

RETHINKING EDUCATION THROUGH CRITICAL PSYCHOLOGY

Co-operative schools, social justice and voice



GAIL DAVIDGE

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Since the very first 'co-operative' school opened its doors in 2008, the complicated relations between 'co-operative' approaches to schooling and democratic subjectivity remain unexplored. This groundbreaking book considers the role of 'voice' in 'co-operative' schooling and its place in radical research, offering an original, critical analysis of an alternative model of 'co-operative' schooling set within the context of the contemporary public education sector in England. Drawing on poststructural theory and critical ethnographic research, the author explores how this model might offer new ways of thinking about what education is for and who stands to benefit or lose when schools adopt co-operative ways of working together across the structures of governance, pedagogy and curriculum. The book considers how participatory ways of working in education might inform a more critical educational psychology that takes engendering equality and collective well-being as an alternative starting point to measuring individual achievement and cognitive development.

This text will appeal to advanced level undergraduate and post-graduate students, researchers and practitioners, particularly in the fields of psychology, education, politics and social research, with an interest in developing a critical appreciation of inequalities in education and in reimagining the possibilities for change.

Gail Davidge has over ten years' experience as a practitioner in a variety of Primary and Early Years educational settings. She completed her PhD at the Education and Social Research Institute at Manchester Metropolitan University in the UK.

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Co-operative schools, social justice and voice

Gail Davidge

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'Radical democratic project, quiet revolution, or an ethical brand on a shelf of the global education supermarket? In this wonderful book, Gail Davidge tells the unapologetically and delightfully messy story of how some UK schools navigate becoming "co-operative" amidst a neo-liberal education marketplace where cooperation is justified through its benefits to the knowledge economy. Davidge skilfully navigates the "voices" of cooperation from illusions of equality that maintain the status quo, to a radical cooperative culture as a glimpse of equalities yet to come. This book makes a significant contribution to the theories and methods of Critical Educational Psychology.'

*China Mills, Lecturer in Critical Educational Psychology
at the School of Education, University of Sheffield, UK*

'Theoretically sophisticated and passionately argued, Gail Davidge's beautifully written book examines the Cooperative School model as, in the author's words, "a possible site of counter discourse to the 'business of usual' of contemporary schooling". More than this, the author's careful and deeply considered work offers all of us in Education (and indeed beyond) renewed hope, rekindling the belief that things can be different and that, contra Mrs Thatcher, there is an alternative.'

Professor Matthew Clarke, York St John University, UK

'This is an important contribution to a debate which explores the "conditions of possibility" for democratic and progressive engagement at a time of UK public sector reform. Davidge focuses on the co-operative school project to interrogate the value of "voice" in making a "new", radical, education thinkable and considers how this may be constrained or captured by power relationships within a dominant neo-liberal paradigm. Her astute questions, robust reflections and the critical lens she applies will be thought provoking for academics, practitioners and general readers seeking to make sense of ostensibly collective models of service delivery and livelihood-making at a time of disruption and precarity.'

*Dr Cilla Ross, Vice Principal: Co-operative Education
and Research, Co-operative College, UK*

‘Gail Davidge’s wonderful critical ethnography on co-operative schools in England addresses a rather ironic question: What happens when an organisation that is underpinned by values based on co-operation and mutual aid enters into a highly marketized environment driven by the values of competition and individualization? This well theorized, data rich and highly nuanced book will provoke much debate and discussion amongst academics, teachers, headteachers, policy makers and all concerned about keeping social justice on the education agenda in the current policy moment.’

*Professor Martin Mills, The University
of Queensland, Australia*

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FOREWORD

Co-operative education is under threat but it has a long history as an alternative to the competitive schools that fit so well but function so badly under capitalism. Despite repeated attempts by conservative governments that are hostile to co-operation, it survives and even, Gail Davidge shows us, may flourish again. There is something special about this form of education for critical psychology because 'education' has usually been the place where children are taught to know their place in society, and today that includes that they should know something about psychology, should learn that they are separate individuals for whom there is a psychological explanation for distress or resistance to school. That is, mainstream psychology is compatible with mainstream schooling and plays an important role in diagnosing children who don't fit in and in devising programmes to adapt them again. A new 'critical' psychology worth its name should therefore be looking to 'co-operation' and to the possibility that co-operative schooling might provide a different space for us to learn about ourselves and each other.

The book traces the history of co-operative schooling and the underlying assumptions it makes about people, assumptions that are often very different from the psychology we learn in our own training to be professionals working with children. And then it homes in on a crucial question for a critical perspective on these issues which concerns the 'voice' of those involved. We see that this is a complex question that takes us to the heart of what the relationship is between the individual prized by the discipline of psychology and the collective aspects of human experience co-operative schooling values. This is a

conceptual question, of course, but this book guides us into its nature as a more profound methodological question. Psychology as a discipline is fraught with divisions, and there is little agreement as to what overarching theory should hold it together. What most psychologists have in common is not a theory or system of concepts but method. Historically that has been method within a laboratory-experimental 'paradigm' that treats people as if they are objects rather than human beings; it routinely observes, classifies and regulates people as its subjects whether they are actually in the laboratory or outside in what the discipline refers to as the 'field'.

Qualitative research breaks from this logic, from the overarching method which governs psychology, and this book takes us even further away from mainstream competitive psychology into the realm of ethnographic and collaborative interviewing in which we are able to reassess what we understand by attending to the 'voice' of those we research. *Rethinking education through critical psychology: co-operative schools, social justice and voice* does this with a surprising and innovative take on 'co-operation'. We learn that 'co-operation' does not entail consensus, but it opens up a space for a contest over what counts, a 'rupture' with what we take for granted in psychology and in research. This 'rupture' has the status of a break in language where something unexpected takes place and also of an event in the school and in the research interview. We see a new method being worked through here that is working alongside notions of voice in qualitative research but also questioning those notions, with and against them, 'outwith' them, we might say. As it deftly moves backwards and forwards across the different kinds of boundaries that structure research with people, the book makes the 'co-operative' school visible again as a genuine alternative. It puts forward a theoretically rich argument that enriches our understanding of psychology, schooling and public education today.

Ian Parker
University of Leicester

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In the first instance this journey would not have been possible without the assistance of a fully funded research scholarship fund provided by the Education and Social Research Institute at Manchester Metropolitan University, which helped to keep my family afloat during difficult times. However, this passage has required so much more than practical assistance alone, paying tribute to the intellectual stimulation and emotional support that has enabled me to make this transition must begin first and foremost by thanking Erica Burman, Ian Parker and John Schostak. To Erica, Ian and John, I remain in awe and inspired by you all.

Although I remain a somewhat uncertain author of the stories and accounts that follow, it goes without saying that this book is the product of many different conversations and relations that opened up as a result of the kindness of others offering their experiences and insights of 'co-operative' lives lived. Thank you to all of the staff at The Co-operative College for providing me with a wealth of information and practical assistance which helped this research project take flight. Julie Thorpe deserves a very special mention for giving up her valuable time and for helping me to chart my way through an abundance of all things 'co-operative', past and present. I also wish to acknowledge gratitude to all of the staff and the students who graciously accepted my intrusion into their schools. I remain indebted by your kindness and cannot thank you enough for making me welcome, especially when your time and resources seemed to be perpetually pushed to the limit. I would also like to thank all of the staff at Routledge for making this possible,

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especially Liz Rankin and Michael Strang. I am indebted to you both.

Many people remain unnamed throughout this book and although this protects their identities, I cannot help but remain saddened that I cannot acknowledge their enormous contribution more openly. How can I ever do justice to acknowledging your unwavering commitment to engendering greater social justice in education and educational research? I can only offer my heartfelt gratitude for helping me access the 'voice/s' that often go unheard and unacknowledged against the acoustics of neoliberal pedagogic spaces and hope that these stories offer a small step towards recognizing the challenges that students and educational professionals continue to face. I hope you think that this volume offers a fair reflection of some of the obstacles that you all continue to negotiate.

To my parents, Carol and Alan, thank you for your words of encouragement and for bringing me up to believe that anything is possible. I will remain eternally grateful for all of the sacrifices you have made throughout my childhood. To my sisters, Jennie and Rosie, thank you for reminding me not to take life too seriously and for always being there, whatever the emergency. To my partner and soulmate, Nick, I can never thank you enough for your continual support and patience. And to my daughters, Sophie and Millie, thank you for understanding when Mum couldn't always be there; I couldn't be more proud of you both.

INTRODUCTION

Navigating social (in)justice in education

Although the principles of equity and education are firmly entrenched, both historically and across diverse international membership groups across the co-operative movement as a whole, the extent to which ‘co-operative’ educational projects work against, alongside or as a constituent part of national state provision varies around the globe. Within the English context, relations between the co-operative movement and state education sectors have endured a number of peaks and troughs. Historically, the form and focus of ‘co-operative’ education has adapted to take account of perceived shortfalls in enabling access to both more general educational provision and providing specific support for ‘cultivating a co-operative character’ which foregrounded working class emancipation as a central aim (Vernon, 2013).

More recently, pivotal changes in legislation and state regulation of education in England created an opportunity for the co-operative movement to occupy a significant space as an alternative ‘provider’. The first English ‘co-operative’ school emerging as a result of these wide-ranging public education reforms opened its doors as a ‘co-operative’ trust school in 2008. Since this time, the number of ‘co-operative’ schools in England has roughly doubled year upon year, bringing about what has been referred to by some as ‘a quiet revolution’ in public education. Claims that such schools engender greater social equality sit uneasily alongside counter claims that warn of the dangers of neoliberal appropriation of freedom. Yet, since the first school converted to trust status in 2008, the complicated relations

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between 'co-operative' approaches to schooling and subjectivity remain unexplored. This book, therefore, offers a unique perspective that engages with fundamental questions about what education is for and what it can do, viewed through the lens of an alternative approach to public education and from the outliers of traditional psychology.

The central aim of the 'co-operative' model of schooling is premised upon creating the conditions for a more socially just society, which are reflected in the co-operative movement's values and principles (of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity, solidarity, openness and honesty, social responsibility and caring for others) and multi-stakeholder governance structures. At present, 'co-operative' schools are mandated to operate in an environment that straddles the aims and objectives of decades of neoliberal public policy 'reform' on the one hand, and on the other seeks to develop the conditions and resources that inspire social justice and inclusion. This situates the 'co-operative' school and its members within a number of contradictory discursive frameworks, which thus generate a multitude of possible fields of action for interpreting co-operative values and principles within the present educational milieu. This book engages with the dilemmas that schools and their members encounter as a result of striving to establish a co-operative culture, where 'everyone has a say' within an educational policy context where understandings of 'freedom' and 'choice' are predominantly read in neoliberal terms.

Stephen Ball (2012b, p. 27) has argued that '[e]ducation policy, education reform are no longer simply a battleground of ideas, they are a financial sector, increasingly infused by and driven by the logic of profit.' In spite of this, opportunities for collective resistance to increasing levels of social and economic inequality have appeared to gain momentum on an international level over the past few years. Protests such as 'The Occupy Movement' emphasize the extent to which the '99 per cent' have attempted to reconstruct public space to voice collective dissent against the richest one per cent and 'reclaim democracy from capitalism and corporate power' (Butler & Athanasiou, 2013). However, the extent to which these protests offer a significant form of countervailing economic-political power to resist the current state of affairs is increasingly placed under question (see for example

Quiggin, 2010; Wolin, 2010). Hopes that the recent global financial crises would weaken the stranglehold of ‘the corporation’ have slowly vanished, leaving us to question how else we might resist the effects of ‘The Strange Non-Death of Neoliberalism’ (Crouch, 2011) in our homes, and in our schools.

As early as 1795, early pioneers of the co-operative movement developed a pragmatic approach to corporate greed by setting up their own ‘anti-mill’ flour mill in Hull in response to the extortionate prices charged by commercial millers (Bibby, 2014). This co-operative mill operated for over a century. The co-operative movement has expanded considerably since that time, with its collective values and social ideals bringing together over a billion members the world over. This begs the question therefore, could a co-operative response to the marketization of education offer such a form of countervailing power? With over 800 co-operative schools positioned within the English public education sector currently taking up this challenge, perhaps there is the possibility to find out.

Critical inquiry into the recent emergence of a ‘co-operative’ model of ‘schooling’ offers the opportunity to examine the ‘co-operative’ school as a key site within which fundamental ethical and political struggles are played out. Given the nascent nature of this particular model of public schooling and the consequent dearth of critical research in this area, I argue that it is vital that we begin to document and interrogate ‘what happens?’ when these schools are positioned between the space of ‘socially just’ aspirations and ‘socially divisive’ conditions of interpretation in order that we might begin to understand what ‘co-operative’ schooling might mean for transforming the relationship between education and the development of a more socially just society. This book offers a critical response to some of these contradictory demands and claims, informed by critical ethnographic research. Within this volume I draw from, across and in between disciplinary debates that question what education can do, and who benefits. Transgressing the traditional boundaries of education and the conventions of psychology, I consider how ‘bottom up’ or participatory ways of working in education might inform a more critical educational psychology that takes engendering equality and collective well-being as an alternative

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starting point to mapping individual achievement and 'development'. This book, therefore, begins to lay the groundwork for further critical debate about the merits of an alternative, 'co-operative' model of education and examines how students and their families are precariously positioned, both as individual consumers of educational markets and as collective stakeholders with ambiguous rights and responsibilities. In order to consider the construction of the 'co-operative' school subject within contemporary educational discourse, I draw upon original ethnographic research undertaken within co-operative schools and endeavour to expand the domain of critical psychology to connect with contemporary debates in 'critical educational psychology'.

The central aim of the book is to interrogate the complex conceptual and methodological debates and relations that work to shape understandings of subjectivity and education and offer an alternative way of thinking about 'development' as a more democratic experience. Therefore, this volume attempts to understand what co-operative schooling *is* or *could be* by undertaking a critical analysis of emerging 'co-operative' school discourse and members' lived experiences and reflections that emerge as narratives of 'getting it'. Through critical analysis of members' stories, which explore contradictory positionings as both individual 'consumer' and collective members of a co-operative school, I interrogate the tensions and conflicts that render the notion of 'voice' problematic but yet still hopeful, in terms of reimagining what it might be possible to *do*, *think*, *feel* and *say* as a member of the 'co-operative' school. My experiences as a critical ethnographer further complicate the (re)presentation of these narratives, in addition to engaging the reader in a dialogic space which explores the 'co-operative' school as a possible site of counter discourse to the 'business as usual' of contemporary schooling. Weaving between the intersections of policy, practice and pedagogy I offer the beginnings of critical conversations that consider how 'co-operative' schooling is formulated, constituted and performed as I invite the reader to reflect upon how various identity positions and power relationships are enacted and interpreted within this educational milieu, drawing upon Michel Foucault's work on power and subjectivity along the way.

This book begins with a journey that explores the complexities of sustaining an ethical and political engagement with a new and emerging sector of public education that has developed within a discursive terrain that intersects the present educational policy landscape and the historical and social ambitions of the co-operative movement. In order to gain a sense of the complex socio-political relations between education and social justice, Chapter 1 examines the social construction of education and its relation to collective well-being and 'schooling', especially in terms of mapping how educational institutions have gradually evolved from sites of religious instruction to spaces of social regulation. Following this short genealogy of the 'co-operative' school, in Chapter 2 I go on to consider the theoretical and methodological dilemmas which shaped the ethical and political trajectory of this research project. Here, I deliberate the consequences of collecting 'data', analysing 'texts', representing 'voices' and developing a collection of narratives that can offer a critical contribution to 'knowledge' about the 'co-operative school'.

Chapter 3 begins with a consideration of the limits of 'voice' (Jackson & Mazzei, 2009) and the failures of ethnography (Viswesweran, 1994) as I get caught up in the dilemmas of (re)presenting the 'real'. Here I begin to lay the groundwork for understanding how the 'co-operative' school model emerged from idea to action, as a result of changes to education policy and in conversation with educators who aspired to offer a *different* agenda for education and social transformation through a 'co-operative' approach to school governance and pedagogy. Following on from this, Chapter 4 examines a number of 'co-operative' legal frameworks of school governance which evolved in response to being positioned as one of many other 'providers' within the current educational 'market'. Alongside this, I develop a discourse analytic approach to understanding co-operative school membership as this chapter considers how various articulations of 'co-operative schooling' mobilize the trope of 'voice' as a signifier of democratic subjectivity. Chapter 5 goes on to deliberate 'what can be said about the co-operative school by whom, where and when?' before moving towards developing a deeper understanding of the tensions that surround one school's transformation to 'co-operative' trust. Here, one

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member of staff charged with the task of making ‘co-operation’ more visible shares her experiences of developing a ‘membership benefits package’ as I begin to deliberate whether the co-operative model may just offer a more ‘ethical’ brand. This chapter concludes by sketching out the conditions of possibility for ‘everyone having a say’ as I critically examine how co-operative schools navigate equality and difference through co-operative governance structures and separate categories of membership.

Chapter 6 critically examines the relations between education, co-operation and childhood as I draw together a series of (dis)located stories and (dis)located ‘voices’ which come together and fall apart as I explore the notion of ‘student voice’ in the co-operative school, that is in terms of examining the discursive construction of childhood/s in wider society and wondering what this might mean for educational projects that aspire to engender equality. I then go on to consider how my initial attempts to ‘capture’ student voice and understand its relation to the ‘co-operative’ school led me down a number of blind alleys and cul-de-sacs until finally, I encountered the failure of ‘student voice’ on the side-lines of a basketball game. In foregrounding moments where both ‘student voice’ and ‘co-operative’ governance frameworks fail to live up to expectations of equality, I begin to notice ‘transgressive jolts’ (MacLure, 2010) that push the familiar ontological status of ‘students’ and their ‘voice/s’ to the limit. Here, I consider how children and young people occupy a variety of (il)legitimate spaces to ‘speak’ as fundamental questions of equality are raised. In Chapter 7, my engagements with ‘student voice’ continue to cause trouble as I seek out the ‘truth’ in an awkward exchange with a head teacher who exposes how the diametrically opposing demands of competition and co-operation are played out against a range of asymmetrical power relations and regulatory practices. This chapter closes with a reflection upon various struggles for recognition as I (re)consider how the illusion of harmony crumbled and faltered in the wake of a ‘failed’ proposal for school reform which placed the equitable basis of ‘co-operative’ governance structures in abeyance.

Chapter 8 brings this ethnographic encounter with the ‘co-operative’ school to a close with a series of conceptual, methodological

and practice based reflections that set out how this piece of research has contributed to the beginnings of a critical conversation about the 'value' of co-operative schooling and the provocative nature of 'voice'. In addition to deliberating the merits of adopting a critically informed ethnographic approach to generating 'data' about the 'co-operative' school, I go on to offer a number of observations and foreground the ethical dilemmas that emerged as a result of understanding my 'situatedness' as a researcher, interrelated with others throughout my sustained immersion within these contexts of education and educational research. Following these considerations, I sketch out what these emerging narratives can tell us about the promise and perils of 'co-operative' schooling and identify some of the challenges that lie ahead if this model of schooling is to offer a significant form of resistance to neoliberal articulations of freedom as individual 'choice'. I conclude with several recommendations that could enable co-operative school policy, practice and pedagogy to move towards developing the site of the 'co-operative' school as a radical democratic project, rather than merely offering a more ethical *brand*. Finally, I also highlight the pressing need for further research that builds upon the critical conversations that I have attempted to begin within this volume.

(Re)writing 'the real': an 'author' under erasure, a foreword and forewarning . . .

Within this volume, I follow Dan Goodley's (2011, p. 131) move to employ narrative both as cultural artifact and as a resource for deconstruction, in order to offer 'stories [and 'voice/s' that] ask unsettling questions rather than claiming final answers'. Within these narratives I offer my own partial accounts which tangle with the voices of others and engage with the 'practices, texts, assemblages of knowledge, documents, experiences and narratives of given social and cultural locations in which subjectivities are constructed' (Goodley *et al.*, 2004, p. 115). Turning to Foucault I question the problematic construction of subjects and 'voice/s' within these narratives as they emerge from ethnographic engagement to the page, unravelling contradictory interpretations and tracing competing regimes of truth