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# **The logic of the marketplace and the ethic of Co-operation: a case study of a Co-operative school**

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## **Abstract**

Over the previous decade, Co-operative schools have emerged as a feature of, and resistance to, processes of marketisation in the English schools sector. The Co-operative schools project, an education initiative of the UK Co-operative movement, has been positioned as a ‘values-based alternative’ to the controversial academies programme. This paper examines the claim of the Co-operative alternative and questions whether the Co-operative schools project risks reproducing neoliberal values through a reliance on the ideal of the ‘self-improving school’. The discussion focuses on the evolution of one inner-city Co-operative school. Through a close examination of its sociohistorical context, and with attention to the experiences of those involved, this case study explores the realities of a Co-operative school striving to operate within in a competitive system.

**Key words:** academies; academisation; Co-operative schools; neoliberalism.

## **Marketisation, academisation and the emergence of the Co-operative schools project.**

Over a period of 30 years, there has been a radical shift in the government and administration of England’s schools. With emphasis on the marketplace mechanisms of ‘choice’ and ‘autonomy’, successive legislation has reduced the role of the local authority, to advance a mixed economy of schools. In this growing marketplace, state agencies join with business and philanthropy to compete in a centrally funded and highly regulated ‘self-improving system’ (DFE, 2010). These processes of marketisation are the accomplishment of neoliberal politics, which have dominated education policy in England since the 1980s (Ball, 2007, 2012; Exley and Ball, 2014; Woodin, 2017).

Central to this reforming process, and to the emergence of the Co-operative schools project as an alternative, is the controversial academies programme (Ball, 2008; Gunter, 2011). Academies are ‘independent state schools’ (DFE, 2010:51), which are funded by central government and independent of local authority control. The academies programme was originally launched in 2000, as a focused initiative to target a small number of failing secondary schools in urban areas

(West and Bailey, 2013). In 2008, the programme expanded as part of New Labour's National Challenge (Harris, 2009; Riddell, 2009) and by the end of that administration there were 203 open academies. In 2010, a new Coalition government entered parliament with radical plans to extend academisation, announcing the ambition that 'academy status should be the norm for all state schools' (DFE, 2010:52). This significant political push, coupled with a new school inspection framework (Courtney, 2013), means that many schools have found themselves vulnerable to 'forced academisation' (Ball, 2016). The outcome is a radically transformed education sector in which schools have been encouraged to compete for limited resources and simultaneously incentivised and coerced to adopt academy status.

The expansion of private enterprise in education has prompted significant criticism from groups of parents, teachers and academics. There is concern that this transformation erodes established educational values, and that wider purposes of education are threatened as individual academic 'performance' becomes closely linked to the micro-economy of the school. As schools become uncoupled from local government there are concerns about the future of the public sector (Simkins et al., 2015) and the erosion of democratic accountability (Hatcher, 2012). As the system becomes more fragmented, and schools strive to succeed in a competitive environment, there is increased potential for unfairness and inequality (Lupton, 2011; Lupton and Thomson, 2015). The transformation of the sector has happened both quickly and slowly. An incremental process of marketization has occurred over 30 years, evolving through a rhetoric of 'choice', 'specialism' and 'autonomy' (Chitty, 1997, 2014; Ball, 2017). However, the recent expansion of the academies programme has dramatically accelerated the scale and pace of change. There are currently 6996 open academies, representing a 3346% increase since 2010 (DFE, 2018).

Emerging from within this reform process, and in response to changing threats and opportunities, the UK Co-operative movement has extended into the sector with a range of Co-operative schools. These have appealed to groups of parents, teachers and academics because of their positioning as a values-based alternative within the wider competitive system (Thorpe, 2013; Shaw, 2015). Initial investment came from the Co-operative Group, which provided legal and financial resources, in partnership with the Co-operative College, which developed a vision and a strategy for growth within the education sector (Woodin, 2015:114). The Co-operative schools

project offers an approach based on the Co-operative values of *self-help*, *self-responsibility*, *democracy*, *equality*, *equity* and *solidarity* (Co-operative College, 2010).

Co-operative ‘trust’ schools were launched in 2008, receiving a positive endorsement from the New Labour government (DCSF, 2009), which positioned the model as one option for underperforming National Challenge schools (Harris, 2009; Riddell, 2009). Later, with a change of government and the dramatic expansion of the academies programme (DFE, 2010), many schools turned to the Co-operative ‘trust’ model for a values-based alternative which allowed them to ‘remain within the Local Authority family’ (SCS and NASUWT, 2011). Other schools urged for a Co-operative ‘converter’ academy, which would allow them to pursue academy status whilst operating according to the Co-operative values and principles – this model was developed in 2011 (Thorpe, 2013).

As the wider education landscape shifted and positive stories of Co-operative possibility began to appear in the media (Mansell, 2011; Birch, 2012) more schools were inspired by the potential of the Co-operative schools project. The ‘co-operative experiment’ (Woodin, 2012:327) gathered pace during a period of intense education reform and it came to be regarded as a ‘movement’ (Thorpe, 2011:61) of resistance and hope (Facer et al., 2012). In 2015, the Co-operative College claimed a network of 800 schools, which was ‘connecting a whole new generation with the Co-operative values and principles’ (Co-operative College, 2015b). During this period of rapid growth the Co-operative College extended a welcome to all comers - some schools grasped a sense of possibility in the Co-operative approach and others saw it as a way to protect themselves from the creeping ravages of the unpopular academisation programme (Facer et al., 2012; Woodin, 2012).

As Woodin (2017) suggests, the extent to which Co-operative schools represent an alternative to neoliberalism is a complex issue, which this paper seeks to explore further. The focus is on the evolution of one inner-city Co-operative school, which joined the Co-operative schools project in 2009. In this setting, external and internal motivations played a role in ‘becoming co-operative’ while also raising possibilities, tensions and contradictions as Co-operative ideals were applied within a highly competitive system. The case study seeks to explore this complexity and raises questions about the potential of Co-operative schools to offer an alternative. Finally, this paper

asks if the Co-operative schools project risks reproducing neoliberal values through its reliance on the notion of the ‘self-improving school’, particularly in those school environments where there are considerable constraints.

### **Methodology**

This paper reports on a qualitative study of the Co-operative schools project in England, which took place in 2013-2016. The broader inquiry included interviews with key personnel at the Co-operative College and the Co-operative Group. The focal inquiry included research visits to four Co-operative ‘converter’ academies. Data was collected from semi-structured interviews, student focus groups and participant observation. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed, observations and reflections were recorded in a regularly maintained field journal, and an evolving process of thematic analysis was applied. This paper presents a single case study of one Co-operative ‘converter’ academy, which is referred to using the pseudonym Steepston Co-operative Academy – pseudonyms are also used for all participants.

Steepston Co-operative Academy was visited in May 2015, over four consecutive days. The study involved observation of the school at work – in lessons and assemblies, on the corridors and in the cafeteria. Interview data was collected from twenty-nine participants (including ten students, eight classroom teachers, five members of the senior leadership team (SLT), four support staff and two trainee teachers). A range of topics were explored during these interviews. A key discussion, particularly amongst the staff, involved the initial decision to join the Co-operative schools project and then to become a Co-operative ‘converter’ academy. All participants explained what the Co-operative ethos meant to them, and were asked to consider what difference it made in the school community.

This case study is ‘an exercise in contemporary history’ (Ball, 1990), which describes and analyses the particular context of the school, focusing on processes of education reform and policy enactment (Braun et al., 2011). Whilst the research was designed to investigate how the alternative of Co-operation is interpreted within the school setting, it also provides an opportunity to follow the reforming processes of marketization that have enabled the Co-operative movement to enter the sector. The case study provides an account of one school’s journey by tracing the shifting economic, political and ideological constraints and possibilities,

finally relating these to an understanding of what a Co-operative school *is* and what it might become.

### **The case study of Steepston Co-operative Academy**

In 1984, Steepston Comprehensive School was purpose-built as part of a major reorganisation programme in the city of Strandgate. Since then, Steepston has reinvented itself many times, responding to successive education reform with a mixture of necessity and imagination. As the education market has expanded, and performance pressures have intensified, Steepston has used external changes, welcome or otherwise, to inspire internal transformation and develop a strong ethos across the school. Steepston became a Co-operative ‘trust’ school in 2009 and assumed Co-operative ‘converter’ academy status in 2011.

Steepston’s local circumstances are such that it is likely to remain a school that is called upon to innovate and improve. Situated in a ‘low-wage, high welfare’ coastal city (Centre for Cities, 2016), the school serves a community that can, in part, be defined in terms of its socio-economic deprivation. The school operates a comprehensive 11-18 admissions policy in a highly selective borough and, in comparison to the national average, there are fewer students at Steepston who attain at the upper end of the scale. Student attainment in national examinations (GCSE) is below the national average. The school supports approximately 1100 students and is routinely undersubscribed. The number of students who are eligible for free school meals is 26%, which is considerably higher than the national average. The proportion of minority ethnic students is low but steadily increasing, as is the number of students for whom English is not their first language. The school has a special on-site unit for students with physical disabilities and a larger proportion of students than the national average receive support for special education needs and/or disabilities.

Principal, Mike Carpenter, a passionate advocate for equality and democracy in education emphasised the complex socio-economic context of the school and the negative effect of selection in the wider authority. He described Steepston as a ‘constrained’ school (Lightman, 2011), which is unfairly served in a system of top-down targets and regulatory performance assessment,

There are ‘confident’ schools and there are ‘constrained’ schools. The confident schools sit on able populations, in middle class areas and attract well-fed children, who are well looked after with all the usual parental backing, and they do really well. They can take risks because their children will rock up and no matter what they do, they will always do very well in public examinations ... The constrained schools, schools like us, can’t [take risks] because someone comes in and inspects the hell out of us. They are looking for why we don’t achieve at above national average. They don’t see the fact that [we’re in] a selective authority [with] white working-class children etcetera, etcetera. They assume everything is the fault [of poor teaching]. (Mike Carpenter, principal)

Despite these challenges, Steepston works hard to secure positive outcomes for its students and has a good reputation for creative practice and strong leadership. It has received a number of prestigious national awards that recognise its strength in innovative learning, performing arts, community leadership and professional development e.g. Artsmark Gold and Investors in People. School improvement has been recognised by the government School Achievement Award Scheme (SAAS), a programme of financial reward granted where results substantially improve over a four-year period (Stevens et al., 2003). In 2015, Steepston was preparing for a routine school inspection from the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted). In previous inspections, Steepston had been judged favourably over a period of 10 years, receiving a ‘good’ judgement at its most recent inspection in 2012. In the same year, Steepston received a special commendation for its ‘outstanding’ spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) curriculum and was identified by Ofsted as a ‘best-practice example’.

Arriving at the school in 1995, Mike Carpenter remembered a culture of negativity and a poor local reputation. Rebuilding a positive relationship with the local community was his first task, and has remained a key priority for the continued success of the school. Mike emphasised the longstanding relationship of informal co-operation between the school and its community,

We [are] an outward facing school. Trying to build a level of consensus in a very difficult white, working-class community can only be done through co-operation. In the old days we had adult education, youth work, family work ... Then adult education went ... youth work got all centralised and we kept open to the community through things like sport, art, Spanish classes ... It was always where we were coming from, with heart ... It is a school for its community and, really, the values were fairly well entrenched (Mike Carpenter, principal)

One of the ways that Steepston strives to meet the challenges of its circumstances and its own aspiration for success is through the creation of a strong co-operative narrative within the school. There was a story of shared endeavour told at Steepston, the staff and students felt that they were part of a common community which was ‘working together’ to achieve its shared goals. Louise, a Y9 student, explained it like this:

Everyone works together. You are not striving for yourself exactly, you are striving to work and help others as well, not just you. You help others instead of doing it by yourself and [Steepston] is centred around that. As much as you are working for yourself you are also trying to help everybody. So in class, we will do a certain amount of single work but we will work as a team as well. (Student, Y9)

Here Louise touched upon the co-operative pedagogy that is at the heart of all classroom practice and curriculum design across the school. Her account revealed the way in which the narrative of the school is ‘centred around’ the idea that ‘everyone works together’. It is important to notice that as Louise talked about her experience of Steepston, she naturally turned to an example of classroom practice, using this to describe how the students both work for themselves and ‘work as a team’. Louise was referring to the Kagan (2001) co-operative learning programme, a commercially available resource with an emphasis on democratic practice. Steepston adopted this approach when it became a Co-operative ‘trust’ school in 2009 because, as one teacher explained, ‘it embodies the values that we [wanted] to develop’ (English teacher). The Kagan learning programme was integral to Steepston’s teaching and learning method as one aspect of a wider co-operative pedagogy, which also included school organisation and structure, and was expressed neatly in the operating philosophy of ‘everyone works together’.

Mike reflected that the Co-operative model provided ‘a sense of travel – it gave us a values driven sense of where we were going and who we were’. He believed that the Co-operative values contribute a sense of purpose and trust throughout the school community,

Every time we have had difficult decisions to make, we have gathered around the values like the American Indians would gather round a totem pole. It has become something that people now believe in and trust the leadership to deliver on. (Mike Carpenter, principal)



Looking back at the education reform cycles of three governments, Mike reflected that the focus and financial resources of the Specialist Schools and Extended Schools programmes were crucial in the co-operative development of the school. New Labour's emphasis on collaborative partnership and co-operation (Bevir and O'Brien, 2001) saw a growth of initiatives that drew expertise from beyond the education sector, for instance the extension of the Specialist Schools programme (DFES, 2005b) and the development of the Extended Schools programme (DFES, 2005a). The former was designed to help schools develop a distinctive specialism, and drew upon private sponsorship and government grants to develop curriculum expertise and co-operation between schools (Bell and West, 2003). The Extended Schools programme sought to emphasise 'community-oriented schooling' (Dyson and Raffo, 2007) by joining up services from the public, private and charitable sectors to develop schools as a resource for the whole community (Wilkin et al., 2003).

Steepston Community College was one of the first schools to benefit from a performing arts specialism in 1998. The school used the additional finance to develop a transformative 'architecture of co-operation' (Sennett, 2013) that remains in place today and offers two pillars of support to the current Co-operative ethos of the school. The first aspect of this was the introduction of an innovative 'house system' for pastoral care. This was a vertical structure of five 'houses', which have a subject specialism as their focus. Students chose their preferred specialism e.g. arts, languages, science, sports or technology and were supported to spend two morning sessions developing expertise in an area of personal interest. One teacher explained that the idea was 'to start [the students] with something that they really want to do in the morning, to get them excited about learning' (form tutor). Other mornings were dedicated to pastoral care and academic support, including a regular 'circle-time' session. During the research visit, a 'circle-time' discussion about responsibilities beyond school was observed, the conversation included caring for others, domestic chores, voluntary work and paid employment. The students shared their experiences and were encouraged to comment and reflect on the conversation. The vertical structure helped students to build relationships by providing a supportive 'mixed-aged' environment, with democratic opportunities for students to act as mentors and role models. During interviews, both staff and students described the school in terms of 'a family' where 'we all belong'. A student explained how this sense of relationship and co-operation is linked to the structure of the school,

If you go to other schools you see that their tutor [groups] are separated into year groups ... whereas [in our tutor groups] we have got people from [all the] different years and we communicate together, like a small family. We are a big family if you take all of us. We just co-operate with each other. (Student, Y10)

The second aspect was the adoption of a 'theatre paradigm' as a pedagogical mechanism for creating the 'working together' ethos that permeates the school. The students were encouraged to think about themselves as an important part of everyday performance, where everyone has a role to play and all depend on each other to achieve overall success. Mike saw this as a way to create a positive ethos across the school. He and his team used it to raise expectations by emphasising the imperatives of theatre performance: self-discipline, motivation, high-expectation, unity of purpose and constant dialogue. One teacher explained the theatre paradigm as,

[The theatre paradigm is] everybody valuing each other and looking after each other, everybody taking their own responsibility, meeting deadlines, being on time etcetera. ... Individually you have to know your lines, but you have also got to work as a group. You have to turn up on time for the performances. You can't be late, you can't miss your cue, you can't not be on stage. (Teacher)

Here it is possible to see how the established 'working together' ethos of the theatre paradigm, with its emphasis self-responsibility and solidarity with others, has underpinned the more recent transition to the formalised values and principles of the Co-operative movement.

Mike spoke in cautious terms when I asked about the motivations for becoming a Co-operative 'trust' school, explaining that it came about because of the National Challenge. This was a school improvement initiative that set new standards for Y11 achievement, schools that fell below the threshold of 30% achieving 5 A\*-C grades were classed as 'failing' and threatened with closure. Mike remembered that Steepston was 'named and shamed' on a list of the 638 lowest performing schools in the country. Local authorities were given notice to develop a 'rescue plan' for their schools. Mike remembered a political drive towards private partnership models e.g. foundation trusts, sponsored academies and private finance initiative (PFI) building programmes. It was a tense time. The leadership at Steepston was determined to preserve the strong identity of the school and was desperate to avoid sponsored academisation. Mike recalled,

‘we were given three solutions – it was a knife edge really. The local authority was either going to close us, sponsor us, or find us a kind of blind date’. It was at this time that Mike was introduced to the Co-operative College and began to consider a Co-operative future for the school. He remembered feeling excited by the Co-operative vision for schools, which, he said, ‘chimed with what I felt about education’ and ‘fit with the way we see ourselves’. Following consultation, Steepston became a Co-operative ‘trust’ school in 2009.

Whilst Mike admitted that the Co-operative model ‘saved our bacon’, it is possible to see the National Challenge at the start of an new era of precariousness for schools. There has been a recent intensification of policy to measure progress, improve performance and ‘drive up standards’ (Ball, 2017). Increasingly it seems that standardised measures and centralised approaches miss the finer points of what it is to be a school and educate a child. To illustrate this wider point it is helpful to consider the contradictions of Steepston’s designation as a ‘failing’ National Challenge school. In fact, against other significant measures Steepston was performing well in 2008. In July, Mike was named Head Teacher of the Year in a prestigious regional contest and in November, Ofsted judged the school ‘outstanding’ overall. That judgement enabled Steepston to join the SSAT Leading Edge Partnership Programme<sup>1</sup> - this is an exclusive, collaborative school-improvement initiative where ‘high-performing’ schools learn from each other in a peer-to peer network.

With the expansion of the academies programme from 2010, the education landscape began to shift once again and the SLT felt that Steepston’s position was potentially vulnerable. Assistant Principal, Katy Gorton, explained how the option to become a ‘converter’ academy was viewed as a way of overcoming the persistent threat of forced academisation,

[There was] a looming fear of being taken over and being forced to become an academy. The nature of the children that we have means that we are always fighting the battle to be just over floor target ... we are always just keeping our heads above water. So, while we were on a successful trend, we were in a position to become a ‘converter’ academy rather than being forced [to become a ‘sponsored’] academy. We made the decision to take that path and become a co-

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<sup>1</sup>For more information see <https://www.ssatuk.co.uk/ssat-membership/leading-edge/>

operative academy in order to look after ourselves (Katy Gorton, assistant principal)

When Katy says ‘while we were on a successful trend’, she is referring to the ‘outstanding’ judgement of 2008, which was unlikely to be returned at the next inspection. When the SLT were considering the options in 2011 they were aware of planned changes to the Ofsted inspection framework, particularly the removal of contextual value added (CVA)<sup>2</sup> statistics, which would make it harder for schools like Steepston to achieve the higher inspection ratings from 2012 (Courtney, 2013). Inspectors came in January 2012 and awarded a ‘good’ judgement.

At the time of the research visit, the school was preparing for the next inspection cycle, which was overdue. The staff felt beleaguered and disrupted by the constant threat of Ofsted. Mike explained,

There is no escaping performativity and market forces and those things that are totally alien to what we are trying to achieve as a Co-operative school. It’s almost as if we are part of a resistance movement, an underground movement, trying to survive in impossible times. That’s how it feels anyway. (Mike Carpenter, principal)

Mike and his team are working within a system that they do not agree with. The language of ‘resistance’, ‘survival’ and ‘striving’ was repeated across several interviews, where the Co-operative values were expressed as both a source of strength and an expression of their marginality and vulnerability. They felt that that they were trying to achieve something special in impossible circumstances. There was a general acceptance that the path was difficult, that progress takes time and that, occasionally, some compromises must be made.

One significant area of tension and compromise was on the strategy for examination entry and preparation, which linked to the wider context of performativity. Mike insisted, ‘we have never cheated, we have refused to game the system’. Nevertheless, he admitted that it was getting harder to act with integrity, and he explained that, ‘we will be closed if we can’t compete on progress and achievement in English’.

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<sup>2</sup>Contextual value added (CVA) was a statistical measure used by Ofsted until 2012 when it was replaced with the simplified value-added (VA) measure. CVA accounted for contextual factors e.g. gender, ethnicity and socio-economic status. The new framework assumes that all pupils have the same starting points and are expected to make the same progress.

Whilst Steepston was trying to resist ‘the exam factory tendency’ (Teacher), it was clear that it was increasingly difficult to do so. Several teachers expressed unease about the diagnostic and strategic approach to exam preparation that had developed through work with Challenge Partners<sup>3</sup> and PiXL Club<sup>4</sup>. As Mike discussed the relationship with these external school improvement agencies, he was critical of the lack of support from the Co-operative College. He suggested that, in terms of resources and strategy, it had been ‘way off the pace’ in comparison to other providers in the sector.

The whole education network is thriving and we are part of that. The PiXL network is absolutely superb, and we’re part of Challenge Partners. The difference is that, with each of those, they cost me a lot of money and I am prepared to pay it because of what we get back. The Co-operative College ... are doing it on half a sixpence and ... consequently aren’t moving quick enough. [They] don’t know what our expertise is and don’t know what we’re trying to achieve. (Mike Carpenter, principal)

The research revealed that Steepston did not understand itself as ‘a’ Co-operative school but rather saw itself as a school with a co-operative ethos. The ethos of the school and the priority of ‘working together’ began in 1998 with the theatre paradigm and the Specialist Schools investment, and has more recently been understood in terms of the values and principles of the Co-operative movement. The information technology (IT) manager, expressed Steepston’s long history like this:

I think it's been built gradually over a long time, over the last twenty years ... You don't just become a co-operative school. Any school that thinks that you can just become a co-operative school today and have a co-operative ethos throughout the place [is mistaken]. They can begin to put things in place, but they won't be a fully co-operative school for a long time. Because it takes a lot of time and it's built on a foundation of change, and learning together, and working together, to achieve something more. (Roger Griffith, IT manager and former student)

The suggestion that Steepston was built on a ‘foundation of change’ reveals the dynamic and responsive way that the school understood itself and its values. At Steepston, the co-operative ethos was not a static ideal but a continually dynamic practice of consensus and relationship.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.challengepartners.org/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.pixl.org.uk/>

Mike Carpenter draws inspiration from the origins of the Co-operative movement in 1844 and sums up the contemporary challenge when he says,

Toad Lane is a great story but it is a 19th century market story based on the Industrial Revolution and how the people of Rochdale made sense of it at the time. What we have got to make sense of is a very different world, in a particular education system ... that is very competitive and very based on, really, anti-co-operative principles. (Mike Carpenter, principal)

In March 2017, Steepston Co-operative Academy received a category 3 Ofsted judgment of 'Requires Improvement'. Whilst this does not place the school at immediate risk of closure it does mean that pressure to improve on progress and achievement will intensify in an environment of increased scrutiny and surveillance. In such circumstances it is probable that there will be further compromises to the co-operative ethos of this 'constrained' school.

### **Conclusion**

This 'contemporary history' of Steepston Co-operative Academy offers a dual perspective. On the one hand, we see an increase in neoliberal reform policies, the intensification of the school improvement agenda and the dominant logic of the marketplace. On the other we learn about a school community, striving to survive in difficult circumstances, determined to establish and maintain an ethic of co-operation, which it has nurtured over a period of twenty years. The case study illustrates the complex situation in which the school operates, one in which the staff are implicated in routine processes of neoliberal governance and performance whilst simultaneously striving to be activists for co-operative change and transformation.

The neoliberal reform agenda provided both the context and the impetus for the Co-operative movement to enter the education sector. The research shows that the development of a marketplace in education and the increased value of competition provided both the possibility of and the demand for Co-operative schools. These models appealed to schools because they provided a framework to negotiate the changing landscape in a way that might keep them in touch with 'traditional' educational values. However, as we can see in the case of Steepston, the fact that these values already existed and were, in fact, established and resourced through well-funded government initiatives such as the Specialist School Programme and the Extended Schools Programme calls into question the particular value of the Co-operative schools project. That the Co-operative movement has been unable to provide financial or practical support to

schools as they continue as Co-operative entities is particularly ironic. This leads me to consider the idea that, rather than creating an alternative to neoliberal education, the Co-operative movement has rather relied on neoliberal reform and on the neoliberal concept of the ‘self-improving school’. This is an issue for the Co-operative schools project, which is a product of the reforming agenda that it seeks to resist, and for schools such as Steepston, which committed to co-operation an alternative to competitive individualism but frequently find that their intrinsic values are curtailed by the external demands of the wider system.

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