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THE CO-OPERATIVE GOOD WITH SCHOOLS?

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1. Background

The 1988 Education Reform Act initiated changes in the English educational landscape. In its wake there were significant alterations to the nature of schooling; the transfer of budgetary control to schools, the National Curriculum, City Technology Colleges and Grant Maintained Schools. Four years later Ofsted was established. This inevitably led to the erosion of the role of local education authorities. As a Head at the time it seemed like a tsunami; with hindsight these changes look almost pedestrian in the light of more recent educational legislation.

In 2006, under the then Labour Government, the Education & Inspections Act enabled the development of trust schools. This act was the one which facilitated much of the work of the Co-operative College in facilitating the setting up of its associated schools. Subsequently the Academies Act (2010) and the Education Act (2011) dramatically steepened the trajectory of change in relation to the governance and the relative autonomy of schools. The former made provision for all publicly funded schools to become academies and it opened the door to the development of Free Schools. The latter act addressed a number of issues ranging from early years provision, discipline, the transfer of land to academies and the abolition of the General Teaching Council. Aspects of this Education Act (2011) facilitated the intentions of the previous year's act.

What had previously been a 'culling' of local authorities by central government was moving increasingly towards 'genocide'. Schools, however labelled, were moving either as volunteers or conscripts to independence from the support and control of local authorities. At the time of writing approximately 50% of secondary schools and 8% of primary schools are Academies. The Department for Education (2013) states that there are also 181 Free Schools intended to open by September 2013 with a further 100 planned for opening in the following year.

The structure that has emerged is a mixture of autonomous academies and aggregated chains. Pragmatically, without the 'go between' local authorities, the Department for Education is unlikely to manage the 25,000 State funded schools. One solution is to group schools into federations or chains. One model is the development of hierarchical chains such as those of Harris Federation or Oasis Community Learning. The Co-operative College has emerged as a significant player in presenting a different paradigm. The Co-operative College also has a networking arm, The Schools Cooperative Society (SCS). The CEO of the SCS commented;

Just as Co-operatives in other enterprise areas are showing that there is a valid alternative to the 'PLC' approach, co-operative schools are developing an alternative way of educating our children. Education is rapidly changing in our country and there are many new models available for schools to use. One of the many advantages Co-operative Schools have over many of the other models is that they have to take into account the views of the local stakeholders of a school. If we want our schools to be good schools that truly work with their local community then it is important that we actively involve the people like parents, members of the community staff and of course the learners. Co-operative Schools have that as part of their DNA. (Boston, 2014)

It is the development and operation of the Co-operative College and their affiliated schools that form the focus of this paper. Are they indeed 'good with schools'?

2. The Conceptual Framework.

It could be argued that schools are schizophrenic; on the one hand they are rooted in past organisation and pedagogy whilst on the other they are under pressure to be prophetic in responding to the potential needs of an indeterminate global economy. One suggested response to the evolution of education is network governance. The expression of network governance can be varied, Triantafilou (2004, p. 489) defined it as 'a specific form of rule that governs at a distance through norms of efficiency, agency and accountability'. Others capture the uncertainty of the times by suggesting that network governance is a response to 'wicked social problems' that defy efforts to delineate their boundaries and to identify their causes' (Rittel and Webber, 1973, p. 167 in Williams 2002, p. 104). This view holds that solutions will develop through collaboration and networking. This is resonant with values of the Co-operative movement especially around solidarity, 'Supporting each other and those in other co-operatives' (CC 2013a).

The research explores in what way and to what extent the Co-operative College is providing a new framework of 'knots and threads' for schools and academies in this new UK educational landscape. In August 2013 there were some 400 affiliated schools making it a substantial player in the new educational order.

3. Methodology.

The research is a small-scale case study conducted between January and November 2013. A significant challenge for the study was the rapid development of the Co-operative College during this period and so the findings can only be viewed as a 'snapshot'. This development currently shows no signs of slowing and additionally potential changes in the political landscape will render the findings time bound.

There were four instruments used in the research: -

- Questionnaires to existing Co-operative Trust Schools
- Interviews
- Documentary analysis
- Website analysis

4. Data and Findings.

Questionnaires to existing Co-operative Trust Schools.

The questionnaire was constructed to establish some basic contextual information. At the core were questions about the identification or indeed lack of identification with the stated Co-operative values. The questionnaire was designed to find out whether schools were affiliating on the basis of a values-based preference or out of a need to find new avenues of support.

The Co-operative College kindly distributed electronic copies of the questionnaires to all of their schools. At the time of distribution there were some 200 schools and 34 were returned.

The phase distribution represented by the schools returning the questionnaires was: -

Secondary	50%
Primary	32%
Middle (other)	3%
Setting	3%
All through	3%
Multi school trust (other)	3%
Special	3%

(the figures are rounded up and so do not correspond to 100%)

Association with other schools: -

Stand alone	44%
Aggregated in various formats	56%

Length of time the school has been a Co-operative Trust School

In transition	6%
0 – 1 Years	29%
1 – 2 Years	29%
2 – 3 Years	24%
3 + Years	10%

The following were offered as possible responses to the question ‘Reason for joining the trust’:

- Identity with the values of the trust
- Pragmatic, the services offered by the Co-operative College in areas such as governance and how needs were met.
- Defensive, your school was coming under pressure to become an academy or accept some other pattern of organisation
- Offensive, you wanted to challenge current national educational policy
- ‘Port in a storm’, existing support structures from local authorities were diminishing and you needed something

The first and the last responses scored most highly in terms of eliciting positive responses.

Overall the responses came from schools judged as good by Ofsted, only a small number of respondents came from schools that were judged outstanding (9% of respondents). There was one school designated as being in special measures and one held to exhibit serious weaknesses. It appears that the majority of the respondent schools populate the middle ground of the current Ofsted designation.

Governance was seen as central to the schools' strategic planning and accountability. A good structure of governance was seen as important.

The move towards seeking to become Co-operative Trust Schools was significantly initiated by headteachers (50%) governors (18%) and local headteacher groups (12%).

Respondents expressed satisfaction with the service that they had received. A significant indicator here was the extent of the advocacy of the Co-operative College by respondents. 97% of respondents were advocates; and of these 68% did so frequently.

The experience of affiliation had not significantly changed the responses, the 'before and after' effect.

Interviews

The interviews were split into two groups; firstly the interview with Mervyn Wilson, formerly the Chief Executive and Principal of the Co-operative College. Secondly with five senior staff currently involved in leading Co-operative Trust Schools. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with five schools as follows: -

School	Phase	Nos.	Staff Interviewed	Location
A	Primary Special	90 (M)	Head	Urban
B	Secondary	1300 (M)	Assistant Head	Urban
C	Secondary	1150 (M)	Vice Principal	Urban
D	Secondary	1000 (M)	Assistant Head	Urban
E	Secondary	800 (M)	Assistant Head	Urban

A regret is that a wider range of interviews was not possible. Requests were made to some of the established network groups and no replies were received. Under pressure of time, four of the interviews were conducted with stand-alone schools and one with a small federation. This lack of an opportunity to interview more widely has limited the scope of the research.

The interview with Mervyn Wilson illuminated the structure of the Co-operative College and the process of becoming a Co-operative Trust School. In essence the overarching organisation is The Co-operative College. The SCS is a development which seeks to support networking and facilitate development within linked schools. The SCS is an independent co-operative registered as an Industrial & Provident Society and with membership open to all co-operative schools. The Co-operative College and the Co-operative Group were founder members, as were a group of the first co-operative schools. Its current affiliation fee stands at a recommended minimum of £1.00. This apparent complexity is best seen as evidence for the

promotion of autonomous development The Chief Executive did not see the oversight of the conversion process as his main area of work and indicated that the Rochdale Pioneers Museum was also a significant part of his work and commitment. The staffing of the Co-operative College linked to this area of its work in August 2013 was 2.5 FTE.

The Co-operative College provides a consultancy service for converter schools. Much of this support is undertaken by a named associate. The basis of the relationship between the Co-operative College and a school/academy/free school/federation is through a memorandum of agreement which makes explicit the intended direction of association. These now have a clause requiring all affiliating schools to engage with a network of SCS schools. Previously it had only made this requirement of academies.

Documentary Analysis.

A variety of documents was made available for the research. These included three publications from the Co-operative College: *Trustee Handbook* (Brown, 2013a), *Company Secretary Handbook for Co-operative School Trusts* (Brown, 2013b) and *Your Co-operative Trust, Making it Work* (Gardner, et al. 2013). Additionally, and generously, The Co-operative College made available a variety of internal documents and documents such as memoranda of agreements.

Website Analysis

Nearly all schools have a website. They are a mix of message and marketing blended with varying degrees of subtlety. They invariably provide details of phase, number and admission criteria. Many use such a portal to record their values. Ten websites of schools linked to the Co-operative College were analysed.

5. Analysis and Discussion

In the initial framing of the research there was a suggested focus on the quality of the 'governance package' that schools/academies could secure through affiliation. It soon became clear that what was being offered was indeed a properly conceived product that would meet the requirements of incorporation. It also became clear that the main provision of such a package was through recommended law firms who had been properly briefed by Co-operative College.

An analysis of the questionnaires indicated that there were high levels of both affiliation and satisfaction with the Co-operative College. It could be argued that what was being analysed was a customer satisfaction survey and that the Co-operative College was providing its clients with a very creditable service. When the next stage of the research, the interviews and websites were explored a less secure picture began to emerge.

The sites were scrutinised for evidence of linkage to the Co-operative College, SCS e.g. logos, relevant hypertext links and explicit statements linking the schools to the Co-operative values.

School / Academy	Type	Logo	Link to SCS	Comments related to SCS and being a Co-operative Trust School
1	RC/ Sec./ Academy	No	No	Statement of catholic values
2	Sec./Academy	Yes	No	Reference to setting up a Pioneer Co-operative Trust. This is not referenced to the Co-operative College or the SCS. There is a Pioneer Loyalty Card with discounts from local businesses, strangely not the Co –op.
3	Sec./Academy	No	No	Reference to being part of a Partnership Trust. Marks and Spencer’s logo is portrayed but not the Co – operative movement. Values are implicit rather than explicit
4	Sec. / Special / Academy	Yes	No	Mention of being a Co-operative Trust School in their introduction, no link to values
5	Sec. / Academy	No	No	No mention
6	Sec. / Academy	Yes	No	Mention made of Co-operative values, then their own strap line. Logo of The Co – operative on bottom with others
7	RC /Sec. / Academy	No	No	Many logos displayed at the bottom of the website including Fair-trade but no mention of the Co-operative College or the SCS. Values are typical catholic values.
8	Sec. / Academy	Yes	No	Clearly articulated through a mind map
9	Sec./Academy	No	No	No obvious linkage to Co-operative identity.. The values stated are the schools own values
10	Sec. / Academy	No	No	Statements of links and testimonials from key Co-operative College staff

Website Analysis (Accessed 17/8/2013)

With one exception the interviews supported the website analysis in suggesting an apparent detachment or at least the lack of connection with the underpinning principles advocated by the Co-operative College and also by the SCS. The staff interviewed at School B was asked what difference does it make to be a Co-operative Trust School. They replied ‘Absolutely nothing’. In an interview at School E I was offered an explanation as to how the idea of being a ‘Co-operative school was communicated to parents: ‘We explain that we are a co-operative just like Waitrose’. In the interview at School A, the headteacher repeatedly moved away from the SCS linkage to an exposition of their own stance. It is also evidenced by the website where the existing school values were overlaid on those promulgated by the Co-operative

College. In a number of websites it was challenging or impossible to find a link to either the values or even identification of the co-operative movement.

This stands in marked contrast to the interview and website of School C. The identification with the Co-operative College and the SCS was evident in their literature, displays in the entrance and of course their website. The Vice-Principal was explicit about the co-operative values and explained how these had been worked through in detail in many aspects of the life of the school. They were the basis of school life, pedagogy and many aspects of the curriculum such as citizenship.

A number of the schools (A, B and D) noted that becoming a Co-operative Trust School had been birthed through the vision and drive of an individual. Several years on, that person was moving to another post or retiring. In all three of these interviews concern was expressed about the co-operative concept being sustained. At School B the engagement with Co-operative College had been driven by a Vice-Principal who had left a year ago. The interviewee noted that since they had left there was very little mention of the new status of the school, the Co-operative values or the engagement with the wider network of SCS schools. The view was expressed that 'It was business as usual'.

A feature of all the interviews was a concern that the local authority was less able to provide the support that had previously been available. There emerged as regret rather than rancour. School A was working hard to retain a partnership with its local authority and included them in the governance of the school. There was also an anxiety expressed about the academy chains such as Ark, Oasis etc. This was not a route that they wanted to go down. They saw their school as a local provision of education and wanted to secure governance specific to their school and locality. The Co-operative route was resonant with this. One respondent noted that: -

“The college does not have a business sponsor and is free from Local Authority control. We have chosen to become a co-operative because the staff, parents and governors believe that the best way to build on a very strong legacy is for all members to be part of governing the college through co-operatives. It makes us part of a family of schools, nationally and internationally, that are co-operatives, sharing a set of values that we believe really matter to the future of our young people”.

As stated previously the Co-operative College establishes a relationship with the school through an initial memorandum of agreement. This is then translated into the articles of governance. These specify the membership of the governing body and areas such as voting rights. This area is very explicit in the discussions with the school. Four out of five of the interviewees were unclear about the nature of the governance. One suggested that recruiting parents as 'members' was not really any different to PTA membership. One website noted that signed up members were entitled to a loyalty card. The link with governance seemed tenuous. There were, however, discounts to be had at a local tyre retailers but ironically not with the local Co-operative food stores.

The emergent themes were that schools wanted to work collaboratively and that many of their existing structures were diminishing as the role of local authorities became reduced. There was a perception that the Co-operative trust route offered another space which was distinctive from that being developed by the academy chains.

A particularly interesting area relates to the espousal of values. The questionnaire explored this area and the responses suggested that this was a matter of considerable importance to headteachers. The Co-operative movement is values-based. These are historically rooted and expressed as follows:

- **Self-help**
Encouraging all within the organisation to help each other, by working together to gain mutual benefits. Helping people to help themselves.
- **Self-responsibility**
To take responsibility for, and answer to, our actions
- **Democracy**
To give our stakeholders a say in the way we run our school
- **Equality**
Equal rights and benefits according to their contribution
- **Equity**
Being fair and unbiased
- **Solidarity**
Supporting each other and those in other co-operatives. (SCS, 2014)

Initially this seemed to be a situation of consensual partnership. The website analysis appears to challenge this. The schools where the websites were explored seemed to have overlap with the values of the co-operative movement rather than an identity with them.

As new models of school organisation emerge there are significant questions to be asked about the detachment of schools from existing democratic processes. Many of the academy chains have centralised governance and for the stakeholders engagement is more akin to contacting the board of directors of a commercial organisation. This is clearly not the model developed by the Co-operative College and its affiliated schools which have dimensions of local engagement, collaboration and accountability at its core. There is still that sense that democracy has moved back a step and education has passed from an electorate to interest groups.

6. Conclusions.

Mention has been made earlier of the burgeoning numbers of schools achieving autonomous status through becoming Co-operative Trust Schools. Further the extended memorandum of agreement that identifies being part of a network of schools under the umbrella of the SCS has only just become established for all categories of linked schools. It is justified to consider the growth of these schools as remarkable but also as being embryonic in a meta context.

The original intention of the research was to focus on governance. It has been concluded that Co-operative College is guiding schools along a 'tried and tested' pragmatic route rather than

a very specific model of governance. It is the assent, in principle at least, to the co – operative values, that is the basis for affiliation and the development of subsequent structures of governance.

It is suggested that what has emerged from this research are five emergent issues germane to Co-operative Trust Schools:

- *Space.* The route generated by the Co-operative College allows schools a pathway into a different space. This is a space not populated by academy chains or fading local authorities but one, which offers opportunities to develop differently and one in which collaboration becomes a possibility. Less convincing is the action of becoming Co-operative Trust schools because of an identification with the movement itself rather than a desire to draw down pragmatic support and to find a space with which they are more comfortable.
- *Place.* Maintained schools have traditionally belonged within local authorities which offered an identity. The affiliation with the SCS and through the development of local networks has reduced the sense of isolation and provided routes and access to resources to negotiate this new educational landscape.
- *Detached democracy.* The emergent governance of Co-operative Trust schools is clearly wedded to local representation. The interviews confirmed that parents and local groups were represented. Interestingly in many cases an organisation was represented on a governing body rather than an individual from that organisation. Such a structure of governance does place accountability and responsibility with special interest groups rather than retain the school within an overall framework of local and national democracy. Put another way unless an individual is part of the governance of the school they have no right of input into its existence or function. The ordinary voter has become potentially detached from having a democratic voice in the local provision of state education at all but the most general levels.
- *Governance.* At the time of writing there is a lack of consistency in the operation of governance. It would appear that most schools surveyed took this area seriously. What was less secure was the role of membership. There was a spectrum manifested from membership participation to one that appeared more akin to that of an ‘old school’ PTA. Two of those interviewed were uncertain as to how representation and stakeholder voice operated.
- *Values.* This is a significant area, which has emerged from the research. It is certainly one that the research indicates would warrant further exploration. The Co-operative College and the SCS stand within the modern co-operative movement which has its roots with the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers which in the mid 1800s established a variety of ventures. The movement has a family of initiatives ranging from banking, retail sales, funeral provision and insurance. All the initiatives achieve coherence around the movement’s clearly stated values. The values are the brand identity of the movement. There are indications of a lack of prominence of these values within the affiliated schools. Few if any seem to be operating in a manner that is discordant with these values. Many surveyed seem to eclipse the Co-operative values with their own. A number of the faith schools surveyed placed a greater emphasis on their existing statements. Values and marketing slogans appear to coalesce in a way that does not always define outcomes.

“We began by addressing the problem and importance of origination, where values schemes are concerned. Here we concluded that it is essential for a

community to understand not only what their values are but where they came from, who ordained them and what it means to distil these principles in every aspect of school life” (Rook, 2010).

It would be disingenuous to critique a sapling for not bearing fruit. In the same way it would be inappropriate to judge the Co-operative College and their linked Trust Schools for being embryonic. Both require considerable husbandry to fulfil their potential yield. Enshrined in their updated memorandum of agreement for use with all institutions becoming Co-operative Trust Schools is the requirement to be involved in their local networks. This certainly begins to align with the aspirations of network governance

A major question must be to ask whether the SCS, as the networking dimension, has sufficient capacity or coherency to undertake the husbandry of its affiliated schools to and facilitate the development of their regional and area networks of schools and academies without such clusters becoming increasingly dissonant with the original template.

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