

Co-operation, Learning and Co-operative Values: Contemporary issues in education, edited by Tom Woodin

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This book is very apposite since it captures the sense of a period when there has been a renewed interest in cooperative education in the English educational context. A number of contributors point out that this has been generated to a considerable extent by a rightward lurch in educational policy and a governmental espousal of a rampant competitiveness in the dynamics of schooling. In order to survive in these straitened circumstances, schools have been impelled and encouraged to enter into competitive relationships with each other.

What this book illustrates is that there is an alternative route that schools can follow, namely the road of cooperation. The 13 chapters in Woodin's edited reader include academic articles on the philosophical, political, and historical analyses of cooperative values. They locate these analyses within the experiences of working within cooperative institutions and also place them within a historical and, to some extent, international context. This international aspect is most clearly represented in the article by the late Professor MacPherson (Chapter 13), to whose life and work this book is generously dedicated. Taken as a whole, the book illustrates many different aspects of contemporary schooling, but above all it reflects that particular commitment to a set of values that are cooperative rather than competitive in their orientation.

The first issue that has to be addressed is the scale of the recent expansion in cooperative initiatives in education. Barely a decade ago there were no mainstream cooperative educational establishments in England. Such cooperative experiences as did exist were largely confined to workplace learning and/or adult education. Now there are somewhere between 800 and 1,000 schools within the family of cooperative schools. These schools may be primary or secondary, they may be 'special' schools, or they may be stand-alone institutions or constituent members of clusters within a trust. The internal variations are considerable, and this is not the place to explore the detailed scenarios of governance within which they are located. There are also important contributions that broaden the educational framing by considering developments within higher education. However, what unites these instances is that they are all committing themselves, with varying degrees of success, to operate within a formally established and recognized structure of cooperative values. This commitment also locates them firmly within an international cooperative context and connects them to forms of cooperative enterprise, action, and endeavour that transcend the specifically educational. It is this value base that Woodin's book aims to explore.

As a number of the contributors are keen to point out, commitment to cooperative values can mean many different things and here reside some of the key issues to which contributors return:

- What were the motivations and circumstances that led schools to choose to go down the cooperative route rather than make other, more conventional, choices?
- Once having made such a choice, how did schools endeavour to translate cooperative values into an agenda that linked to school structures and practices? For example, what does it mean to the lives of learners and the school community, and how does this link to experiences of teaching and learning and articulate with the processes and dynamics of the school?
- 'Values' are contested phenomena. To tie oneself to a particular values agenda inevitably leads to debate and struggle, both internally within an institution and externally with policymakers and opinion formers, who may not welcome any form of cooperative agenda.

These are simply some of the issues with which such a book has to contend. It is to Woodin's credit that he welcomes these debates, and his editorial selections allow them to unfold within his pages. Admittedly, his contributors are all in one form or another generous towards the cooperative impulse and are not outright opponents. However, within this they are stringent in their arguments, reflective rather than partisan in their conclusions, and collaborative in their discursive styles.

There are a number of questions that it is as yet too early for this book to adequately address. For example, to unravel why there has been such an explosive growth in cooperative schools will need a deeper research base than is currently available, and one that will entail a longer historical perspective to fully grasp. Similarly, given the uncertain and turbulent social, economic, and political time in which we currently live, it would be unrealistic to attempt to predict the future prospects for a cooperative education. The likely global impact or demise of cooperative endeavours may well be areas of struggle rather than prediction.

This is a thoughtful, and quietly inspiring, book that in a varied and explicit way addresses a wide range of issues that introduce the reader to an important development in the social architecture of our current educational landscape. There are questions that it does not address that have significant sociological and historical implications in relation to this development. Why are the cooperative initiatives so diverse in geographical terms and how sustainable are the educational changes invoked by the cooperative school movement? To a considerable extent these questions will have to await the emergence of a substantial and well-rooted body of mid- to long-term research evidence. Additionally, the movement is potentially subject to the instabilities and vagaries that currently beset the whole educational and political scene. As yet, for example, we do not know the future of the current Conservative Government's aggressive academization programme, nor the even more uncertain idea of the reintroduction of grammar schooling, with all of its potential implications for social and educational inequalities. Finally, and with direct implications for this book, the tensions between cooperative values and the government's invocation of 'British values' will require very determined and subtle research to untangle their inherent contradictions and consequential effects.

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