

# MORE THAN A SHOP

Education for all?  
A new school of thought

**Dr Cilla Ross**

*Principal and Chief Executive,  
The Co-operative College*

**David Scott**

*AKA ARGH KiD*

**Also featuring:**

*Leeds Co-op Academy*



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## **Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

Hello and welcome to More Than a Shop hosted by me Elizabeth Alker. We're welcoming guests with something new and radical to say about the big issues of the day.

Well the flavour of the series is a search for new alternative ideas in the spirit of the worldwide co-operative movement, which happens to have started in my hometown of Rochdale.

Co-ops proudly offer radical alternatives to mainstream ways of getting things done. They are indeed so much more than a shop.

Well today we're looking at education and I'm joined in the studio by two people ready to give their personal take on the issues that really matter when it comes to learning. Be it in the classroom, higher education or later on in life.

Would you like to introduce yourselves please?

## **Cilla Ross, The Co-operative College**

My name is Cilla Ross. I'm Principal of The Co-operative College in Manchester.

## **David Scott AKA ARGH KiD**

My name is David Scott. I'm a poet, musician and broadcaster and I perform under the name ARGH KiD.

**MORE THAN  
A SHOP**

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**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

Wonderful – welcome! So I'm going to be asking you both later for your big idea – something that will make a difference in education, for the better. But before that can I ask you each for a challenge that you think we're facing right now when it comes to education?

**David Scott AKA ARGH KiD**

Yeah I'll go first. Okay, so my big challenge is that I do workshops in Pupil Referral Units, but also Young Offenders Institutes, community centers and also mainstream schools.

I see kids in mainstream and you can see the path that they're going to take because they're not into academic subjects so for me what tends to happen – sorry I'm going to get on my soapbox early on here if that's okay. What tends to happen in schools if you're no good at maths or science – just because of your lack of capability because your brain isn't built that way and you're not fitting the box – what happens is the kids tend to misbehave just due to a lack of interest or lack of confidence and this happens time and time again at all the mainstream schools I work at. And then because they don't fulfill the quota in terms of GCSE results or whatever at the schools they tend to be pushed by and put into these things called Pupil Referral Units. Now I've worked in Pupil Referral Units as well and they are nothing but a glorified prison system for kids because of either behavioural issues but their behavioral issues tend to stem from – and I'm not saying all of them do – but stem from a lack of interest or ability in school and I don't think we're catering to try and offer alternative ways to teach them.

You know, and a lot of these kids are creative and the same story all the time is that “I didn't like school...I couldn't get interested in it” and there's got to be another way. It's got to be something that we need to start talking about and looking at.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

That the system doesn't fit everybody?

**David Scott AKA ARGH KiD**

Yeah we live in a day and age now we're all about equality and then we're talking about like gender, race and we're not allowed to stereotype people by their sexuality or their colour but we seem to be stereotyping children as all one and the same and that isn't the case at all.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

Okay, Cilla what do you think the biggest challenge is we're facing today in education?

**Cilla Ross, The Co-operative College**

Well you saw said all the things I would absolutely and utterly agree with. Because one of the big challenges is getting people to understand that education is different to how they might think it is. But in terms of the sort of everyday work I do you know not having the money to participate is a big thing and that puts people off. The lack of confidence people feel about whether it's right for them puts them off.

But I think one of the really big things for adult education – you know as I'm speaking slightly differently from you – is time. We live in a society with precarious work, where people are in work poverty – they're lucky if they've got work – and so on. And people just can't map that time against their other obligations and responsibilities. So, to try and create a bit of space which is for them to think about the things that they need to learn or want to learn whatever it's for, plus the work they might do in their communities for whatever it's for, is quite difficult because it always drops down the list.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

So these are quite large-scale problems aren't they? A problem with our education system. A problem with the way that our society is set up and the way that we live, which is to be often pushed for time. Big problems...

**David Scott AKA ARGH KiD**

Yeah, huge problems and these are problems I think have a knock-on effect into our society as well and we're looking at the rising knife crime across the country and I don't see anything trying to counter that and I just think that through education and through offering alternative means of education... Because a lot of people that are caught up in knife [crime] – and again I speak from experience of working with people, both victims and the people who've done the attack, that they are failed in some ways by the education system.

So it's huge, it's a knock on effect, and like you were saying in terms of education as an adult... I was speaking to my wife last night and she had a sense of guilt that she wanted to learn more stuff and I said well that's a brilliant feeling so that's the best thing in the world that you want to learn but she does feel because, like she's knocking on 40 – but we won't put that in the podcast, I mean you can, but I'll be in trouble! But she felt guilty about it, like "I shouldn't be learning new things at this age." I said but that's the most beautiful thing because you should always be wanting to grow and explore anything even for self-worth as well as certificates...

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

And do you think adults do you feel selfish with their time if they try and pick up something new later in life?

**Cilla Ross, The Co-operative College**

Well possibly. But I have to say challenge her and push back on that because that is not generally the experience.

And we're drawing on the co-operative way of doing learning and you know right from where it all began in Rochdale, it was adults who did a full days work then went met above the shop and met in the reading room and they were doing learning, not just about making a great business so they ran, you know, a great enterprise, but also what they then call those days I'm really old-fashioned was the co-operative character you know so that they had good values, good ethics. They related to each other and they ran good communities and they were citizens.

And when you think about some of the issues you're talking about now it's exactly the same... New ways of doing work, running a business and new ways of being a citizen, because a lot of stuff's broken down. But, yeah I do think it's quite hard for adults to find the time but these are the big issues they've got to work with we know what they all are whether it be climate change or you know the automation or whatever it is and how do we actually encourage people to learn you know that they feel okay spending time learning.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

Okay, so you both have ideas as to how we can fix this but before we come to that tell us what you do on a day to day basis.

**David Scott AKA ARGH KiD**

So on a day to day basis, I can work in anything from a prison to young offenders to a mainstream school. I still struggle, due to my own education, to refer to myself as a poet because that always

seemed as a... you had to be middle class, so you had to do a certain thing, you know, to be awarded that... you know, I felt very undeserving and I still sort of have that impostor syndrome now.

So four years ago I got fed up of being artistic at home more creative and to an extent feeling embarrassed by it and I thought you know what where's all this build-up from and it's stemmed from school... I mean, I think I remember having one teacher that was quite encouraging. But aside from that they were building like battery hens when working in factories or on the roads and – you know I'm not making negative connotations about them jobs – but that was what we were sort of being skilled for...

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

Poet wasn't one of the things that you were being pushed into...?

**David Scott AKA ARGH KiD**

But the fact is that when I told my friends that I was going into poetry and stuff, the responses were exactly how I expected. Shock, disbelief, my sexuality was questioned – because they'd been built up that you had to be gay to be a poet or artists are creative... But these are my peers that grew up in an education system, so that also stems from there, do you know what I mean? They're not prejudiced in any way but that's what their understanding of a poet was.

So four years ago I got on my high horse and I thought you know what I'm sick to death for this I'm doing it for myself because what'll happen is years later I might go the route of Van Gogh... I'll keep both me ears, but I might be dead and you know I might get a bit of fame if someone finds my poetry but I just wanted to put myself out there.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

Where did your interest in it come from if you weren't exposed to it you know by your teachers, by people in your family? How did you find poetry?

**David Scott AKA ARGH KiD**

For me I got into it through music, through either hip-hop lyrics or any sort of...I'm a big Smiths fan. But yeah so just through lyrics, but they weren't taught as being poetry, but you strip them down, they are, especially The Smiths lyrics – they're hugely poetic. So it was a huge thing on learning in terms of what school had taught me what I can and can't achieve but also what poetry is and stuff and then obviously you look into your Mancunian icons and Salford icons like John Cooper Clarke, he was a poet. But also the people like Snoop Dogg and Eminem and all them, cos I've been writing hip-hop for it for ages but I never thought I was cool enough to be a rapper.

So then I took that and then started working in the school system. I was invited "would you like to come in and talk to our kids?" and I did when I went into one school but I wasn't sure about what I'm going to talk about so I was just talking about... "I don't want you to turn into me 20 years later, poetry can be about anything or anywhere." And I do, my main one is from Shakespeare to Stormzy and we sort of break down how Stormzy could be a modern-day Shakespeare or Shakespeare could be the first rapper and stuff like that. And it's just really eye-opening... And there's these teachers as well that welcome me in because they have to stick to a real curriculum and structure in terms of what they can teach.

Now I wanted to be a teacher, I still have passions to go in and be a mainstream teacher, but I think that I will be doing a disservice because I'll be adding to the problem. Whereas now I'm not saying I'm a superhero but I actually offer something different to the kids who aren't academic or don't know what stanzas or iambic pentameter are. But the people that I talk to are from an urban background or a neglected area, they have the best stories to tell and it's not... the creativity that I try to get out of them is more for themselves because if you haven't got any sort of outlet then where does that go? And, again, we talk about the scale of the problem... If you're knocking children's confidence at the age of 14 and 15

we have a huge surge in mental health over the last few years and that's because people are told that they aren't any good at a certain thing but if we could open a doorway to say "okay, so you're not that great at maths and science, but you've shown some sort of ability or interest into something else, well why don't we do that?" Because I've had life sentence prisoners quoting Hamlet, do you know what I mean? It's fantastic just to see them looking at it from a new point of view...

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

Yeah I suppose I'm thinking of people like John Cooper Clarke, Simon Armitage. I guess those people, they're part of the establishment now, they've been canonized... but it's finding someone like you say Stormzy who means something to young people today...

**David Scott AKA ARGH KiD**

Exactly. I always liken it to fishing... I always walk in and say I've done anything with music or I've worked with... because I've worked with Man United quite a lot... so that might get you some kudos with the kids. But I go in purposely, "Oh it's a poet" and then you see the faces on the kids and then I start doing some of my poetry and they say "What? That's not poetry, that's rap music" and so I say "What's the difference?"

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

Can we hear some?

**David Scott AKA ARGH KiD**

Well now you've put me on the spot. As we're talking about education... So, I grew up in 1980s Manchester and I'm mixed race. I wasn't unaware at the time but I wasn't predominantly white and I wasn't predominantly black so the teacher christened me "beige boy" so this is *Beige Boy*.

Where're you from?

Around here, I reply.

Nah mate, where are you from? Your people, your relations.

An unanswerable question soon becomes an unanswered accusation because you're not white and you're not black, you're sort of brownish.

And here I go again scratching at a three-decade itch... beige boy...

The schoolyard blast from the past baptised by a teacher with a label that lasts.

Well kids Kelly's white and Nathan's black and Dave... Well, Dave's sort of beige...

Beige boy was born.

But as I got older the queries got colder.

I didn't fit into a box so I became something of a moulder.

A cultural chameleon crafting a character for the constant craving of wanting an equal.

A vulture picking a part I found interesting from different races of people from black rap to Irish crack.

I jumped through hoops I clung, I grasped for a group to belong to.

But it was always a laugh, a joke, a snigger...

Bigots using skin tones for leverage to make themselves bigger but I wonder.

Can someone who was raceless be a victim of racists?

I questioned my aunties and uncles and wondered why they were several shades paler until it came out that daddy's real daddy was an absent father, he was a sailor.

A history all at sea but it's true.

The iPhone don't fall too far from the iPad because my identity struggles are the same as my dad.

My beige sister, my beige brother and then I met a beige lady who became a beige lover who became a beige mother to three beautiful beige babies and who knows in the future that beige may be the shade of skin that we'll all be.

So, whenever I meet someone with the "roots" question in their eye I say it's me, my beige skin and I.



**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

Oh wow thank you very much.

What really surprises me is that there's so much discussion around identity politics and we think that we've come so far don't we – you know, you describe how people describe to you in the 80s and that's really shocking now, so we think we've come a long way. But actually young people are still struggling to identify themselves and to express who they are.

**David Scott AKA ARGH KiD**

Yeah. We don't encourage individuals, especially in the education system, you have to tick-tick-tick GCSEs and stuff.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

Okay. Well, thank you very much. Cilla, you are Principal of The Co-operative College. What exactly is that?

**Cilla Ross, The Co-operative College**

Before I say what it is, I must just say that I'm a working class woman who left school at 15 and went to a factory and then through my trade union went into education. So what you've described there and that fantastic thing you did there was really amazing, but it reminded me of why there's a lot of adults out there struggling as well, as you appreciate, you know, so my particular interest was adult education. And that tended to be through unions or out in communities or, you know, doing that sort of thing before I came to the College. And I just think sometimes it was that people didn't have an education, because they went straight into work, and into manual work where you didn't need an education. So then people have come out of that and so there's that gap there in terms of belonging and identity. You know, it's, it's, it's very complicated, right through the ages.

Anyway, I digress. The Co-operative College is an extraordinary thing. It's 100 years old, it's an independent educational charity. It sort of came out of the 19th century co-operative movement, but when it was founded in 1919, it aimed to do two things: one, as I've sort of suggested, was servicing the needs of what was then you know, a massive massive massive co-op movement – 51% of all shops were co-ops in the 1950s... Right through to you know, developing international work. I'm working with, you know, all sorts of different types of partners. Accredited, non accredited work... Did you know you used to have to spend two years on a course to learn how to run a co-op shop...two years! So that's what it came out of.

But my day to day job now is doing two things really working with my colleagues to deliver a range of different things. Right from international projects where we work with teams, so it's not a sort of top down colonial sort of thing. But it's, you know, working with teams on the ground around democracy and women's leadership in co-ops, there's over a billion people in the world...

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

So training people who are already doing jobs...

**Cilla Ross, The Co-operative College**

Yep, who are already in co-ops, but you know, working with them, especially women, in many cases about how they, they sort of develop their empowerment within such co-ops, you know, because, as you all know, you know, a lot of the, the poor of the world are in bits of co-ops, you know, which are just about how they managed to scratch a living but equally the other end and it's quite unusual. Sometimes you're in a room full of doctors from Brazil, and they're all in a workers co-op, and you think, hang on,

and they're the wealthy of Brazil. So it's not you know, so that you've got these really diverse things that come out of your international work.

We've also got a number of, and a growing number of UK projects. So there's some great projects taking place in Manchester, around co-operatives but much more broadly. You know, it's not saying that "you need to start a co-operative this second" or "go and shop at the co-op", but actually just getting them to think about different ways of doing work, different ways of being. Working with groups all over the place on co-op research. But also, you know, just trying to develop the co-operative idea in these times. And I think that's really important.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

Well, I was going to say, it sounds like you must have to change and adapt as needs develop within the co-operative movement. Is what you do very flexible?

**Cilla Ross, The Co-operative College**

Totally flexible and always changing. And totally benefits from disruption. And totally benefits from mayhem. And especially co-operative learning, because it's the best of the type of learning that does go on. In other words, it's about need, it's about identification of need. It can be self organized, and then we work with it. It can be all sorts of different groupings who come together.

At the same time, our support is to develop ideas around "what does a values based approach look like?". And I just think it's really important and why it's really timely, not simply for the College, but for the global co-op movement, as you know. You know, what do you do in those areas where there's a real, you know, need for sort of collective active democratic citizenship where it's all sort of broken down in a lot of our very poor places.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

And are you going into these areas and presenting solutions?

**Cilla Ross, The Co-operative College**

Well this is exactly what we're trying to do. And whether that be working with our colleagues at Co-operatives UK and thinking about how you might build in a different type of business model. So fundamentally, it's about trying to rethink what a democratic organization looks like. And then thinking about how we do the learning around that, because it's learning for all of us.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

Yeah, what you're both doing is understanding people where they're at, isn't it?

**David Scott AKA ARGH KiD**

Trying to give their voice, yeah. That's fantastic work, it sounds amazing.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

Amazing work, lots of challenges, as we've heard. And we're going to hear your big ideas as to how those challenges might be overcome very shortly. But first, to see how the co-operative model actually works in practice in an educational setting, our producer Geoff Bird has been to visit some of the students at The Co-op Academy over in Leeds, and their Headteacher, Jonny Mitchell, who you may know from Educating Yorkshire...

## **Johnny Mitchell, Leeds Co-op Academy**

I think being a Co-op Academy means different things to different people. For those of us on the inside, we see lots of co-op filtering down. You know, we are guided by a set of values which all co-operatives enjoy worldwide, the 'ways of being' have been really helpful, instilling in the young people here and the adults that work in this environment, that sense of commonality, that sense of belief.

## **Geoff Bird, producer**

For those people who don't know what 'the ways of being' are, what and how do they stand in relation to the values?

## **Johnny Mitchell, Leeds Co-op Academy**

I think the ways of being are about behaviors, the values around there's almost facts and cornerstones isn't it? You know that we've got, you know, 'be yourself always', 'succeed together', 'do what matters most', 'show your care'... The things that I think sit very naturally in a school environment. These are four short clauses and phrases, if you like, that kids can really pick up and hang on to and say "Oh look, I showed that I cared...that I did what matters most. I made the right decision there". And "actually, no, I didn't put my best effort into that". And "actually, I wasn't I wasn't myself". So it's easy to understand, you know, explaining to a child about equity. It's difficult enough, I think explaining to an adult what equity actually means. And democracy because you know, in a school, is it a democracy? No, I'm afraid my name is over the door. And I suppose, where the buck stops, that's the decision that I have to make. And the same would apply in any other Co-op Academy.

Not everybody has their say all the time, but in the period up to making those decisions the children here perhaps have more of a stake in those conversations moving towards the decision. You know, we recently changed the structure of the school day. You know, we consulted with kids informally before we actually approached the staff. And then before we went to the governor's, before into the trust. Because if it was dead in the water from an early stage, then, you know, it probably would have been counter-productive. It was a decision that they were involved in, the staff are involved in. That's probably more like here.

I mean, the same applies with colleagues as well. We don't ask colleagues about everything because there's a management and leadership team here for a reason. But staff are asked, and actually what I found out last couple of years in particular, is that they've maybe whinged and moaned about something but then they thought one of them stood up and said "hang on a minute, all right. We've whinged and moaned, which is a human condition. But actually, unless we've got an idea to make the situation better, we're just gonna carry on whinging and moaning about it and we'll just become those mood hoovers that everybody talks about in society these days, and that the few of them have come up with proposals. They said, "look, this is how we could help," and, actually, we are all in it together – co-operators.

## **Students, Leeds Co-op Academy**

My name is Farrah. My name is Trevor. My name is Richie. My name's Tristan.

## **Geoff Bird, producer**

How much freedom have you got to pursue your enthusiasms here?

## **Students, Leeds Co-op Academy**

In this school there's a lot of performing art, music, dance and drama.

And we have a lot freedom because there's a variety of subjects we can choose from, which allows us to express ourselves.



I think we have a lot of freedom because, like in lots of schools, like they don't take art seriously as science, maths and English and I feel like the teachers, they try to help us to do whatever we want to do.

**Geoff Bird, producer**

This is a Co-op Academy. What does that mean to you?

**Students, Leeds Co-op Academy**

The word co-op, a co-operative means together and this school is very together, we worked hard together. And with that, because it's a diverse school. Everyone comes together to treat everybody correctly.

It also allows a lot of people to be accepting people for example, people from the LGBTQ community – we have a club for them which helps them if they have any problems and stuff like that.

**Jonny Mitchell, Leeds Co-op Academy**

The kids, you know, the wonderful kids that we get through the door, because they are so very diverse, and many of them for example, don't speak English when they arrive or they've got limited literacy. That used to be the phrase No Child Left Behind, but no child not admitted, if they're entitled to come here.

**Geoff Bird, producer**

And once you've brought them in, how do you make sure they flourish and avoid that kind of cookie cutter thing that sees all the children turn out pretty much identical.

**Jonny Mitchell, Leeds Co-op Academy**

We personalize as much as we can, you know, but what we mustn't do is lower the bar of expectation to such an extent that we're not giving them the opportunity to flourish, because they're in competition with everybody else, aren't they?

**Geoff Bird, producer**

But in that bid to make sure that they can compete when they leave, you're not going to press them all through the same narrow curriculum.

**Jonny Mitchell, Leeds Co-op Academy**

Yeah, you've pretty much hit the nail on the head with that and the children are not automatons. My role and I see the role of my colleagues is to make sure that a young person that arrives with us, we must do whatever we can to make them ready for their natural, logical next step. Be that a skills based provision, or onto A-Levels and onto prestigious colleges and they can get into the top universities. And more and more of them are doing it. In order to do that, though, we mustn't be sacrificing kids' ambitions, aspirations, enthusiasms and passions. What's important is that if somebody is going to make a living in, for example, the performing arts is going to be a West End jobber all-star, it's going to be a musician, then we need to give the opportunity to do that here.

**Student, Leeds Co-op Academy**

Schools helped me to be more confident because when I came here in year six, I was the most quietest person ever. And the teachers helped me to do public speaking and they told me that everything's okay and we're treated all the same.

This school helps us to like not be afraid to answer questions. So I'll be asking more questions in the future.

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**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

So that was our producer Geoff Bird over in Leeds at the Co-op Academy with their Headteacher, Jonny Mitchell. Cilla, we heard about the co-op values there. How hard is it to actually turn those values into everyday practice?

**Cilla Ross, The Co-operative College**

Well, it's quite hard because they are a set of values, whether they be, you know, democracy, equality, solidarity, whatever they are self-help, which most people would sign up to. And you know, you wouldn't normally disagree with them. But actually putting them into practice is the hard thing. So how, for example, do you make a piece of learning democratic? Well, in the school example, and where the example I'll give you in terms of Co-operative University, you actually really genuinely try to bring everybody's views and ideas on board as you co-make it.

The international co-operative values and principles are the things that run us and keep us going. But we have to continuously reflect on them and how we do make them work. One of the main ways we make them work is through the principles because the values are simply a set of ideas. The principles are how you put them into practice. So as an example, you've got, you know, democracy, but a principle is one member, one vote. So, you're actually you know, it's not just an empty word, but how do you do that, so that power is equalized across an organization. But you have to continuously not simply health check that, but also make them real because otherwise they're just words. But I think what co-operatives try and do at their best, and it is uneven, you know, we all have to work at it, you really have to try and test yourself on them, you know, so that you're trying to live those values.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

Can you see that in schools as well? It's a challenge to implement these things?

**David Scott AKA ARGH KiD**

When you were talking about them I was like "that's the dream" really, to be able to see that into many mainstream schools but it's very this sort of old school way on "teacher is ruler and kids fall in line" with it. But I have to talk about the faction of kids that I tend to work with that's like a new lease of life to put them in a room and to empower them to actually have a say in how a curriculum or a class or a piece of creative work is made – that's huge, that's a massive thing to do.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

Do you get a sense when you go into schools that some have stronger core values than others?

**David Scott AKA ARGH KiD**

Yeah, this definitely depends on... it tends to be the area as well. I hate assuming, but when I go to a certain area, you know what sort of school you're going through working with, to be honest. In terms of the core values, I wouldn't be able to pull out any I don't think. I think maybe the religious schools are a bit more obvious, but that's probably because it's par for the course.

## **Cilla Ross, The Co-operative College**

But I would say, I think that people do largely do have those values, and that they're what you've got to work with. But sometimes because they're in particular environments and experiences, they didn't have an opportunity to either use those or develop them or whatever it is.

## **David Scott AKA ARGH KID**

Because I think teachers have got their own values but they're trying to apply to the values of what their job entails, do you know what I mean, or statistics that they need to get by the end of the year exam results and stuff. So that would challenge anybody's values and stuff. But yeah, when you were talking about the work there, I was like – that sounds fantastic! I'm not saying this at all just because we're on the podcast because it's genuinely, like, something that I had not heard of before I was asked to come on to the podcast and it's... a) I'm am amazed it's 100 years it's been going and I'd still not heard about it, and I consider myself quite read nowadays... obviously not! But that something like that exists as well, it needs to be more commonly known in the areas that I go to.

When you were talking about “how do people start certain things”... there's just so many lost voices and lost lives in many ways, just due to the lack of education. And it really upsets me because you can just sort of see when the kids are really young and because of not got certain opportunities in life. And time and time again I leave schools and feel quite heartbroken because you sort of see that... sorry, I wasn't expecting any of this... that their life is going to be limited, and I think that's what we're doing. We're capping abilities now, and that's what we tend to be doing.

## **Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

It's interesting that Cilla said we have these values in here somewhere. And then you immediately said, “That's the dream”, you know, and the word dream already implies that we've been disconnected from what is central to us what's core to us.

## **Cilla Ross, The Co-operative College**

But the terrible tragedy is, you know, there's been a massive, massive percentage of our population that's been failed forever. And that's what's so hard and so heartbreaking. You know, even people's aspirations. And that's no different to when the Pioneers... you know, the [Rochdale] Pioneers when they set up in 1844 – I don't want to be boring about it – but it wasn't just about setting up a shop it was responding to need because it was terrible poverty, because people are being ripped off because the flour was being adulterated. They only sold six things in the shop. So it was about responding to need. And all I'm saying, and I'm agreeing with you, there's a massive proportion of people who've, that they've been systematically failed for an awfully long time.

## **David Scott AKA ARGH KID**

Well they're still being ripped off, but for education.

## **Cilla Ross, The Co-operative College**

Exactly, and education. You know, we've had a slight blip where people like myself, frankly, were able to go to university. I was the first in my family, you know, and I got a full grant because I'm that age. But actually, now we're going back to that age where it's all about students getting into massive debt – if they do manage or feel comfortable about going – or the local provision's disappeared. Well, thank goodness there's people like you going into schools and doing stuff like this because, you know, it's really disappearing and it's shameful.

## **Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

Well, we have hope. That's what this podcast is about. And the co-operative movement! We're all going to be in tears at this rate. I know there is hope because you have both come with a radical idea. David, do you want to go first?

## **David Scott AKA ARGH KiD**

Well after being enlightened by what the [co-operative movement] do, I think maybe that might be the solution. It sounds plan but it's not as there needs to be an alternative for children that aren't academic rather than housing them in portacabins for two years because they can't pass a maths GCSE, that doesn't mean that it should be the end of somebody's education because education is more than Pythagoras. We need to offer alternatives – there needs to be an alternative curriculum for these children to cope with before they end up on the ladder towards prison, like I've discussed earlier on so that's what I think we need.

## **Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

So producing well-rounded human beings focusing on the full person I suppose rather than just being able to do X, Y and Z to pass an exam.

## **David Scott AKA ARGH KiD**

Yeah, exactly. I mean, what is the point of education, what's it supposed to be like? You want people to be challenged. I think failure as well as a huge thing in schools is that they're not allowed to fail. I know this is an artist – failure is the greatest thing that you can have and then coming back from failure as well. But what happens now is just confidence knocking all the time – failure is a negative thing, a negative thing, a negative thing.

And another idea would be to offer alternative would be to use either youth centres or creative writing workshops in the evenings because when I grew up there was youth centres and stuff to go to and there's none of that anymore and they're very few and far between and the ones that do exist like Young Identity in Manchester, they're hugely successful and there's a reason behind that. So if you've got just got a small part of Manchester that's taken in these people that have interest in the arts and drama or writing and it works there, why are we not branching out and having that model based elsewhere? That's the way I'd like to see.

## **Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

Okay, wonderful, thank you. Cilla, your big idea.

## **Cilla Ross, The Co-operative College**

My big idea is the future Co-operative University which is in progress, and which we plan will be delivering programs by the end of 2020. It's a big idea. But it's actually the notion of a university has been around for a long time. But actually, although I'm not elitist about universities, if you unpack the word it actually means universal learning. That's all it means. It doesn't mean hierarchy. Learning can mean kids learning, it can mean anybody learning. What we're trying to do with a Co-operative University is to do something totally different in higher education. Because higher education, in our view is broken. It's broken in a number of ways. There's lots of great people working in there and lots of great ideas. But student debt is soaring.

We've seen terrible examples of in, in our view, massively inflated pay packages for Vice Chancellor, I make no apologies for doing this. You know, it is political. It's not party political. It's not partisan. But also, you know, we've seen the breakdown of a lot of higher education, we feel that it's lost touch with a lot of needs of what young people and any people want.

So what we're trying to do is set up a different type of university. And it's got three main differences. It hasn't got bricks and mortar, so it's very flexible in the way it works. It's totally happy with people making so-called mistakes in their learning, because that's how you learn. It's actually part of a federation. So we're in the process of developing a number of higher education co-ops, right across the country offering different things, they're all constituted as co-ops and doing different types of learning. Whether that be degrees, traditional, higher-ed; right through from community, so you might do an hour somewhere and do that as part of co-operative learning. But also when you get through to the degree and into this so called co-operative University, what's different about this the way it's governed.

So it doesn't matter who you are within that university, whether you do the teaching, whether you do the learning, whether you do the organizing, whether you do the making the dinners with whatever it is – you're a member. You are a part of that. You help to govern that university, so the model of governance is as you would expect in a co-op model of governance. The way you do teaching and learning is very different very much like the way you're talking about, but it's very co-produced. There's structures there, because otherwise people would panic. But the point is you come in, and then you start thinking about how this relates to you, what you can bring to it based on your own experience, and so on. So it's a very different way of doing the teaching and learning.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

Is there an actual physical building location?

**Cilla Ross, The Co-operative College**

Well we actually operate out of the co-operative quarter, which is Holyoke House in Manchester.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

And are you talking about learning new skills or more training around co-operative values that people can take back to their jobs, or both those things?

**Cilla Ross, The Co-operative College**

Both, they're learning both. You know, at the core of a lot of what we do and for example, we're working very closely with – you might have heard of the Preston model, what's going on in Preston, which is where they're sort of trying to develop a co-operative city. So we're working very closely with Preston, about how we actually develop some formal learning in co-operative leadership and practice. Now that can be somebody who works in a co-op. But it can equally be somebody who works in a community who's working in a theatre group or a poetry group. How do you make sure that you do that well and run that properly.

So, there are all sorts of formal courses, degree courses, but also ones around social movements, for example, and which are more arts and creative. It's trying to capture that co-operative spirit. That's what it's doing. We're offering part time courses, part time degrees. You can do them over four years these days. If you sign up you can get a divvy so you get a divvy back as you would expect from a Co-op University and you know we're just trying to, and I think we are achieving this, we've got incredible interest. Nearly every day there's something coming through.

**Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

And are they mostly adults who have jobs and who want flexible learning or are you open to reach people from all different walks of life.



## **Cilla Ross, The Co-operative College**

The latter. But most of the people are getting in touch, they either have missed an opportunity for doing learning. But also there's cultural stuff in there as well. And that's what's equally important to us. It's about a values based approach.

### **Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

It sounds like both of you are talking about quite large scale structural change, which seems perhaps overwhelming. How much sort of room is there to move in with these new ideas today, you know, with systems that we already have, and make an impact.

### **David Scott AKA ARGH KiD**

For me, it's a money thing isn't it, I suppose? Where do you get the money from for new creative places in Manchester or across the country?

### **Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

For space you mean?

### **David Scott AKA ARGH KiD**

Yeah, well for space. Who funds that? I know myself, I've tried to apply to the Arts Council for funding for numerous projects. And again, that's just every year, and again I'm not being party political, but you get cuts upon cuts upon cuts. So yeah, so financial would probably be the big [issue].

### **Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

With the school system as well, it's quite difficult to come in with what you're doing and take time, get students to take time out from curriculum programs. There's not much support for it.

### **David Scott AKA ARGH KiD**

In the schools now and always I've noticed work for the last three or four years, I've cut my fee for what I do when I go into schools year upon year because of all the budgets. And I've got lots of friends that are teachers, and then I was never expensive in any way. But you know, I've got three kids to pay, so it is a living. I go out and do charity work more than doing mainstream schools now, because you haven't got the budget to actually bring people in.

### **Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

But often, if you have a teacher who's on board, does that make a big difference? Is it all about getting a head teacher or a teacher or just someone at the school who can support what you're doing and believes in it?

### **David Scott AKA ARGH KiD**

Yeah, that the teachers little bit because I think said it before, as I can offer a creativity that they're not allowed to offer him as part of their curriculum.

### **Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

Have you found though that by impacting one or two students in one school, that word is spread and what you're doing is mushrooming? Is that something you can see happening?

## **David Scott AKA ARGH KiD**

Yeah, well, getting egotistical but yeah, it's amazing like once you've got the kids on board and the one or two. The success rate is huge in terms of how many people come, because once you've spun it on its head about what poetry could be within two, three minutes of them saying "what do you mean, rap music's poetry?" the pens are scribbling and my job's done within five or 10 minutes. I mean, I like to stay for the full hour. But once you've told them and they're aware of it, it's like...

But for me, another side of it is that what else can you question? If poetry isn't what I've expected to be, so what's literature? What's TV? What's opportunity? What can I do? And once you start knocking down doors, and it's a confidence building thing. You might not go in to be a poet but once you're in that mindset about, "All right, well I presume that that was that, but I'll take that theory into something else"...

## **Cilla Ross, The Co-operative College**

But that's what great education is. It's standing back and looking critically. And saying what else can this thing be? And, you know, not being worried about the conventions of how you look at something or define something but rip it up and play with it and do all sorts of things with it.

## **Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

And Cilla, with the Co-operative University. How much do you hope this will impact the system as a whole?

## **Cilla Ross, The Co-operative College**

Well, we're never going to be as big as a massive, massive university. And we don't want to be although in some ways our ambitions are that big. I mean, the point is we are doing the formal thing of going through the offers for students, and that means we'll have to go through the quality assurance agency. And it means that, you know, the end of it we'll come out hopefully with what are called probationary degree awarding powers. But our ambitions are large in terms of how we do things differently. But we're also very realistic.

It is about leading by example and, I have to be honest, it's about hopefully, like you're offering a brilliant student experience – I know that's overused – but also really decent work for what is actually a very precarious sector. I mean, you know, people who work in education, not like they earn a lot of money, but actually, it's a very precarious sector and co-operatives are committed to decent work. And basically just trying to keep delivering and getting people thinking about different ways of doing the world, really, which is what a co-op is.

## **Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

Well, that's it for this episode. Thank you to both my guests today, Cilla Ross and David Scott AKA ARGH KiD. Now David, any chance of another bit of poetry before we sign off

## **David Scott AKA ARGH KiD**

There is, I'm just trying to have a think about which the most suitable one is because there's some blue humour as well.

## **Elizabeth Alker, presenter**

As clean as possible!

## David Scott AKA ARGH KiD

Okay so this is about this poem is called *Tear Aways* and this is about me growing up in Manchester:

So nights like this I reminisce over you.  
When the street lights reflect on the pavements wet through.  
We were yesterday's strays hooked on girls and glue.  
Smoking weed dropping speed drinking special brew.  
We didn't have paper rounds but wrap paper around roaches told to get lost and found on  
Stagecoaches.  
At the back chatting crap flickin rolled bogies.  
Stealing from Peter to pay PJ Patel with our fake IDs, brothers we raised hell.  
A bunch of tear aways and spray away sharing great days and wrong nights in Longsight on push bikes  
drinking white lights but in hindsight, were we right?  
It's funny how nostalgia can light up your past but there's no way at that rate that those days would last.  
Our lives got split like they've been hit with an axe. But I'm forever walking memory lane, man, and it's  
hard not to laugh.

Thank you.

## Elizabeth Alker, presenter

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More Than a Shop is a collaboration between Co-operatives UK, The Co-op, Co-op News, The Co-operative College and The Co-operative Heritage Trust.

The series is presented by me, Elizabeth Alker. It is produced by Geoff Bird on behalf of Sparklab Productions.