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## Education.Co-op: A Nudge to the Future

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### Abstract

The role of education is one which transforms. In a capitalist neo-liberal environment, the consuming and competitive individual is cast as the protagonist at the expense of communities that struggle for a common good. Especially in the global north, this is exacerbated by lifestyles and leisure patterns which have been heavily influenced by the onslaught of digital technologies, fragmenting to a considerable degree the physical community and the spaces for social interaction strongly associated with wellbeing. This is evident in a number of trends in society at large, including the organization of labour, which pits workers against each other, eroding solidarity, and dissipating class consciousness. In this context, many educators try their best to provide hope, a sense of belonging, and a struggle for justice. This they do despite being considered pegs to plug holes in a system struggling to cope, and where knowledge is considered technical and practical, rather than emancipatory. A cooperative model which provides a greater sense of belonging, an ethos underpinned by social justice and democratic principles, and ultimately a sense of trust and wellbeing, will be proposed. This model can provide a sound but permeable matrix which empowers educators collectively and provides a better community experience for a diversity of learners.

### Keywords

Cooperatives in education, cooperative schools, vision, ethos, community, school autonomy, democracy in schools, collective consciousness, transformative leadership, emancipatory education, wellbeing

### Introduction

Others' problems are the same as mine. Getting out of them together is politics. Getting out of them on our own is avarice. (Don Lorenzo Milani in Borg et al., 2009 p. 37)

The current zeitgeist has been presenting educators with a number of very important challenges, primarily the evaluation and rethinking of the

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underpinnings of the educational systems in place. A discerning look at the cacophony of discourses about education, at the daily experiences of educators, students, and parents, among others, yields a picture of a system that has lost its centre of gravity. Education has always been a site of struggle among different interest groups, yet when even our definition of education becomes obfuscated (training, regimenting students in preparation for the world of work, a *deus ex machina* for innumerable problems, etc.), losing the plot becomes a very clear and present danger.

As educators we believe that a deep understanding of the context, trying to stand as much as possible on the shoulders of giants, is a must. Building on this understanding, in this paper we will be proposing that in the process of reconceptualising a radically new way how to live education that is more democratic, inclusive, just, and relevant, one can seek inspiration from the cooperative movement, as has been the case, for decades, in other countries and contexts. In other words, we shall attempt a philosophical inquiry of **togetherness** in general and **the cooperative model** in particular as hopeful ways forward, attempting to reappropriate their meaning in the process.

## A Critical Reading of the Context

It is essential that, first and foremost, we position our reading of the context within an analysis of the interplay between the economy and education and the effect of this interplay on society.

Two main discourses seem to pervade the local educational landscape. The first is a discourse that is often pushed by business, and then rallied by politicians and policymakers, which focuses on the need to justify the millions spent in education by synchronizing educational outcomes with the needs of the economy: "modernising education and making it more relevant to workplaces..." (Cassar White, 2023). A recent discussion about offering different stipends to students reading for different courses at the tertiary level of education is another case in point (Magri, 2023). A second, seemingly opposite discourse often present in a number of educational echo chambers concerns the effects of the "economy" on educational practices. Nevertheless, this often seems to remain a rant and is very seldomly unpacked and deconstructed in the public sphere.

Education is often seen as a main contributor to the formation of a skilled

and adaptable workforce that fuels economic growth, an idea forcefully argued in seminal works by Bowles and Gintis (1976) and Willis (1977), with Mallia and Mallia (1997) making a similar point for Maltese schools. These and other studies also argue that while traditional narratives portray education as an equalizer, a pathway to social mobility and economic advancement, a critical reading exposes the reinforcement of existing inequalities, the perpetuation of social stratification, and the maintenance of the status quo. Indeed, despite the good intentions, education in Malta still seems to be struggling to bridge the gaps with the disadvantaged.<sup>1</sup>

Curriculum and pedagogy often reflect and reinforce dominant societal values, norms, and power structures (Apple, 2013; Freire, 2013).<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, various critical readings of education systems serving economic necessities denounce its serving of the interests of capital rather than the wellbeing of individuals and society as a whole. The emphasis on a technocratic rationality<sup>3</sup> that views knowledge as a means of facilitating technical control over nature, translated into an emphasis on vocational training and technical skills, often comes at the expense of critical thinking, social consciousness, and ethical reasoning. This can lead to a workforce that is skilled but unquestioning, compliant with the demands of the market rather than engaged in shaping a more just and equitable society.<sup>4</sup> Educators themselves are the result of the rationality they are called to counteract.

Therefore, a critical comprehension of the relationship between the economy and education is imperative for educators, as it equips them to navigate the complexities of preparing students for a rapidly evolving economic landscape. On one hand, this understanding of how economic forces influence educational access, curriculum development, and workforce demands helps educators to comprehend their role as players in the hegemonic scheme of things. On the other hand, such an understanding can help educators to relate what goes on in the classroom with what is happening in the world, problematising power structures, taking a stand, and crucially determining their role and that of their students as agents of change.

In other words, we contend that in the interplay between an economic structure and what goes on in society and in our daily lives, including education, educators need to take a leadership role. Education should act as a source of hope and inspiration for a more just, peaceful, and humane world. This implies a

grounded reading of what goes on around us. Among other things, educators need to be aware of how power structures make use of education as a vehicle for hegemony to make their interests sound obvious and natural. Equally important, rather than dismissing economic interests and the 'system' as 'the enemy', educators should strive to understand very well economic and societal dynamics by constantly studying and interpreting current events.

What follows is an attempt at engaging with this intricate and intimate relationship. We identify the cooperative model hitherto unexplored in the local educational landscape, as a way of making educators protagonists through the way they organise not just their pedagogy but also their own work. We shall claim that this will not only bear witness with students to an alternative democratic organisation of work in an economy infatuated with financial prowess, but it will also provide a way out of the educational cul-de-sac we seem to have remained imprisoned within.<sup>5</sup>

## **Collective Consciousness and a Counter Paradigm to Neoliberalism**

Despite the pressures and the straightjackets, many educators manifest passion, energy, creativity, and connection with the work that they do. This is evident in the day-to-day activities and the initiatives that educators take up voluntarily because they see the added value that this offers to their students. It is also many educators' way of making their work their own. We contend, however, that although working together is not something new, there is much to fragment educators' work.

The compartmentalisation of the curriculum is cemented through a subject-based system of examinations and the introduction of a Learning Outcomes Framework. Although the stated intention of the framework was to decentralise and give schools the autonomy to develop their learning programmes according to the diverse abilities and needs of the learners (Schembri, 2020) through a "seamless curriculum",<sup>6</sup> it has reinforced the arrangement of subjects which are stand-alone and in isolation to each other. We contend, from our experience in schools, that it has retained an overloaded curriculum, leaving educators struggling considerably to keep their heads above water, let alone have the time to reflect and possibly contest this prescribed policy, positioned as it is within a discourse of human capital theory (Mifsud, 2017). The spaces for educators to meet up are reduced to professional development days

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with school development planning relegated to specific and far-in-between occurrences in the school calendar.<sup>7</sup> All this erodes any sense of collective consciousness both within the school and beyond it.

This fragmentation, and a suffocated collective consciousness, serves the interests of a neo-liberal narrative perfectly. The possibility of a counter paradigm to the glorification of private interests over community interests, to a social Darwinism which pits people against each other in a race for the survival of the fittest is, as a consequence, kept in check, and remains largely dependent on the vision and ad hoc initiatives of individual educators. Education, both through its overt curriculum and its equally important hidden curriculum, most notably its organisation of work, should seek to reverse this psychology of a market society that embraces human beings as one-dimensional seekers motivated by their own self-interest (Sullivan & Hickel, 2022). Education, we reiterate, should be a promoter of community interests and therefore social justice by bearing witness through the way it organises itself; an active re-affirmation of a consciously democratic community (Fielding, 2015).

If we view education as a promoter of community interests rather than a purveyor of self-interest, then beyond working together, educators need to make togetherness a political act. Hence the cooperative model.

## **Where We Come From**

All three authors, together with others whom we worked with as educators within a local school for many years, are members of a social cooperative set up by educators and parents within the same school to provide dignified and meaningful employment to disabled youth. Some of us were also members of other cooperatives and we were actively involved in promoting the cooperative model through the way we went about organising our own workplace. One of us was also involved in cooperatives with students, a project which we shall refer to later.

This exposure to the cooperative movement brought us in touch with a number of inspirational cooperative experiments in education worldwide, some of which we will be referring to in this piece. These were extensive sources of hope. Along this journey, we came to realise that, in reaction to an educational system we inhabit, imbued with neoliberal discourse on one hand and lack of vision and hopelessness on the other, the cooperative model offered us an

opportunity to dialogue with economic structures, through a distinct set of principles, away from the usual dominant corporate perspectives.

## Fencing the Proposal

It must be emphasised that whilst the focus here is on the organisation of educators' work, this should not be taken to mean that a democratic and cooperative pedagogical undertaking in schools should in any way be sidelined.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, for any democratic organisation of work to be coherent and consistent, it needs to be accompanied by a pedagogy as a cooperative undertaking, where the construction of knowledge is considered a collective act (ARCO, 2020). In this way, cooperative organisation, and cooperative pedagogies, become an extension of one another.

For the sake of clarity, it is worth pointing out that the definition of cooperative schools used here is not reductive to institutions which guide students through the process of integrating academics with learning in the workplace (Howison, 2011). Such a definition seems an unfair appropriation of what it means to be cooperative, focusing on the needs of the market and in our view, falls short of a critical deconstruction of the world of work.

We also do not intend to give the impression that there exists one way of being a school cooperative. As alternatives, different cooperative schools fall within varying 'strategic identities' (Woods, 2015, p. 45) as they seek to define themselves within or outside of a system which is not of their own making.<sup>9</sup>

Lastly, cooperatives in education are not limited to those made up of educators. There are those set up by parents to provide a specific type of education including the promotion of native languages (Delgado, 2014) and homeschooling (Anthony, 2015). Locally the closest parents came to the setting up of an arrangement similar to that of a parents' cooperative is the Parents' Foundation for Education in 1988, out of the concern of a number of parents that there was not enough choice of private schools (San Anton School, 2023).

As we go about making a case for educators' cooperatives, we need to acknowledge and indeed celebrate the fact that strong communities within some schools already exist. The temptation was therefore to limit ourselves to make the case for such models to multiply, carving out the limited available elbow space they can come up with. The problem with this approach is that

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given the limitations, democratic school setups will probably remain a pipe dream for most, unless a more radical approach is contemplated. So the emphasis being made here is for a systemic intervention that creates spaces of trust, reversing the impasse of a system which is heavily neocolonial, suspicious, top-down, and at times, outright disrespectful of educators' professionalism. What's more, such a systemic intervention would not just open the door wide enough to accommodate initiatives proposed within non-state schools (even if this possibility per se was never taken up) but would become a possibility within the state school setup as well. Exposure to democratic organisation of work cannot remain an exclusive possibility in schools for children whose parents can afford to pay.

### **The Context of Cooperativism as a Counter Narrative**

The International Cooperative Alliance defines cooperatives as "... an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise" (International Cooperative Alliance, 2023a).

Birchall (2000) and Williams (2007) explain that the roots of the cooperative movement can be traced back to the 17th and 18th centuries when various forms of mutual aid societies emerged in response to the hardships of working-class communities facing changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution. These societies provided support in the form of shared resources, healthcare, and financial assistance, laying the groundwork for the principles of cooperation and self-reliance that would later define the movement.

The key principles that delineate cooperatives were first articulated by what were known as the Rochdale Pioneers who set up a cooperative made up of 28 weavers in Rochdale, England, in 1844. With the onset of the Industrial Revolution, rights for both workers and consumers were limited to a large degree. Inspired by the ideas of Robert Owen and other social reformers, the Pioneers sought to come together to create a cooperative store and offer that which individually they could not afford (Altman, 2009). The Rochdale Pioneers' success inspired the formation of cooperatives across Europe and beyond. By the end of the 19th century, cooperatives had become a significant force in various sectors, including agriculture, banking, and housing.

History tends to repeat itself today, with workers' detachment from centres of economic power creating issues of inequality inherent in ever-increasing gulfs between the haves and the have-nots, together with job insecurity (Birchall, 1997). In the Global North, cooperatives provided employment opportunities, access to essential goods and services, and a sense of empowerment to working-class communities. In the Global South, cooperatives emerged as a powerful tool for poverty reduction and economic development (Franke & Chasin, 2013). As the world grapples with challenges like climate change and inequality, cooperatives offer a sustainable and inclusive model for economic development and social progress, even if the point is made that in some cases, as they operate in a modern capitalist milieu, they leave the mode of production largely untouched (Marcuse, 2015).

Today the cooperative movement accounts for 3 million cooperatives worldwide, with 12% of humanity involved in cooperatives. Cooperatives provide jobs or work opportunities to 280 million people worldwide, accounting for 10% of the world's employed population. Locally, there are 54 cooperatives accounting for 4451 members and 768 employees. (International Cooperative Alliance, 2023b).

The cooperative way in general is an uphill struggle. Leadbeater (2012) argues that public policy over the last thirty years has promoted self-interest as against cooperation, whilst big business writes most of the rules of the game (Hollender, 2012). Companies are the mainstream narrative of enterprise within a capitalist paradigm, wherein strength and voice are determined by shareholding power rather than democratic membership control as is the case with cooperatives. This is very evident in the Maltese context. Whilst cooperatives' social function is recognized and their development encouraged by the Constitution of Malta (Constitution of Malta, Article 20), to date cooperatives in Malta do not have access to several Malta Enterprise Schemes available to other forms of enterprise (Malta Coops Federation, 2023). Education and training regarding cooperatives are conspicuous by their absence from courses within the University of Malta and MCAST, among other tertiary institutions. The tide seems to be slowly turning with the insistence and effort of cooperative organisations themselves to have cooperatives feature in programmes of study. The agreement between the Malta Cooperatives Federation and the University of Malta to (inter alia) "promote the cooperative model of enterprise among all University of Malta students" through internships, research, and the



promotion of the model in general, is a case in point (University of Malta, 2023). In the 1990s and 2000s, the Cooperatives Board<sup>10</sup> financed SCOOPS (Times of Malta, 2003), an initiative which sought to expose students to cooperativism by helping them set up student co-ops. This initiative, whilst timely and effective, was however abruptly stopped after a decade and a half in existence.

It is within this overall struggle for the cooperative movement to assert itself locally that we now turn to proposing educators' cooperatives.

As with all other cooperatives, worker cooperatives in education follow the seven key principles outlined by the International Cooperative Alliance (International Cooperative Alliance, 2023a):

1. Voluntary and Open Membership
2. Democratic Member Control
3. Member Economic Participation
4. Education, Training, and Information
5. Autonomy and Independence
6. Cooperation among Cooperatives
7. Concern for Community

Whilst all principles are linked to one another, some are more interrelated to each other, and for the purpose of this piece, these shall be grouped as indicated below. What follows is a discussion and interpretation of these key principles juxtaposed onto our experiences within the local educational context.

### **Voluntary and Open Membership, Democratic Member Control**

The scenario related to the enrolment of educators directly by schools is arguably one of the key elements which impact on autonomy and the possibility of generating a collective and organic sense of ethos, ultimately bearing an impact on the level of education afforded to the children they serve. The comment made in the PISA Factsheet for Malta (OECD, 2022) that many high-performing school systems tend to entrust principals with the main responsibility for hiring teachers is indeed indicative of this point.<sup>11</sup>

We argue that the centralised system of educator enrolment in state schools needs to be replaced by one which is closer to schools themselves. The chronic practice of redeployment of staff in the state sector (particularly

senior leadership team members) to other schools by the Ministry needs problematizing. Where educators and schools choose each other, retention of staff is more probable, providing more stability and a sense of belonging. We suggest that this, in turn, makes for a stronger school ethos, which is key to a cooperative project.

A greater sense of belonging and community is further cemented by another central tenet of cooperative organisations, namely democratic member control. A stronger sense of ownership of the school's project and indeed a sense of wellbeing is further enhanced when leadership is democratized, and where staff feel that they have the space to contribute to the development of the school through horizontal rather than hierarchical leadership. Decisions on the direction of the school or issues it faces are therefore dealt with democratically by the school (ARCO, 2020).

In the local state sector, for instance, some community-related issues are not left to be solved internally but are tentatively dissipated through redeployment of staff to other schools (Agius, 2023) by centrally imposed provisions. This practice robs the community of control over its fate, reinforcing a neocolonial mindset manifested in various facets of school life.

With greater democratic control comes a feeling of trust and value. Besides positively affecting educators, this crucially rubs off on the children they serve. If anything goes amiss, it is easier to seek collective solutions, because the cooperative culture is ingrained. Additionally, if students know that they are dealing with the decision-makers, students are more likely to hold themselves accountable for their learning, because authority and responsibility become embodied within the same people (Hawkins, 2009).

How direct democratic control works varies and needs to develop organically depending on the context. Experiences elsewhere show that a workable democratic model develops through an often painful process which is hard to replicate given the uniqueness of context (Hawkins, 2009). Any cooperative, not just in education, may decide to take decisions by general meeting or committees by elected representatives (Birchall, 1997). Experience shows that the model taken on board is also directly proportional to the size of the organisation. From experience, smaller schools are more likely to create a greater sense of community. This, in turn, impacts positively on psychosocial

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and pastoral provision to students, whilst ensuring that the voice of individual members of the community can remain direct and strong. We contend that big schools, whilst possibly more cost-effective, do little to create what all educators yearn for: a sense of belonging.

### **Member Economic Participation (MEP)**

This key principle involves the empowerment of members into taking an active role in the economic decision-making and financial management of their cooperative, extending beyond traditional employer-employee dynamics, thus fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility among members (International Cooperative Alliance, 2023a). This incentivizes innovation, accountability, and a shared commitment to the cooperative's prosperity. Having a say in the way finances are used has an impact on school identity because resource allocation is made dependent on priorities and context to achieve the school's mission and goals. Moreover, this aspect goes beyond financial considerations, as it serves to foster a deeper sense of belonging and engagement among cooperative members. It transcends the individual and permeates the entire organization.

Within the context of Maltese education, MEP presents a compelling alternative to the challenges posed by top-down management structures that have long hindered the potential of all its participants. This is because power of economic decision-making does not remain the exclusive domain of an individual or a restricted group (for instance, the principal, head, rector, or board, especially if the latter is not representative of the school community as is the case in many non-state schools). As a key principle in all cooperatives, the concentration of decision-making in resource allocation as the prerogative of the solitary leader/s no longer remains an option.

What's more, MEP in cooperative schools does not imply a school closed in on itself, but one that has chosen to take a step further by including the local community, and particularly parents, as part of its financial decision-making, making sure that funds are allocated equitably and in line with the ethos of the school. This does not necessarily mean that parents become part of the cooperative school, although this option can be entertained. What it means is that through open discussions, consensus-building, and a shared commitment to the school's mission, stakeholders can provide an ongoing critique to make sure that what the co-op school does remains resonant with its stated ethos, which parents, and the community itself, can help develop.

## **Autonomy and Independence, Concern for Community, Cooperation among COOPs**

A community is a process of becoming. This process of becoming helps define what we mean and what we don't mean by community. Building a community can, for instance, become a very exclusive exercise overrun by a siege mentality, surrounded by walls that define the 'us' and the 'them'. Should this happen, what a cooperative should stand for becomes a contradiction in terms; cooperating to jealously guard the inside against the outside, ultimately competing rather than engaging with the world. It is a definition of autonomy closed in on itself, which we reject.

Instead, a cooperative educational community needs to be an inclusive and therefore a porous, semi-permeable project, which takes a critically dialogic stance with the outside world, a concern for the community which it is part of. To read the world and face the challenges of the contexts it inhabits without losing its autonomy, a cooperative school community needs to develop a strong ethos which provides a stabilising centre of gravity. Nevertheless, such an ethos, while having a strength nurtured by important values, is based on both theory and practice, which feed each other and should therefore be conceived as a works-in-progress project that allows for the input, reflections, and discernment of members who continuously adhere to the community's spirit. Such an atmosphere values the encounter with the 'other', which results in diverse opportunities for cross-fertilization of experiences and cultures. Cooperative schools can therefore be a harbinger of intercultural dialogue, which prepares students for active citizenship, respectful of its diversity (Zay, 2011).

This semi-permeability will also allow a cooperative school to voluntarily engage with other schools as a manifestation of its *raison d'être*, rather than merely as a result of a policy-mandated system of networking.<sup>12</sup>

A cooperative school or college which harbours such a community spirit assumes a degree of autonomy and of trust. Such autonomy can take several forms, including curricular, political, economic, spiritual, pastoral, etc. Trust, which is an essential component of community life, should also be a structural aspect of relationships within a cooperative school. This means that such a school needs to contradict the systemic milieu which characterizes the present educational institutions, based mainly on hierarchical, top-down relationships

which necessitate bureaucratic ways by which people are held accountable. Trust ensures that relationships among the different members of an educational community are horizontal and dependent on the responsibility the individuals feel they owe each other.

This has profound implications on the way we go about education in Malta. Whilst 'autonomy' in the National Curriculum Framework is mentioned 16 times, it relates almost exclusively to learner autonomy such as 'elements of entrepreneurial behaviour', which include autonomy, creativity, initiative, and team spirit (Ministry of Education & Employment, 2012, p. 38). The point we want to make here is that such attributes can be much better passed on if children and youth witness them through the way educators go about their work, specifically through cooperative organisation.

## **Education, Training, and Information**

Starting again from the context we inhabit outlined earlier, the process of education has often been instrumentalised, its utility in terms of what we're gaining from it becoming paramount. In other words, education is often being reconceived as 'training', with the underlying assumption that the main aim of education is preparing students to become good workers. On the other hand, a cooperative school, contradicting the dominant dogmas, provides an opportunity for discourses on education and economic necessities to be juxtaposed, critically understood, and interpreted.

More specifically, educators need to understand which knowledge is being included and which knowledge is rendered invisible. This requires discernment on and the identification of essential literacies which underpin the reading of the world. Many of these literacies, from art analysis to historical imagination, from economic literacy to literature appreciation, have been rendered much less important as more and more 'applied' and 'hands-on' subjects are promoted via intense promotional campaigns. Cooperative schools need to allow space for the co-authoring of the curriculum, based on the powerful knowledge of specific disciplines (Muller & Young, 2019) as determined by the National Curriculum Framework, as well as the diverse contextual baggage which students bring with them to school. Ultimately, the litmus test of education in general, and knowledge in particular, is that they are vehicles for liberation (Shor & Freire, 1987).

Educators and students in a cooperative school need to allow themselves time during which they can meet, read, discuss, deconstruct, and reconstruct the world around them. Efforts to promote this aspect in schools cannot be overestimated.

We reiterate the point made earlier that schools managed cooperatively will be the best exposure for students to the cooperative model. Lived experiences are the best form of education. The re-introduction of the SCOOPS referred to earlier in this piece can be one way of getting there.

## Conclusion

This work is intended to lay the foundations for a debate which pushes for a more radical approach than the occasional tweaks to a system which many deem to be tired and underperforming. We hope that this effort spawns further investigation into the way such a proposal intersects with current legislative frameworks, its relationship with the National Curriculum Framework and other policies and how it can contribute to and in turn be affected by the National Strategy for Education currently under review. Further investigation is needed as to how formally acknowledged cooperative schools, especially in the state education sector, fit in or otherwise within the existing legislation on cooperatives (The Cooperative Societies Act, 2002) and also within frameworks such as the college system of school networks and ownership of schools in the non-state sector. Research would be required to understand how informed educators are on cooperatives and whether they see cooperative schools as a way forward, together with an assessment of what degree of readiness is needed for schools to redefine themselves to become cooperative schools not just through a sense of fear and faith but rather "according to stronger narratives of confidence and power" (Dennis, 2018, p. 855).

We reiterate the point that we do not intend to make the claim that this proposal is reinventing the wheel. Indeed, where practices are closer to cooperative principles outlined above, strong communities within schools already exist. However, we want to assert that perhaps the space for the setting up of cooperative schools by educators themselves might be the missing link to an education which is more meaningful and more respectful; a more radical collective ownership of work and pedagogy that reverses pervasive feelings of disempowerment and fatalism. It also provides a counterweight to a creeping sense of competition, prescription, increased fragmentation,

measurable targets, and performance indicators as a one-way to standards and excellence<sup>15</sup> as evidenced elsewhere.<sup>14</sup>

Cooperative schools provide the possibility for educators to act as intellectuals (Giroux, 1988), as curriculum thinkers rather than curriculum deliverers of agendas set elsewhere (Pring, 2015). This ultimately addresses educators' sense of wellbeing, crucial as a building block of all else we do in schools. Lastly, it provides a counter-narrative to a pervasive economic model which places considerations other than people at its centre.

Cooperative schools walk the talk by giving witness to an alternative and democratic model of work which is respectful of and makes fuller use of collective intentions in the interest of the people they serve.

## Notes

1. The proportion of Maltese 15-year-olds underachieving in all three PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) domains combined is among the highest in the EU (22.6% vs 13.2%) and it is particularly high among disadvantaged pupils, that is 36.7% vs 23.5% at EU level (European Commission, 2023).
2. Freire (1998, p. 126) eloquently makes the point that "Educative practice is all of the following: affective, joy, scientific seriousness, technical expertise at the service of change, and unfortunately, the preservation of the status quo. It is exactly this static, neoliberal ideology, proposing as it does, 'the death of history', that converts tomorrow into today by insisting that everything is under control, everything has been already worked out and taken care of ... a purely technical kind of education in which the teacher distinguishes himself or herself not by the desire to change the world but to accept it as it is."
3. See Carr and Kemmis's (1993, p. 136) exposition of Habermas's (1974) Theory of Knowledge Constitutive Interests.
4. For broader discussion refer to Lauder et al. (2012).
5. During a parliamentary speech during the budget discussion for 2024, the Minister of Finance is on record stating that he could not understand why "... after 50 years of independence our education is still so poor and it is still a big deal for someone to get a basic education". See Borg (2023).
6. By a 'seamless curriculum' the framework meant providing "... smooth transitions, building and extending on the firm foundations in early childhood education" (Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education, 2015, p. 5). So the focus was on transition from one phase of the educational journey to another, not a holistic view of the world. Subjects were not only retained but others were added on.

7. (Malta Union of Teachers, 2017). Article 17.2iii stipulates the amount of 12 hours per year out of 40 hours of CoPE (Community of Professional Educator) hours. Especially during and after the pandemic, these hours were the subject of prolonged directives by the Malta Union of Teachers.
8. For instance, the work on Cooperative Learning by Slavin and the work of Freinet and Montessori, among many others.
9. Woods (2015) identifies 3 alternative strategic identities, namely Choice (where the cooperative school is considered abnormal and peripheral to the mainstream), Assimilation (where an alternative culture is recognized but falls in line with the dominant culture), and Challenge (where the alternative exists in its own right and not simply defined by what it does not aim to be).
10. The Cooperatives Board is a regulator of the cooperative movement in Malta.
11. According to the latest PISA report for 2022, 24% of all students in Malta attended a school where principals have the main responsibility for hiring teachers. This contrasts sharply with the OECD average of 60%.
12. The local college system brought about as a result of the 'For All Children to Succeed' document issued in 2005 is an example of policy-mandated networks. For a discussion on how school leaders engage and view its implementation, see Mifsud (2015).
13. Participants in focus groups leading to the 4th Annual Symposium, 'The Future is Now', held on the 25th October 2023, spoke of the setting up of colleges as leading to a sense of competition between them. Refer to the keynote paper in this volume.
14. The UK experience is a case in point.

## Notes on Contributors

**Mario Mallia** is currently a full-time lecturer at the Institute for Education, focusing on critical pedagogy, gender, and science education. He was Head of a primary and secondary school for sixteen years, a deputy head and a teacher of science. He holds a Master's degree in Education, a postgraduate diploma in School Administration and Management, and a Bachelor in Education (Hons) degree from the University of Malta. He served, inter alia, as a board member of the National Commission for the Promotion of Equality and the Foundation of Educational Services for many years, besides, to date, being active in the political and social fields.

**Bernard Cauchi**, an educator with almost 25 years of experience, currently teaches History and Mediterranean Experience at St Albert the Great College in Valletta. Additionally, he serves as Head of Department for History and Social Studies at the Secretariat for Catholic Education. Bernard read for a Master's in Comparative Education with Prof. Ronald Sultana and is engaged in the realms of education, politics, and what falls in between.



**Andrew Camilleri** is an educator with over 12 years of experience, currently serving as Assistant Head at Sacred Heart College in the senior sector. His specialization lies in multicultural inclusion and awareness, having read a Master's in Culturally Responsive Education. Andrew's worldview and perspective draws inspiration from education's social justice giants, most notably Paolo Freire, Hannah Arendt, and Lorenzo Milani.

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