</b>	<b>654</b>	<b>716</b>

Although co-operative schools have been set up right across England, there are marked clusters in the south west, midlands and northwest of the country as the map below indicates. Currently there is rapid growth in the east of England. Many of the schools established in 2013 were clusters of primary schools (for children aged 5 – 11). While the first trusts were single schools, the trend now is for the development of clusters of neighbouring schools that can share expertise and resources.



<sup>12</sup> Special schools are for children with special educational needs such as physical difficulties or problems with learning

<sup>13</sup> Associate members are schools that cannot adopt the co-operative school legal model such as Church Schools or Nursery Schools.

## Section 2: Analysis of the case

### 2.1. Impact analysis

With such a rapid evolution of co-operative schools in England, and a fluid policy regime, it is currently difficult to identify any definitive impact as yet or even develop a typology of the different approaches to embedding co-operative values within a school. A number of good practice examples have been cited where co-operative schools have succeeded in raising performance. This is the situation in the county of Cornwall down in the extreme south west of England where the majority of schools will soon work together co-operatively. Here co-operative trusts provide particular benefits for deprived remote and rural communities where there are many small primary schools that face challenges in delivering high-quality education.

One example is the Menheniot primary school which is part of the Liskeard Co-operative Learning Trust. The school has moved from being assessed as satisfactory to becoming one of the top performing primary schools in England. The headteacher attributes this improvement in part to the collaborative working relationships with other schools in the Trust – sharing ideas and expertise. The co-operative principles have provided a strong foundation from which to build the school.

Co-operative schools can also have an impact in more urban areas. Cressex School has more than 80% of its pupils from ethnic minorities and who do not have English as a first language. In addition, almost half the students live on estates that are among the most economically disadvantaged in England, with areas of entrenched poverty and low skills. Here examination results have improved, with the 2013 exam results being the best in the history of the school.

There are many other examples of good practice but few academic studies of impact within a school and of the school's impact on its wider community. There is much that is needed to be done and fortunately a growing interest in co-operative schools among researchers.

It is clear that the impact of co-operative schools should not be measured just in terms of the schools and its local community, but with a wider set of stakeholders as well. Their emergence has helped to kick start dialogue and develop a shared agenda on public sector mutuals between co-operatives and trade unions. Closer relationships are now being built. Secondly, the relevance of a value based co-operative model has had a wider resonance within the education sector and has helped to prompt interest in the notion of a co-operative university amongst a growing number of academics. A consultancy paper for the Co-operative College has been researched and written by Dan Cook as part of his MBA Dissertation.<sup>14</sup> In it, Cook looks at the barriers and enablers to the realisation of a co-operative university. He takes a pluralistic approach recognising that there could

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<sup>14</sup> Available online at <http://coopuni.files.wordpress.com/2013/12/realising-the-co-operative-university-for-disemmination.pdf>

be ‘many’ co-operative universities and ways to embed co-operative principles within the Higher Education context. He concludes:

“Many of the preferences, assumptions and behaviours preferred in universities are co-operative ones. Despite this the possibility of a co-operative university has not been considered by the sector. I suggest that this can change, and must change: the challenges universities face are too great, and the opportunities co-operative working offers are too pregnant with potential, to do otherwise”. Pp 59-60

Following on from this, a well attended seminar, Time for a Co-operative University, was held at the University of London in December 2013 where Cook and a number of other speakers discussed the potential for co-operative approaches in higher education.<sup>15</sup>

## 2.2. Lessons learned and replicability

Co-operative schools are already a major player of England’s school system with the third largest network in England. Only the two biggest faith based groups (Church of England and Roman Catholics) have greater numbers of schools.



Seabridge School

However, at this stage, it is not easy to point to lessons learned and to assess the replicability of this new model. What follows here is a very preliminary reflection on some of the wider issues and challenges related to the growth of co-operative schools.

It is important to note here that although there have been opportunities for the adoption of co-operative and mutual models in other parts of the public sector, such as health and social services, there

have been no conversions on a similar scale. The reasons are as yet unclear, but may relate to the focused use of resources and support from both the Co-operative Group and the Co-operative College on a single sector. Timing was clearly important and new legal models were made available rapidly. It was also possible for individual schools to convert to co-operative status rather than larger and more complex institutions such as universities for example. This allowed an incremental growth.

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.co-op.ac.uk/2013/11/free-seminar-time-co-operative-university/#.U2pA13bNOZR>

Schools and their teachers are well networked and this allowed information about the new model to be by personal contact and word of mouth. There has been practically no expenditure on advertising or PR for co-operative schools.

At the same time, the model appealed to many people who had very real concerns about what was happening within education in the UK. Co-operative models offered the promise of a real alternative to the neo liberal and marketised models which are increasingly dominating the mainstream educational agenda. For many, co-operative status provides a defence from the attentions of predatory private sector chains. The values base has proven to be a central attraction for many, offering a set of non-religious but authoritative values which can become core to all of the activities of the school.

The emphasis on co-operation rather than competition is of key importance. This is not necessarily an easy path to tread. Indeed, Thorpe (2013:9), views one of the main challenges for co-operative schools is to reclaim the definition of successful schooling from being equated simply with good examination results. Instead, schools need to show how they help produce well rounded young people, who are active and critical learners engaged with their communities

A further question for co-operative schools and the wider co-operative education movement today is how to respond to the diverse ways in which co-operative education is being imagined and enacted in schools. Of particular importance is the question of whether co-operative education can function as a 'pick and mix' set of strategies – one part co-operative learning, two parts co-operative enterprise, and we'll leave the wider global movement to one side, for example?

Woodin cautions against unrealistic expectations for the impact of co-operative schools. This needs to be 'tempered by the reality that all examples of progressive change have been subject not only to external opposition but also internal contradictions and tensions'. In particular, he cites the challenge of maintaining a distinct identity for co-operative schools within state structures and in relation to non-co-operative schools without separating them from the mainstream of educational development and thinking.

The challenge is one of translating the initial enthusiasm and instinct for mutuality into effective co-operative schools with local, regional and national networks that prove that co-operation rather than competition is the best way of securing sustainable school improvement, providing high achievement for *all* learners, whilst ensuring democratic accountability to all stakeholders in the local community.



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