

# The Prospects in Schools

by Dr. J.R.W. Hill

*This is an amended copy of a paper prepared by Dr. Hill for a Co-operative Learning Conference at the University of Exeter in April 1988.*

*A brief survey is provided of the prospects for learning about Co-operatives in schools. A distinction is made between the 'content' of learning about Co-operative organisations and the "process" skills of learning co-operatively. The environment, or "context" for co-operative learning is also examined. It is argued that knowledge about Co-operatives should be acquired through co-operative activity. On balance, the current circumstances are not particularly favourable although there are some hopeful signs of improvement.*

Is "co-operative learning" in schools predominately a social process, is it an emerging multi-disciplinary subject, or is it the central pillar of a utopian community?

This paper surveys the possibilities and concludes each section with a summary - school report fashion - of the progress being made by co-operative learning in the education system.

First, as far as the process of co-operative learning is concerned there is a long-established research tradition reaching back over the decades. People engaged in classroom investigations, and in applied social research such as Aronson, Deutsch, De Vries and most notably the brothers Johnson (1975, 1987) have devised many tactics to encourage co-operative learning in schools. Their methods which can be applied to almost any area of content, include: setting mutual (joint) goals; sharing materials and information; devising interlocking, constructive roles and tasks; monitoring and shaping conversation patterns; setting up systems of support and reward; and creating competition between mixed ability teams in order to achieve inter-dependence across attainment levels.

Although much of this work has its origins in the United States there have been similar lines of activity in this country.

## **Recent Initiatives in Britain**

Indeed the promise of a more co-operative approach to learning was held out until recently by the MSC's enthusiasm for "social skills". It was said that

organisations need people with co-operative skills in order to increase the integration of specialist departments, and to improve the quality of relationships with customers. Individuals would benefit from co-operative learning activities because they would learn respect for others' views. The result would be a rise in the standards of personal development because people would become less egotistical and more aware of their own potential for contributing to group work.

Another expression of the value of co-operative behaviour comes from the field of management education where there has been a surge of publications concerning teamwork in business organisations (Belbin, (1981); Hastings et al (1986), and Nolan (1987)). Earlier work on management problem solving by Blake and Mouton (1961), and cited by the Johnsons, claimed that competition biases a person's perceptions and the comprehension of viewpoints and positions of other individuals, whereas co-operation achieves improved communication and performance.

Focussing on a slightly earlier stage in the human life cycle, the recently established *National Project on Problem Solving 5-13* commits itself to the prospect that: "much of the activity . . . will involve children in group-work where co-operation is necessary and communication skills are developed". This National Project is funded principally by the Department of Trade and Industry, with further support from the Comino Foundation and CRS Ltd. Residential courses for Project teachers are held at the Co-operative College.

For 6-9 year olds and 9-13 year olds the Woodcraft Folk have produced resource packs which use co-operative learning activities to improve international understanding and mutual respect between groups.

There are indeed many progressive fields of education and training which involve collaborative project work, group discussion, and experiential learning.

So a school report on the achievements of "co-operative learning" might read:

*"has fair potential, but needs constant encouragement"*

### **Knowledge-in-Print**

When it comes to content there is an impressively burgeoning literature on Co-operative organisations. This literature ranges from the popular and gritty (The Weller Way, McDonald, 1986) to the scholarly and esoteric.

There are several historical studies which include some medium dry accounts of the former achievements of Retail Co-operative Societies (no names - no

pack drill!). The mind is, however, engaged in a higher gear by Hornsby's paper "The Discourse of Co-operation in Britain 1886-1986".

Archival material such as is held in the libraries of the Co-operative Union Limited, the Co-operative Wholesale Society and the Co-operative College provides an abundance of sources for the serious scholar. Moreover, the pleasures of past times are celebrated in publications which are nostalgic (The Pit Village and the Store), idiosyncratic (Todd's Roses and Revolutionists) and philosophical (Co-operative Principles: Today and Tomorrow, Watkins 1986). The last work links specific, practical dilemmas facing Co-operatives over the years to their current and future challenges. (This paper follows Watkins' convention that Co-operation (big C) refers to Co-operative movements, organisations, values, etc; whereas co-operation (small c) refers to co-operative behaviour).

On the international scene there are several accounts of the miracle of Mondragon; there is also Earle's recent book on the Italian Co-operative Movement. A more functional and utilitarian set of materials is available in the ILO's MATCOM training manuals, designed for use in many countries: these have such clear designs and themes that they would need but little adaption for schools.

#### *Rich Variety - but not for Schools*

Nearer home women's voices are strong and clear in the accounts of the Co-operative Women's Guild Centenary History (Gaffin and Thoms - 1983), and Women in Control - the account of Fakenham enterprises by Wajcman (1983).

If reassurance is ever required that Co-operatives can be commercially single minded a glance at a recent issue of "Co-operative Farming Business" will pick out news of groups intensely involved in the marketing of hops, barley, seed potatoes, crayfish; and salad packs - for Sainsbury's.

There are numerous case studies of Worker Co-operatives available from the Co-operatives Research Unit of the Open University including, while food is in mind, Macfarlane's (1987) account of Suma, the wholefoods distributor. In the Worker Co-operatives sector there is also a big selection of set-one-up-yourself manuals, notably from ICOM (eg Macfarlane, 1987). Much of the material on Co-operative businesses illustrates the value and relevance of co-operative skills.

Even a rapid review indicates a rich assortment of knowledge-in-print concerning Co-operatives. Despite this, not much has been designed for

young people at school. The handful of exceptions include the Co-operative Studies Manual (1988) prepared during the Sheffield LEA project at the Co-operative College, the COBIS manual edited by Wade from Portsea Island Co-op, and the Woodcraft Folk's packs already mentioned. The pioneering work by Elisabeth Bray on mini-co's should also be acknowledged.

Overall, a report on the content aspect of co-operative learning might read:

*"has considerable potential, but rarely turns up for school"*

### **The Context for Co-operative Learning**

If that view seems a little pessimistic the context for co-operative learning and Co-operative education is distinctly unpromising. On one hand there are new opportunities in syllabus development. A few years ago whoever would have anticipated a cross-certification arrangement between RSA, with its commitment to education for capability, and selected GCSE subjects? But on the other hand the education system is in many respects divided and confused. School teachers are weary from marking GCSE assignments and have, perhaps, little spare capacity for taking up new initiatives. The National Curriculum seems to give more encouragement to subject specialisation than to the kind of cross-disciplinary work represented by Co-operative studies.

A blunt warning against optimism poses this question, and provides an answer:

What are the prospects for promoting co-operative learning in secondary and tertiary education from the national political level or through the central educational bodies? On the evidence the answer is 'very few'. Neither of the major political parties are likely to promote a change. The primacy of the goal of individual gains from schooling is entrenched in the Labour Party's promotion of "equality" and in the Conservative Party's concern with choice, standards and "liberty". (Houlton 1986).

In an important landmark book on Schools/Industry initiatives (Jamieson and Lightfoot, 1982) the TUC and Trade Unions receive unfashionably fair treatment, the CBI gets due acknowledgement but the Co-operative Movement might never have existed.

Another omen is in the findings, from Kutnick's (1981) research into primary school children's views of the political context, in particular their understanding of the concept of leadership. By and large their experience of "authority relations" in schools was founded on hierarchy and constraint - poor preparation for democratic roles.

A report on the context for co-operative learning could say that it:

*"has an unhappy background, and suffers from parental neglect"*

### **Development**

An important skill in co-operative activity, however, is collectively to identify the strongest footholds in the face of adversity. In spite of an unfavourable context there is idealism among the "Blue Peter" generation. The public response to the famine in Ethiopia and the initiative of Bob Geldof's Band Aid was concrete evidence of goodwill and social concern waiting to be tapped.

Among school teachers there is yearning for a more optimistic view of human potential than that which is reflected in the tail lights of the 'Starship Enterprise'. There may be a source of strength in the reminiscences of older people who can still recall communities in which Co-operatives were of central importance. Business studies alone will never provide a wide enough heading to encompass the experience of Co-operation. But practical learning about businesses of any kind, in schools and colleges, necessitates co-operative behaviour because of the size of group involved and the need for 'turn-taking' to provide experience of different roles.

### **Competition and Co-operation**

One of the problems which needs to be tackled by teachers (and Co-operative activists) is that the operational mode switches from co-operation to competition with changes in the organisational hierarchy. Within an operational context Co-operation is a goal directed activity. Hornsby has highlighted the crucial role of the Co-operative Union in controlling the endemic competition and rivalry between neighbouring Co-operative Societies in the late 19th Century. The Union itself, as a trade association, is at one level in competition with other similar organisations such as the Mail Order Traders' Association and yet, at a higher level co-operates with its rivals within the Retail Consortium. One wonders whether young people would understand and appreciate the need and necessity of rivals co-operating with each other or whether a world of working compromises would be accepted given the prevalence of entrenched political positions.

### **Conclusion**

If progress is to be made, one important step for co-operative learning is to give increasingly wide recognition in syllabii and schemes of work to both the process and content aspects simultaneously.

It would be a tragedy if Co-operative Studies were taught by didactic means using incentives based on individual competition achievements in examinations.

It would be very sad if co-operative learning activities were used simply to promote the dominant capitalist model of business enterprise. If the context for Co-operative education looks grim, this need not discourage a widespread flowering of local experimental initiatives. After all, Co-operatives are hardy plants which do sometimes thrive in harsh climates.

It is important to decide what unit of co-operation to work on in order to achieve a resonance between co-operative process, Co-operative content, and community context. In the absence of state encouragement and without much sign of enthusiasm by national curriculum influencing bodies it is necessary to improvise a context which adds strength to small-scale local projects. If local education authorities are not able to provide leadership and support in Co-operative learning then schools with Co-operation "in the motto" might need to form their own national federation.

### **References**

Full details may be obtained from the author.

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