

The Co-operative Schools Movement in England: Who, where and why.

Abstract

This paper is concerned with the recent growth of the Co-operative Schools Movement (CSM) in education in England. It provides a detailed description of the demography and distribution of co-operative schools and the motivations for becoming a co-operative school. Based on data provided by the Co-operative College (2014) the paper will identify schools' geographical distribution, the particular loadings in terms of primary and secondary institutions, the school populations they served, and the correlation between the political complexions of the local areas within which these schools were located and their decision to follow the co-operative route at that point in time. A key component of our research has been to explore the motivations which encouraged schools to affiliate with the Schools Co-operative Society (SCS) rather than with other forms of trusts and academies. We thus complement the statistical analysis of data with interview data from key figures in the CSM and a consideration of the values base within which the CSM is set.

Introduction

Dominant within the contemporary English schooling system is the valorisation of competitive market discourses. This is of course not unique to England. However, there are some aspects of the Global Educational Reform Movement (GERM) (Sahlberg 2011) that have had particular effects in that country. Education in England has been constructed as being in crisis, both within the media and education policy, and the solution to this supposed crisis has been to draw on ideas from competitive businesses. Hence, it is largely anticipated that schools will act competitively and that headteachers will adopt an entrepreneurial approach. Whilst some collaboration does exist, in order to privilege schools' adaptation to market pressures and the production of 'results', the academies project has sought to draw business into the schooling sector, which has led to a school 'brand' in the form of academy chains (Junemann and Ball 2013; Keddie 2015). Onto this stage, enter the co-operative schools movement (CSM).

The co-operative movement has a long history in England, as elsewhere (see Woodin 2015). Its mid-19th century origins were underpinned by an ethic of mutual aid which suggests that societies are more socially just and more democratic when co-operation rather than competition shape forms of social relations. The ethical values of the International Co-operative Alliance have been at the core of their ventures into, for example, retailing, funeral homes and the insurance sector. Ironically, this movement that is underpinned by a commitment to co-operation and a critique of competition is seemingly thriving in the competitive environment now shaping the English schooling system. Woodin (2015, 9) recently questioned whether: 'co-operative education may prove to be a short-lived phenomenon given the resistance of education systems to previous attempts at reform'. However, whether or not this may prove to be the case, its remarkable growth, as we demonstrate in this paper and as Woodin (2015) noted in relation to the number of schools associated with the Co-operative Society doubling 'year upon year', since 2008, makes it well worth studying. Despite the recent decline in numbers, we want to understand the rapid initial expansion of the movement.

We begin the paper with a discussion of this expansion of the CSM in England, then chart the demography and distribution of co-operative schools. Based on 2014 data obtained from the Co-operative College indicating their geographical distribution, the particular type of schools represented, the school populations they served, and correlations that existed between the political complexions of the local areas within which these schools were located at that time. We then ask: Why was there such a specific expansion and how can we understand and analyse this process and its motivations? We are also interested in what co-operative identity, values and solidarity can offer to schools. This then leads us to our

overall question of whether or not this constitutes a durable, positive turn for socially just schooling in an otherwise regressive moment in educational policy.

In the paper we draw on the spreadsheet data provided by the Co-operative College, mentioned above, documentation provided to schools by the Schools Co-operative Society (SCS) for the transition to co-operative status, and interviews with some key figures in the CSM in England. These sources provide an initial basis upon which to ground an understanding of the principles and values underpinning the growth of this movement, the influences which have been instrumental in shaping it, and the structure of expectations and motivations within which these developments are located.

Background

In 2008 there was only a small network of 10 specialist business and enterprise colleges sponsored by the Co-operative Society in England (Woodin, 2015), but by 2014 there were nearly 800 schools which had become members of the SCS. These included mainly primary and secondary schools, but in some cases also early years institutions and ‘special’ schools. Predominantly this expansion occurred during the 2010-2015 Conservative-led political coalition which explicitly pursued a policy of restructuring the landscape of English educational provision.

Before we look in more detail at these schools, we want to place this development in the context of what has been happening in English schooling in general. Historically, state schools in England have been organised under the auspices of Local Authorities (LAs) which have had responsibility for their resourcing patterns, structure, staffing and overall policies – albeit within general policy frameworks established and run by central government at

Westminster. Since the 1980s this locally run and governed organisation of schools has come under scrutiny and erosion by all Westminster administrations – beginning with the Conservative governments of Margaret Thatcher but continued through the Blair years and to the present day (see Ball 2013; Benn 2012; Gunter 2012 for discussion). It has been this process which has generated the pattern of academies and trusts into which the Co-operative schools predominantly fit. In order to make sense of what sometimes seems like a very confusing system, we provide some background to the differences between academies and trusts. Both trust schools and academies are schools which have changed their forms of governance and their relationships with LAs.

Trust schools remain within the LA as fully maintained schools but have added a charitable trust to their governance structure (Co-operative College 2013a) – hence the term ‘Trust Schools’. As such the governance structure is composed of local stakeholders with experience and expertise to strengthen and support the leadership and governance of the Trust school and therefore help to raise standards. Such trusts can take a variety of forms. It may be a single school which has decided after consultation to add a trust body to its governance structure. Or it may contain groupings of local schools which band together to utilize shared skills and expertise to improve their local offering. For example, a local secondary school and adjacent primary schools may decide to become a trust; or a group of similar schools may come together to become a trust. A good example of the latter was the Sentient Trust (2012) where all (10) of the Devon Special Needs Schools (sic) became one trust. The detail of trust formation and administration can be very complicated (see Brown 2013) but basically trusts remain fully within the LA remit and as such continue to operate,

with some local variations, within national admission procedures, curriculum, pay and employment regulations.

Academies differ from trusts in that they are schools which have severed their direct links to LAs and become free-standing (independent) bodies answerable to, and funded directly through, the DfE at Whitehall. They are also directly accountable to the Secretary of State for Education as part of their funding agreement. Whilst the initial dismantling of the LA governed schooling system begun under Thatcher's 1979 Conservative government, it was the Blair Labour government that introduced City Academies in 2000, the precursor to the current academies and free schools. The arguments used to justify the setting up of these academies were based on the claim that mainstream government schools had failed young marginalised people living in high poverty and deprived areas of England (Gunter and McGinty 2014) and needed to be improved by intensifying competition between schools and by running them like businesses. Schools which were perceived as 'failing' could be forced to become academies. As well as the business community, other organisations that ran successful business models, such as universities, charities and religious bodies, also became sponsors of these schools (Junemann and Ball 2013). The Coalition government which came to office in 2010 continued to expand the academies programme, continuing with the forced 'academisation' of some schools, but with considerable changes in emphasis away from a policy of supporting schools in under-privileged areas, so-called 'struggling' schools, to encourage other schools to become an academy.

What made academy status attractive to many schools was the promise of greater control over their budgets than had previously been the case within the LA and an increase in funding to compensate for the services that they no longer received from the LA. Academies

are expected to follow national guidelines and regulations on selection of their students and remain subject to OFSTED inspections. But these new academies had a number of ‘restrictions’ removed. For example, they are not required to follow the National Curriculum, nor to employ qualified teaching staff, nor to be bounded by national pay and condition agreements. Nonetheless controversy remains over whether the Academy programme has or has not ‘improved standards’ and whether it has led to schools becoming more selective in their intake (Office of the Children’s Commissioner 2013). The outright election of the Conservative Party in 2015, meant that debates over academies and free schools continued to dominate the English education scene. For example, the Conservative Party 2015 election manifesto noted that the Party would ‘turn every failing and coasting secondary school into an academy’. Thus, the SCS emerged on to this education landscape in England within a context of the gradual erosion of the powers of LAs.

The process of becoming a Co-operative school was generally undertaken through the auspices of the SCSⁱ which provides support, advice and regional contacts as schools navigate procedures, including the legal process, of becoming either trusts or academies (Co-operative College 2013). Once becoming a Co-operative school, there is access to a network of other schools with which ‘to share dilemmas and strengths’. Within the SCS model Co-operative Trusts and Academies are expected to adhere to important aspects of the overall Co-operative Society such as a voice for key stakeholder groups and commitment to Co-operative Values and Principles (see below). Unlike many academy ‘chains’ the SCS has worked closely with education unions to ensure agreements can be reached on pay and conditions for teachers working in affiliated Co-operative schoolsⁱⁱ.

Data sources

It was in this general context that the expansion of the CSM occurred and we came to this research through our different paths. Martin was introduced to the CSM as part of a larger project looking at social justice and English schoolingⁱⁱⁱ. That project involved extensive interviews with the principal, other senior administrators, governors, teachers and students in one co-operative academy (see Mills, 2015). Some of the interviews from that project are used here. Ian became involved with the developments as a governor of a Co-operative Trust school. Through these connections and his links with the Co-operative College he was provided with the data spreadsheet for the purposes of this research. He has also become a member of the London and South-East Regional (LASER) Board.

In undertaking the research for this article we utilized a range of data sources which included the numerical analyses based on the Co-operative College spreadsheet 2014. This contained some detailed national data for co-operative schools as of that date. Since then there have been some contractions in the number of schools affiliating with the co-operative structures and in our overall conclusion we address factors which may be combining to account for these later developments.

We also use a range of key documents that schools work with in relation to becoming affiliated to the SCS (Brown 2013; Co-operative College 2013a; 2013b; Gardner et al. 2013). These documents are significant in that they are the texts that are accessed by schools and shared with parents, trustees, governors and staff during the affiliation process.

The key interviews we draw upon here are with a principal of a Co-operative Academy (Tania), a vice-principal from that school (John), a former head of a Co-operative Trust school (Peter), and a regional policy worker for the SCS/CSNET (Nick). These participants all have specific insights into why schools made their decisions to adopt the Co-operative

model. The interviews with Tania and John occurred at different times over an approximate six-month period and were conducted as part of a larger school case study. (Multiple interviews were also conducted with students, parents, governors and teachers from that school – but are not represented here.) Interviews with Peter and Nick were for approximately two hours and covered multiple topics. Only very short segments of these interviews are used in this paper. Martin conducted all of the interviews at the school. Ian conducted the interview with Peter. We interviewed Nick together. All ethical protocols and permissions were obtained for this research.

Where are the Co-operative schools?

In the light of this background it is now possible to spend some time looking at the overall pattern and demography of Co-operative schools. We use data from the 2014 spreadsheet to describe the pattern of co-operative schooling in England at that time and preceding both the General Elections of 2015 and 2017 and subsequent political developments.

Across the whole English school system the 2014 spreadsheet shows there were some 700 co-operative schools affiliated to SCS and a further 94 undertaking the process of ‘implementation’^{iv}. In total, these 790 schools had about 301,000 students/learners on their rolls. If we disaggregate these schools into broad age sectors approximately 590 (74% of the total) were primary schools and over 140 (18%) secondary schools. There were also over 50 (7%) special schools and a small cohort of others, such as middle schools or 6th Form Colleges (less than 1%).

[INSERT Fig. 1]

Regarding the above discussion of trust and academy status it is important to note the dominance of the trust model amongst Co-operative schools. Of the 790 schools only 50 (approx.) had opted to follow the academy route whilst the remaining 740 (92%) were trust schools. Within the 5% subtotal of academies nearly two thirds were secondary schools and the remaining third primaries/special schools. The remaining 3% of schools were unspecified in the spreadsheet.

[INSERT Fig. 2]

The geographical distribution of co-operative schools is achieved by plotting the schools in accordance with the OFSTED regions. We then find the following: South West 260 (33% of total); North East 175 (22%); Central West 155 (20%); South East 100 (13%); Central East 55 (7%); North West 40 (5%) [NB. Totals and percentages have been rounded.]

[INSERT Fig. 3]

We also analysed the distribution according to the political party affiliations of the constituencies within which the schools were located. This relates to the situation in December 2014 prior to the May 2015 General Election. From the data provided on the spreadsheet approximately 360 schools (50% of reported total) were located in Conservative constituencies; 230 (32%) Labour and 120 (17%) Liberal-Democrat. Following both the 2015 and 2017 elections these figures are now quite likely to be very different. Nonetheless they represent a political distribution which is widely dispersed and warrants a more detailed interpretation than we have space for in this paper. For example, how does this compare to national patterns of constituency seats more generally? Is there a difference in the distribution of co-operative schools according to political party or does it

merely reflect the relative proportions of different political party constituencies? How does the resource base of LAs influence their decision-making?

[INSERT Fig. 4]

Another strand we were interested in was the pattern of OFSTED gradings the schools received. When we looked at the OFSTED grades using the formal hierarchy of judgements current at the time, we found the following broad pattern: of the total schools (primary, secondary, special and other all taken together and figures rounded) 70 (9%) were designated as *Outstanding*; 470 (60%) designated *Good*; 105 (13%) *Satisfactory*; 110 (14%) *Requires Improvement*; and only 28 or less than 4% were in the *Inadequate* category.

[INSERT Fig. 5]

This set of data and the descriptive account we have provided are revealing and reminds us how intriguing the growth and topography of the CSM has been. Clearly there are many questions which only a fuller analysis would reveal such as, the detailed comparisons between co-operative schools and other comparable institutions, the geographical spread of the results and their mapping against socio-economic data. Without such a detailed analysis we also cannot deduce from these patterns the extent to which school gradings have been moving since becoming co-operatives nor indeed the extent to which their OFSTED gradings may have motivated schools to pursue the co-op path. Finally, we do not yet know what impact the new OFSTED inspection frameworks, the changes in the grading patterns for GCSE and procedures for forced academization will have on future trajectories of existing or prospective co-operative schools. We also need to know much more about the causes and

motivations which generated the upsurge in interest amongst schools in pursuing the co-operative path and the more recent contractions to which we have referred and to which we shall briefly return.

Whilst we acknowledge the need for further research, what these data do demonstrate is that, in 2014: 790 schools (primary, secondary and other), with approximately 310 000 of the then almost 8 million students being educated in the 21,836 government funded schools (DfE 2014), were associated with the CSM; that while this association was primarily as a trust school, there was also engagement with the academies movement; that co-operative schools could be found across the country; that they were predominantly in Conservative constituencies, although this represented 50% of the co-operative schools, those in Labour *and* Liberal Democrat constituencies also came to approximately 50% of the total; and that they run the OFSTED gamut of gradings from 'outstanding' to 'inadequate' (although there were very few in this latter category). Taken together these data indicate that the phenomena of the co-operative schools' movement in England is well worth studying and in particular the motivations for schools to go down the co-operative path. In the analysis of Co-operative College documentation and our key personnel interviews which follows, it is apparent that co-operative values have played a key role in attracting school personnel to this model and in convincing staff of the merits of going down this route.

Becoming a co-operative school

We next draw on a range of documents provided to schools by the SCS to assist them in the process of becoming a co-operative school. These documents (cited above) detail the legal procedures that need to be completed, consider various potential problems that can occur in the transition to becoming a co-operative school, and outline the commitments that the

SCS has made in relation to maintaining teacher wages and qualifications and on-going commitment to the SCS. As we have already noted there currently exists some fluidity in the relationship between the SCS and CSNET (see endnote i). In this context it remains unclear as to whether the affiliation documentation and procedures will remain the same if there is a shift from SCS to CSNET. Furthermore if this is accompanied by a more regionally focused pattern of involvement will this in turn lead to more adaptable, regionally oriented models of school recruitment and involvement. Central to school affiliation documentation is the expectation that those within the schools need to share co-operative values and principles. These values are formally stated 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.

(Co-operative College 2013c)

These values possess both important symbolic and practical importance and align with the International Co-operative Alliance (<https://www.co-op.ac.uk/co-operative-values-and-principles>) statement on co-operative identity, and apply to every form of co-operative enterprise, agricultural, retailing, manufacturing, services, and the whole range of activities not just schools. As well as underpinning the organisation of the school, they are also meant to shape the type of education received by students. According to the SCS website^v ‘Co-operative schools are about developing a balanced set of values that will help young people become the good citizens our society needs’. It is suggested that there are three key areas that need to be focussed upon: creating the systems, structures and processes; embedding co-operative learning practices; and ensuring the active participation of all interests (Gardner et al. 2013).

‘Co-operative Values’ are thus an important element in decisions to align with the CSM at the very start of their membership process and they remain central to the development of a school’s co-operative identity. Whilst the first two values (*Self-help* and *Self-responsibility*) have strong individualistic, neo-liberal associations, in a co-operative setting they are usually interpreted as all within an organisation helping each other for the ‘mutual benefit of all’ and being responsible for one’s actions, for instance, impacting upon the environment. *Democracy* relates to ensuring that all within a community have a voice in matters that impact upon them. *Equality* and *Equity* are based on a ‘rights’ discourse of ensuring that all have access to fair and just treatment *and* that difference is recognised and valued. Finally, *Solidarity* encourages those within the co-operative movement to work together, regionally, nationally and globally to support each other and to further the values of the co-operative movement more generally. Specific examples of school activities can be found in Gardner et al. (2013)

The SCS website indicates that there are also a set of principles which are to determine the ways in which the values are to be translated into action. These include, 'voluntary and open membership', which suggests, for instance, that schools should not be forced into becoming a Co-operative Academy under new government mandates. Where conflicts arise over such issues the question of power becomes dominant and can conflict directly with co-operative democratic principles and decision-making protocols. The principle of 'democratic member control' is precisely intended to ensure that schools develop inclusive decision-making practices. 'Democracy' is of course a contested term (see, for example, Mills and McGregor 2014), and the extent to which schools affiliated with the SCS could be called democratic will vary. Other important principles include, 'autonomy and independence', 'co-operation amongst co-operatives' and 'concern for community'. These principles indicate the freedom that schools will have from their 'sponsor' in contrast to other academies, as well as the care they are expected to demonstrate for their counterparts in other co-operative schools and the local and global community.

The question of 'values' has a particular salience in relation to the current development of co-operative schools. However, whilst schools may state that one of the reasons why they chose the co-operative route is because the co-operative values already chimed well with their existing values and principles, it is much more demanding to translate these formally stated values into practice. The emerging literature in relation to co-operative schools provides evidence of the struggles and complexities of these processes (see for example, Davidge 2013; Mills 2015; Woodin 2012, 2013, 2015). Discussions of democracy, equality and membership do not necessarily sit comfortably alongside conventional patterns of state schools with their hierarchical patterns of organisation and leadership (Fielding and Moss 2011). Similarly, trying to infuse these values into curriculum, pedagogy and assessment

patterns require considerable determination and commitment. This is particularly true in the light of the increasingly dominant role of government directed notions of content and standards as expressed in OFSTED guidelines. Even within schools there will be heterogeneous communities whose orientations to the 'meanings of values' will have quite diverse inflections but whose views will need to be fully 'voiced'.

As in many areas 'context is everything' and the nature of what it will mean to translate values into practice/s will take quite diverse forms and trajectories. The handbook *Your Co-operative Trust: Making it Work* (Gardner et al. 2013) provides many examples of the range of ways in which schools commit to developing their orientations and working practices. However, these commitments are highly demanding in a context where government and OFSTED expectations upon schools are already at a high level and lead to 'high stakes' consequences.

These issues may come into quite specific focus if a school falls foul of central or local government expectations. The procedures entailed in any process of forced 'academisation' pay little attention to questions of democracy, transparency and accountability. This has led to problems in the governance of schools being 'forced' into academy school structures. Such issues become even more pressing for co-operative schools which are grounded specifically on presumptive democratic values.

A recent political intervention has thrown into sharp relief dilemmas involved in questions of values by raising the issue as to the extent to which co-operative values can sit alongside the current government's introduction of the notion of 'British Values' and the broader *Prevent Strategy* within which this is located (Richardson 2015). One example highlights some of the potential tensions in this area. Co-operative values are explicitly orientated to

the embodiment and strengthening of patterns of international and global awareness. Indeed, these values and principles which schools have adopted are internationally agreed and are common to Co-operatives across the world. The debates to be held between these and 'British Values' will have important ramifications for trusts, governing bodies and whole school communities. The 2016 referendum result on Brexit and subsequent debates underline some of the potential tensions in this area, for example, regarding the meaning of British Values if one or more of the current administrations which comprise the UK decided to push for greater autonomy or independence! Such issues are so central to meaning and purposes of co-operative social and educational relations that we regret not being able to pursue them more fully in this paper. As has been shown they are certainly fundamental in the motivations which people bring to their involvement in co-operative schools.

Why become a co-operative school?

In this section we explore the reasons why schools might have chosen to affiliate with the co-operative movement. We draw on interview data collected from, at the time of interview: Tania, principal of a large Co-operative Academy and John from the same school; Peter, former head teacher of a Co-operative Trust; and Nick, Director of a regional network of co-operative schools. We were particularly interested in the motivations which encouraged schools to affiliate with the SCS rather than with other forms of Trusts and Academies.

Woodin (2012) has suggested that the motivations for affiliating with the Co-operative Society range 'from a core group which has used co-operation to improve education and participation, to one that is more loosely associated with the concept, perhaps seeing co-operation as means to defend existing ways of working'. This range of motivations has been captured by our own interview data. Where schools were in communities which already had

thriving community links or where schools had values which they wished to maintain, the possibility of becoming a Co-operative Trust or a Co-operative Academy was seen as a positive option. The SCS, our interviewees indicated, has provided opportunities for schools which want to access additional freedoms and funding which they see as available in the academy model but via a more congenial route than either following the business or faith sponsored routes. However, recent policy changes may well have dramatically changed this landscape, which is an issue to which we shall return in the conclusion.

Our interview data suggest that schools have embarked on this movement to co-operative status with a variety of diverse motivations, ranging from the pragmatic to the inspirational. It has also become clear that not all populations have identical and/or coherent images of what co-operative schooling might mean. As we have seen above and as other researchers have found this is particularly evident in relation to the values which are assumed to underpin co-operative schools and the translation of these into educational practice.

Peter, who came to be the CEO of a Co-operative Trust school and was an early member of the SCS, saw the co-operative movement as a way of enhancing what he saw as the radical purpose of schooling. As the Director of School Improvement in a secondary college he was convinced that schooling could be done differently and more democratically. For example, he stated that:

I knew it had to be part of a local network, a regional network, a national network; and then kind of had some international, because we wanted world-class kind of practice.

He saw the school's involvement in the piloting of the trust model as an opportunity to explore working with the SCS, which at that stage he indicated had not acquired 'a lot of traction'. In exploring the legislation for trust schools he indicated that 'There wasn't that much in it to say that "you couldn't run a school as a co-operative"'. Consequently, he approached the SCS and 'joined' the school up. The school he was involved with was the first of ten Trust schools. Becoming a Co-operative Trust had not been a straight -forward task. It took two years, but had deepened the school's commitment to the model. Peter told us:

...we took our time, if you like, and kind of dug in deep, to hang on, until we got the model that we wanted approved. ...when we eventually established the Trust, the Trust was made up of a representative from the Co-operative Group and a representative from the Co-operative College.

For Peter, the acceptance by the school and community of these Co-operative representatives on the trust derived from their support for co-operative values. However, he also indicated that for many in the community it was not the values *per se*, but what these values represented for the children of the community that made them attractive:

And I think that that kind of summarised the value of the community, saying, "Well, this is what we have always been about. You term them as 'co-operative values'; that's fine. Tell us it's part of a wider movement; that's fine. But this is who we are, as humans. And why would we want this for our children?" So it was almost like a righteousness indignation, I would say, within the community of saying, "Well, this is what we are about together." But I guess the community was kind of siloed at that

point. So this is the first opportunity that those different generations got to have dialogue about what they wanted for their young people, all the way across in their community, and the political dialogue.

Whilst Peter had been at the forefront of the trust movement, the academies movement had well and truly begun by the time that Tania's school became a Co-operative Academy. However, the Co-operative values were again the great attraction for her school. Tania, the principal of Meridian College with approximately 1200 students that converted to academy status in 2011 and was one of the first Co-operative Academies (see Mills 2015 for further details), indicated that she was herself not supportive of the academies movement:

My personal politics have never been in favour (of academies). I don't believe in the academy system, which sounds a contradiction in terms (laughs); because I do believe in a State education system, which is in the interests of all. I don't believe in this, in the privatisation of education.

However, there were two key reasons why she had supported the conversion into a Co-operative Academy: that the school was in danger of being forced into becoming an academy not of their own choosing as the result of a poor assessment by OFSTED; and that the co-operative values aligned with those of the school. Tania indicated that in their considerations of becoming a co-op academy:

It made sense to us that there is a protective factor being a co-operative in this kind of sea of corporateness; that it is about the client group and it's about the people and the institution, rather than about whoever owns it or runs it

Indeed, she argued that the school's prior commitment to social justice had helped to embed the values across the school through what they called a process of 'Brighton rocking'^{vi} them into all areas of the school. She indicated that many of the teachers, governors and indeed the school administration, indicated that they were only interested in becoming an academy if it was a co-operative one. A vice-principal, John, from the school noted:

And the staff knew that it would reflect the values of (previous name of school) and they also equally knew if we didn't make our own movement and convert ourselves, we would be putting ourselves at risk of being taken over and we didn't want that.

The advantages of being a co-operative school were seen as: having autonomy within the Co-operative group of schools in contrast with the homogenising practices of many chains; teachers were to be paid national award wages and they would only employ qualified teachers, in contrast to other academies which were 'liberated' from such expectations; the networking opportunities available with a set of schools that subscribed to similar values; and the values themselves. Tania and others in the school indicated that the teachers and community only supported the academisation of the school because it was going to be a Co-operative Academy. There was also the strong element that focused on student leadership that appealed to the staff. Tania stated:

We also felt that in this area where young people don't see what their role/place is, that leadership was going to be one of the ways that would engage and enable them to see that they had a voice; and it could be a positive voice; and that they could be part of something.

The commitment to students was evident in the way in which they included them in the process of becoming an academy. One of the vice-principals had taken a group of students to visit other schools and to a co-operative school conference held at the then Institute of Education in London. Tania stated:

They met students from other schools. They came back. They then spent another day where they worked out what leadership structures they wanted and they thought would be right for us. And that's where we went.

The extent to which the school had taken on board the co-operative values was evident in, for example, student interviews, in the incorporation of young people's voices in all aspects of the school (including being consulted on the employment of teachers and the new principal), in their real life 'community benefit' projects, and the naming of the school communities (houses) with the co-operative values: Self-help; Self-responsibility; Democracy; Equality; Equity and Solidarity.

Nick, the network policy director in one English region, was responsible for developing and supporting co-operative education in that region, and also helping to develop networks in other regions. He was a former headteacher and OFSTED inspector. Whilst a headteacher he had become committed to the principles of co-operation when he was developing closer relationships between his school and the local community:

So I became, if you like, Chair of a regeneration partnership, looking at a town called (Oakwood)... and it kind of started with an interest in "if school is a central and pivotal feature in a community"? ... And the only solution for me has always been co-operation; people working together. You know, the transaction is not a financial

one, you know, it is an intellectual, it is a professional, it is a public service work, so that's where it comes from.

It was this commitment that led to him coming to work with the SCS to support schools becoming affiliated and to develop networks of support. In response to why schools were attracted to the co-operative model, and whether or not some schools took this up as a safe option rather than being forced to become an academy, he replied:

What was the link between forced and the sort of place of safety syndrome? That was always a false argument and one, to be honest, the core team of regional managers who were working for the College's advisors to schools and helped them through the process - we stayed away from that, to say, 'It is not for that. You actually need to go back to the core purpose. This is actually - you believe in this stuff and we don't.' ...We were quite clear that we didn't want to work with or encourage people beyond a certain point to say, 'Go in this direction.' It was unethical to do so. So, in co-operative terms, either you could see very simply - and governors and Head teachers and their staff and the kids and the families could say, 'Actually, this is what this is about. We all want to have a say.'

Thus, as with Tania's school, whilst there was sometimes a 'fear factor' in not wanting to be forced down an academy route that was unattractive to them, it was the values which appealed to many teachers and that were central to the decision to become affiliated with the co-operative society. He went on to say:

And the reason for the growth is actually because we had - I would say it's because the College at the time had the insight to say, "The values and ethos and principles in

this model are well-suited to public service schools. Right. That's one. That resonated. People would get it, yeah, quite easily.

In addition, and unlike some of the academy chains, the people within the co-operative movement were also seen as being highly credentialed in terms of experience and connections to education:

But secondly, there was a team of people who were really credible. ... I have been involved in helping and co-managing and co-leading quite significant pieces of money or investment or development, and large-scale stuff ... some of the other guys, I mean, they have been assistant director of a local authority and they knew planning and law and governance and education. So you stand up with an audience of people who are receptive and they are persuaded that, "These guys, what a team. This is great. I want to be with this. I don't want to be with something that is maybe less powerful."

These excerpts from extensive interviews with Peter, Tania, John and Nick underscore that the moves towards affiliation with the co-operative society, at least in their eyes, has been driven by the co-operative values and that what has been 'out of the ordinary' has been the nature of the debate which underpinned the great growth in this group of schools at that time.

Questions and Problematics

Although, as we indicate in the introduction, Woodin (2012) argued that co-operative schools might 'offer new directions,' some have previously argued that the Co-operative sponsoring of schools may well represent the co-operative movement's complicity in the

neo-liberal education project (see Thorpe 2011 for discussion). Some have claimed that the entry of the co-operative movement into schooling has been a form of 'privatisation by the nice guys' (Woodin and Fielding 2013, 180). It remains to be seen whether the core philosophy of 'co-operation' and its attendant values can pose a challenge to current neo-liberal agendas in English schooling, and to resist the 'dictatorship of no alternative' to these agendas (Fielding and Moss 2011; Mills 2015). Nonetheless our direct experiences in various co-operative schools and those reported in this volume and elsewhere indicate that in some locations this move can open up spaces for pursuing more socially just agendas within schools. Even in the context of the overall national decline in co-operative school numbers there remain areas, notably the South-East, within which consolidation and expansion continue. Similarly, some point to the possibilities of expansion into larger metropolitan areas as they confront increasing resource crises.

However, growth was not to go completely unheeded. The 2015 UK General Election radically changed the situation regarding the co-operative education project given the confidence the election generated for a neo-liberal, inegalitarian agenda. With an overall majority, the Conservative Party confidently stated that it would 'continue to expand academies, free schools, studio schools and university technical colleges'. The consequence of which would be at least 500 new free schools over the next parliament and, as indicated earlier, all 'failing and coasting secondary school(s)' would become academies. The Election of 2017 has rendered these policies much more uncertain. A resurgent Labour Party with a strong manifesto^{vii}, continued lack of clarity regarding the Brexit process, and a fragile Parliamentary majority now make the Conservative education agenda much less assured. The reintroduction of grammar schools has been (temporarily?) shelved and the

academisation and 'free schools' policies are less secure. As Warwick Mansell (2017/2018), former Guardian education journalist, continues to demonstrate on his blog, academies and free schools are becoming increasingly less secure in their funding and legitimacy.

Nevertheless, the overall 'austerity' agenda and its consequential financial restructuring and cuts, in terms of general educational and local authority funding, within which the co-operative schools sit, are continuing to have significant but as yet incalculable impacts on public schooling (Institute of Fiscal Studies 2017).

Alongside these developments is a declining number of schools registered with the SCS. The scale and nature of this decline is currently based partly on speculation and personal experiences rather than statistical evidence. The combined impact of political pressures, stringent inspection regimes and relentless erosion of school budgets at national and local levels appear to be making schools increasingly wary of following what they see as possibly risky routes. Such pressures underline Woodin's (2015, 9) reservation mentioned earlier about co-operative education becoming 'a short-lived phenomenon'. Clearly only focussed research and analysis will make possible an understanding of why some schools are moving away from the co-operative model whilst other areas may continue to consolidate their involvement.

Furthermore, the 2016 Brexit referendum on UK membership of the EU continues to cast a long shadow with consequences for a wide range of educational and social scenarios. The increasingly inequitable, differentiated and combative nature of global under/development and politics also pose stark questions for the 'values base' upon which co-operative education is grounded. These increasing political and economic developments cumulatively increase pressure on the co-operative movement in general and for co-operative

educational provision but they also open up future possibilities of positive transformations. Possible resurgences of radical social movements, on regional and local bases as well as national, may create spaces within which co-operative principles, practices and values may find wider opportunities for progressive development. This paper has illustrated that there is the urgent need for some properly funded, trans-national policy research to analyse past experiences and to use this to ground movements in the future. There are undoubtedly turbulent waters ahead at the local, national, regional and global levels. Only with a secure research foundation will it be possible to evaluate co-operative education practices and experiences collectively and collaboratively and to ensure that they can make a powerful and dynamic contribution to the social and educational architecture of the future.

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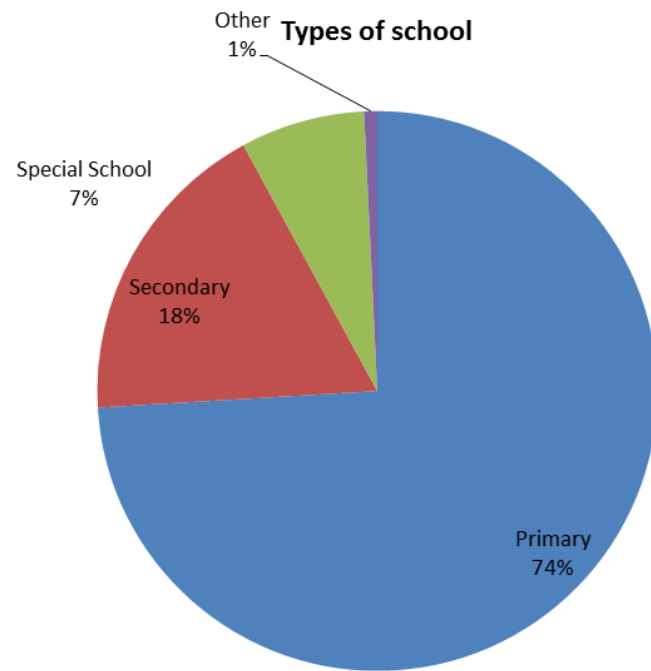


Fig. 1 Types of Co-operative School 2014

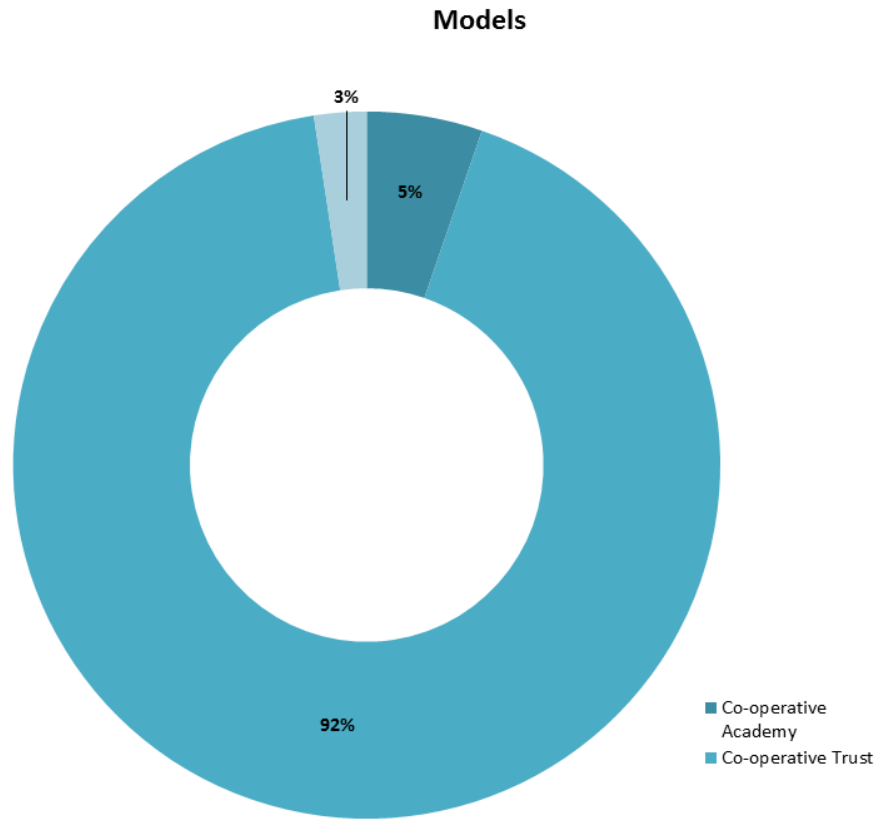


Fig. 2 Models of Co-operative schools 2014

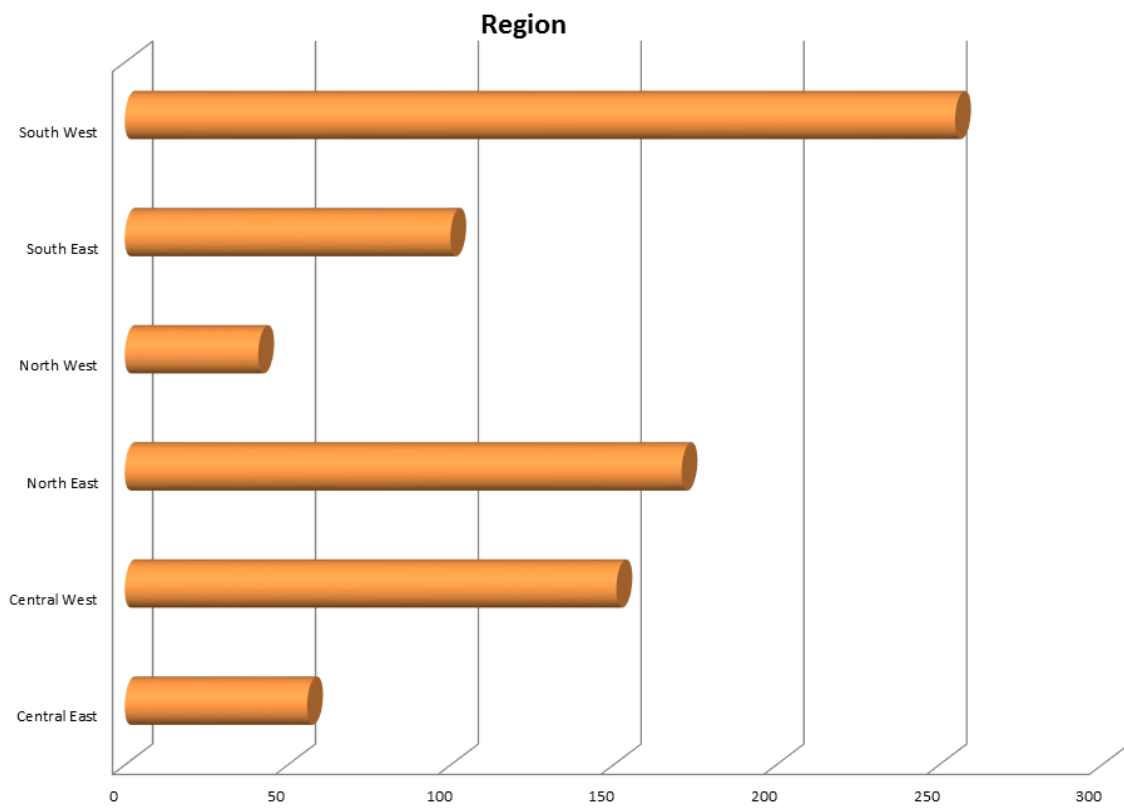


Fig. 3 Distribution of Co-operative Schools according to Region 2014

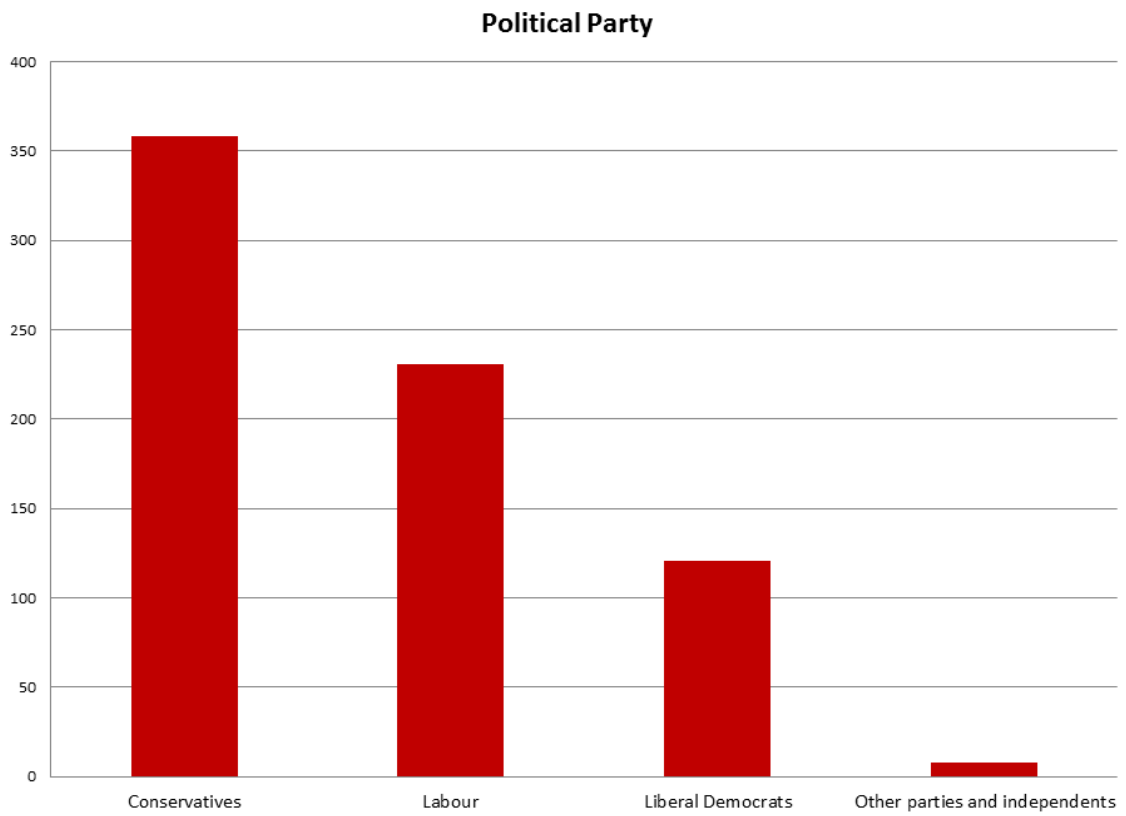


Fig. 4: Political constituencies where co-operative schools located in 2014

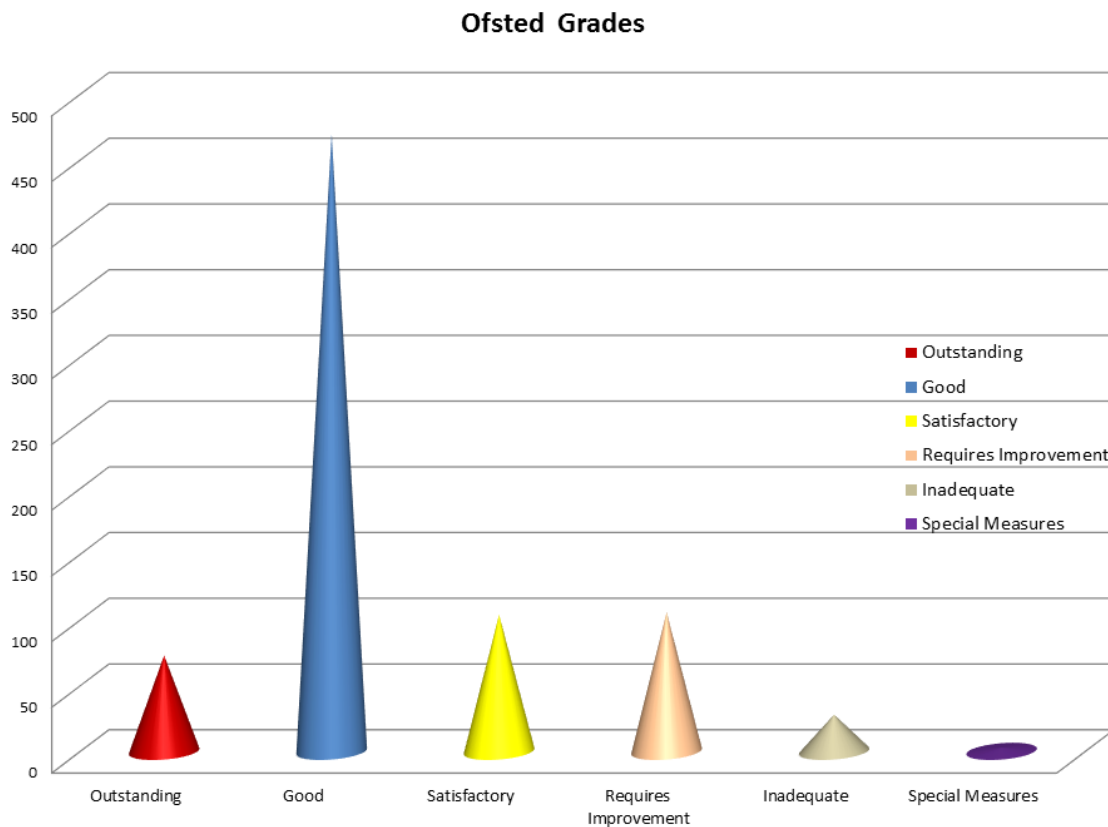


Fig. 5 OFSTED grading as at 2014

ⁱ Currently there exists a somewhat fuzzy boundary between the SCS and a newly emergent body called CSNET (Co-operative Schools Network). This ambivalence is likely to be resolved in the near future. However, for the purposes of this paper we shall continue to refer to the model which is in place at the point of our final draft (Feb 2018).

ⁱⁱ The educational researcher and journalist Warwick Mansell has produced powerful evidence of many Academy chains and sponsors failing to undertake appropriate negotiations with unions and professional associations, and/or meeting agreed protocols. (Mansell, 2017)

ⁱⁱⁱ Martin would like to acknowledge the support of an Australian Research Council Future Fellowship (FT110100203) that facilitated this research.

^{iv} Indications are that since that time numbers may have shrunk below 500. We return to this issue in the conclusion to the paper.

^v <http://co-operativeschools.coop/about/values-and-principles/>

^{vi} Brighton rock is a stick of confectionary with the word 'Brighton' appearing throughout the whole stick.

^{vii} For example, Labour's 2017 (Labour Party 2017) manifesto committed the Party to working with the co-operative movement to double the size of the co-operative sector.