

SCHOOLS AS COMMUNITY HUBS: POLICY CONTEXTS, EDUCATIONAL RATIONALES, AND DESIGN CHALLENGES

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Abstract

There is increasing interest in making more effective use of schools as community hubs, both in Australia and internationally. Investment in shared facilities aims to engage parents and local communities in schooling, encourage civic participation, co-ordinate educational and community services and overcome disadvantages of location or service provision. Parent and community partnership with schools is an important priority within current educational policy, at both state and Commonwealth levels. It is a priority that can be supported from different parts of the political spectrum, fitting liberal conceptions of parental choice and private investment as well as more communitarian conceptions of local engagement, civic renewal and participatory design.

This paper provides historical background, policy context and educational rationales for the rise of the community hub concept. It discusses how schools as community hubs have provided early childhood services, through both state funding and public-private partnership. It then focuses on the lack of alignment between the Commonwealth Government's top-down scheme of school capital investment, *Building the Education Revolution*, and other major public investments into digital infrastructure for schools. This lack of alignment points to a wider lack of community input into school redevelopment projects, alongside a fundamental difficulty in identifying the appropriate constituents of a target community. The paper concludes with four key challenges to the design and implementation of sustainable schools-based community hubs: governance and consultation; cross-jurisdictional issues; physical vs. digital infrastructure; and measurement of effectiveness.

Introduction

Investment by Australian governments in new school facilities is a key element of educational reform and civic renewal programs. Schools are pivotal institutions in many urban regeneration projects in Australia and elsewhere, as governments seek to revitalize local communities and invest in human capital (Cummings & Dyson, 2007; Dahlstedt, 2009). In a policy environment that has fostered school choice and mobility, recent capital investment in public schools now seeks to minimise distinctions between schools *in* the community and schools *of* the community. For example, new public school buildings in the state of Victoria are “designed and constructed so they can be assets for the whole community” (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2006). The Commonwealth Government’s recent *Building the Education Revolution* (BER) program aimed to “build learning environments to help children, families and communities participate in activities that will support achievement, develop learning potential and bring communities together” (Australian Government, 2009, p.2).

The rhetoric of *community hubs* is widely used to signify this convergence of spatial, educational and social planning. The term is an irresistible mix of the normative (community) and the programmatic (hub) that is sprinkled liberally across policy and planning documents in government and non-government sectors. It is a flexible yet contested concept characterised by divergent views on how, and for whom, the concept is deployed. This paper analyses the conceptual and policy frameworks underpinning the idea of a school-based community hub. In exploring the ways in which community hubs change the ways in which locals use local infrastructure and interact in particular localities, it contributes to the broader debate on schooling and place, and to what Gulson and Syme (2007:97) have called the ‘spatial turn’ in the social sciences. We begin with an historical overview of contexts in which closer relationships between schools and their surrounding communities have been imagined. The idea that school infrastructure should serve purposes beyond formal schooling emerges periodically in twentieth century debate, but the policy vision is characteristically centralised and top-down. We argue that this is not necessarily a paradox (the framing of system-wide policy is the *raison-d’être* of state education departments) but it creates tensions when local visions of community hubs differ from those of central bureaux. We then focus on the current Australian emphasis on early intervention and educational partnerships as the dominant policy driver of community hubs. However, advancing wider claims that schools are assets for the whole community requires scrutiny of school resources and capabilities. In the paper’s final section we raise some questions about the physical and strategic design of these spaces to clarify how wider community engagement with school resources can be optimised.

Background: rise of the community hub

Since its inception, mass public schooling has been asked to forge stronger links between parents, schools and communities – including the use of schools for wider civic, educational, social service and recreational purposes (Franklin, Block, & Popkewitz 2004; Theobald & Selleck 1990). The

relationship of schools and their surrounding communities rises to prominence in educational and policy debates every few decades in the twentieth century. Although these debates are modulated by changing educational and political rationales, making more effective use of school infrastructure and resources is a resonant theme.

Educational and social planning invests schools, especially primary schools with their neighbourhood location, with particular spatial and sociological agency. Schools are not simply part of the community, they actively constitute it. Advocates of the area school movement, prominent in southern Australia in the mid-twentieth century, explicitly sought to widen the affiliations and experiences of small rural communities along with the extension of secondary education. In some cases this came at the expense of sustained parental involvement in the maintenance of small rural schools (Halsey, 2011). Modernist planners argued that school catchments defined communities and schools helped integrate them. Australian planners drew on UK and US models, particularly community centres on UK housing estates, to argue for the grouping of educational and recreational facilities to achieve infrastructural efficiencies and establish service and social links (Bunning, 1945).

In the 1970s, a fusion of ideas around de-schooling, decentralization and participatory democracy made school boundaries more permeable, through experiments with community involvement in curriculum and governance, the use of urban settings as learning resources and the advent of 'community schools' (Fitzgerald et al., 1976; Pettit, 1980). Debates over urban and civic infrastructure also called into question strict jurisdictional distinctions between local recreation (municipal) and education (state) facilities. Guidelines and model agreements to encourage community use of school buildings and grounds outside school hours and to incorporate a shared use perspective in new developments were developed by state and local governments and the non-government school sector (Connell, 1993, Fitzgerald et al., 1976). In Western Australia there has been an almost continuous policy push on shared use since the 1970s (Western Australian Local Government Association 2010). The evidence on how widespread or successful advocacy for wider use and integrated planning actually was is fragmented, though there has been a spread of shared school-community libraries over time Bundy (2003) and there is data showing sharing of school facilities occurring across the government and non-government sectors in Victoria and New South Wales (Victorian Competition and Efficiency Commission, 2009; see also New South Wales Legislative Assembly, 2004). The degree to which the educational visions of the 1970s were ever realised, or even widely subscribed to, is more difficult to track. Even in 1976, it was unclear that school-community links were about the community's commitment to an abstract educational ideal: as Fitzgerald et al pointed out at the time, "links to schools are focussed on everyday issues, not abstractions such as educational goals" (1976, p.183).

Two themes underpin recent developments around the school-community interface in the late twentieth century: service coordination and infrastructure efficiency. Concerns to connect schools with health and welfare systems informed discussion and experimentation with 'full-service' or extended use schools, with Australian educationists again looking to the UK and US for inspiration (Semmens and Stoke, 1997). Black (2011) summarises the range of institutional models on offer in Australia as school-based and school-linked. Filardo et al (2010) also argue for more precise use of terminology,

observing that terms such as shared use, co-location, full service and community schools involve different philosophical, funding, regulatory and operational concerns. The second theme – infrastructure efficiency – is a whole-of-government approach to optimise capital investment through multiple uses of buildings and public sites, ‘smart’ services that produce environmental and energy savings, and reforms to procurement and asset management processes.

As Althaus (2011) observes, education is near the social heart of the Labor Party, and system-wide government school rebuilding programs were initiated during the decade of Labor dominance of state administrations. The condition of government schools’ physical fabric was symptomatic of deteriorating social infrastructure and public disinvestment in Australia in the late twentieth century, an issue to which voters were becoming increasingly sensitive (McShane, 2012). State governments and their local authorities are the locus of public service provision, and they control 85% of the nation’s non-financial public assets (Althaus, 2011). Infrastructure renewal was a task that fell to them.

Victoria’s urban and school regeneration program that rolled out in the mid 2000s was one of the Commonwealth’s largest. Sixteen metropolitan and regional centres rated highly on indices of disadvantage were selected for major school renewal projects. These projects involved school closures or mergers and the construction of new campuses. The new campuses involved shared-use or co-located facilities, in partnership with local authorities and/or non-government agencies. More radically, the Victorian government contracted with a private consortium to build and maintain eleven new schools on Melbourne’s fast-growing urban fringe (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and Department of Treasury and Finance, 2009). Departmental literature on the high school rebuilding program in Victoria carried an explicit message of earlier educational failures, and argued that starting with a clean slate was the best way to break the cycle of disadvantage (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, nd.). In some cases, notably Broadmeadows in Melbourne’s north, school regeneration was located within a vision of a wider learning community or learning city involving the development of organisations and networks as well as physical capital (Wilson, 2010).

Victorian regeneration projects involved some lengthy consultations with local communities, but local wishes did not always coincide with central planning. School regeneration in Colac, a town of 10,000 people in south-west Victoria, involved construction of a new high school and shared school-community facilities on a greenfield site. Some local residents objected strenuously to the planned closure of the municipal public library, which had operated in the town centre for many years, in favour of a shared library at the school site. Closure plans were thwarted, and the original library now operates as an annex about one kilometre from the new facility. Reasons cited for opposing the joint-use arrangements include location, loss of the service’s independence, restrictions on book stocks and internet access, and a sense that library patrons are on school grounds (Hart, 2008).

Localised versions of schools as community hubs in Australia have been framed by concerns over the fate of school sites, particularly where they are perceived to be under-utilised and under-enrolled. Community responses have built activity around the sites to stress their value and adaptability as public resources, not simply school sites. An outer-eastern Melbourne public school we refer to as

Hillview Primary School is a good example. Hillview has an expansive site prominently located at the top of the village-like suburb's main street. Faced with underutilisation and possible closure of the school, parents and local businesses built a commercial kitchen, signed up with the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Foundation to link the facility with the school curriculum, and increased the level of out-of-school hours usage to the extent that a part-time coordinator was required, paid from facility hire revenue. Although this school is not in a high wealth area, the contribution of professional parents, including an architect and project manager, clearly helped. Retaining the site in public hands through demographic and enrolment cycles was articulated as the main objective of the activist group (personal communication, School Council President).

Focusing on Early Childhood

Recent state government articulation of the school as a community hub concept is more exclusively focused on connections between schooling and early childhood services. Early childhood services have been a troublesome area of policy and market activity in Australia in recent decades. Structural labour market change, notably increasing participation of women in the workforce, has seen steadily growing demand for childcare. 52% of Australian children aged 0-12 accessed some form of childcare in 2010/11, with a reported level of unmet demand for 8% of this cohort (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). Despite – or perhaps because of – such a high level of institutional care, service engagement and coordination has been problematic in the early childhood area (Brennan, 2009). A burgeoning literature on the significance of early intervention for positive health and educational outcomes, together with an Australia-wide push through the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) to boost pre-school enrolments, influenced policy and structural changes to state government portfolios (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009). State health authorities previously played a major role in the governance of early childhood. This has given way to the location of young children within an educational program that extends, according to the Victorian Department of Education, from 0-18 (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2008, p. 22). The move of early childhood policy from the Victorian Department of Health to the Department of Education is representative of a structural shift that has happened in five Australian states or territories.

Two examples illustrate this development. In NSW, the Blue Mountains School Centred Community Hubs (SCCH) project provides 'community hubs' in five school sites. Their aim is to improve children's home learning environment, enhance child-centred referral networks, and enable successful transition to school (Singh & Woodrow, 2010). Qualitative feedback from parents and stakeholders involved with the project suggests that there may be a closer relationship between 'everyday issues' and abstract 'educational goals' than Fitzgerald (cited above) imagined:

- SCCH senior manager: "people come there with the sole purpose of having somewhere for their child to play and maybe get a cup of coffee and talk to another parent. That's all... there won't be any other agenda" (p.31).
- Parent: "Making new friends. Learning to share. Negotiating social situations" (p.51).

- Parent: “As a parent very happy to see child play and learn” (p.65).
- Parent: “getting to know others, establishing friends pre-school, seeing others in a school setting” (p.xxiii) (from Singh & Woodrow, 2010).

The second example is Derrimut Primary School, which opened in 2010. Derrimut is in Melbourne’s outer west, one of Australia’s fastest growing regions. Co-located on the site is a YMCA facility for long-day childcare, which also offers formal pre-school programs. The school is also a pioneer public-private partnership (PPP) in Victorian education. Education PPPs have appeared throughout Australia, embraced across the ideological spectrum of parties in government, but are positioned within a highly contested public debate over public interest and value for money. While Crump and Slee (2005) are amongst educational writers who contest this move, other views – including the testimony of principals – raise questions about conflicts between time spent on site management, and community engagement and educational planning (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, nd.; Dunn, 2012).

BER, digital infrastructure and community engagement

How does BER fit into the picture? As we saw above, the secondary project aims of BER resonated with state-level moves to connect schools with their surrounding communities.

BER followed similar coordination processes through COAG as the early childhood agenda and other national schooling initiatives (e.g. NAPLAN and the Digital Education Revolution) although relationships between state and Commonwealth bureaucrats engaged in the program were fractious (Althaus, 2011). Objections were raised to downward cost shifting, a significant theme in inter-governmental relations in recent years, with the Queensland government suggesting that BER would add an estimated AUD \$50 million to the Department of Education’s annual maintenance bill (Australian National Audit Office, 2010, p.142). BER’s specification that funded facilities would be made available for community use “at no or low cost” (Australian Government, 2009) begs further questions of resourcing and policy coordination. The extent to which the program was successful in achieving its primary aim – to deliver medium-term economic stimulus across Australia – has received little attention amidst political controversy surrounding the program. The implications of the program’s ‘cookie-cutter’ approach to school capital investment and community engagement has received even less notice.

Combined state and Commonwealth government school regeneration programs within the past decade represent the largest capital investment in school buildings undertaken in Australia. Alongside this there has been significant public investment in the digital infrastructure of government and non-government schools including the development of centralised educational websites and intranets such as Victoria’s Ultranet (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development 2010a), faster broadband connections to schools, and providing students with notebook computers (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2008). Such publicly funded initiatives can be contrasted with non-profit initiatives such as the US-based Connect2Compete which offers low-cost broadband connection and laptops for accessing educational content (Connect2Compete, 2012). Yet BER’s strategy was inattentive to these concurrent program developments: the most glaring evidence

of this failure to appreciate the interconnections of physical and digital infrastructure was demonstrated by BER's specification that information and communication technology (ICT) would not be included in funding for school libraries – the scheme's most popular building type. The picture of a book-lined school library may be comforting for library traditionalists, and valid in promoting print literacy and love of deep reading, but it is poorly connected with school library developments, an issue that has recently been the subject of a federal parliamentary inquiry (Parliament of Australia 2011). Indeed, the library sector itself proposes a number of community-oriented digital services, all of which could be offered by a community hub:

- Provision of reliable educational digital content.
- Lifelong digital literacy training.
- Engagement with hard-to-reach learners.
- Online government services.
- Personal access via community / municipal broadband - in 2011, less than 40% of Australian public libraries had fast broadband (Australian Library and Information Association, 2011).

The Colac community hub discussed above combines two existing secondary schools with a shared-use library and planned ICT lab, recreation and arts facilities and community meeting rooms. An interesting comparison with a non-school hub is provided by the Churchill and District Hub in Latrobe, Victoria. This AUD \$4.75m redevelopment of the old Town Hall includes a neighbourhood centre, child care centre and pre-school, public library and internet access, and houses a service centre for government agencies (Latrobe City, 2005).

There can be little doubt that the current surge of enthusiasm for schools-as-community hubs raises some important and exciting questions about the physical and strategic design of these spaces, particularly as digital resources become more widely available in a number of countries. Yet it should be appreciated that the kind of resources suggested in the list above cannot be provided through software and hardware alone. Specialised training and staffing will be required for community hubs to successfully offer community-oriented digital services on an ongoing basis, and it should not be assumed that such staff will be supplied or managed by a host school. Neither should it be assumed that the provision of digital resources and intermediaries by schools as community hubs is a necessary design prerequisite. The feedback captured from parents and the senior manager of NSW Blue Mountains School Centred Community Hubs (SCCH) project discussed above indicated that the main achievement of the community hubs as perceived by these users was the provision of a free playgroup and peer support network (Singh & Woodrow, 2010, p. xxiii). It is questionable whether digital services would be high priority in this environment, which in turn supports arguments for greater community engagement during the planning of community hubs.

The wider lack of community input into school redevelopment projects has been a persistent issue in public commentary in Australia and elsewhere. The UK's ambitious *Building Schools for the Future* program was criticised for lack of attention to local educational needs and community consultation, leading to the under-utilisation of new facilities (House of Commons, 2007). These concerns are not

new: earlier Australian projects to encourage greater community participation in schools were discouraged by perceptions of local apathy and bureaucratic silos (Howard, 1988; Interim Committee for the Australian Schools Commission, 1973). These concerns hint at a fundamental design challenge in this process: just who is the ‘community’? Lack of consensus on a definition of community in turn means that the successful design of a community hub will remain problematic. For instance, the Victorian Government’s commitment to “promote schools and children’s centres as community hubs through co-location” (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development 2010b) suggests the target ‘community’ consists of parents and young children. By contrast, the Brotherhood of St Laurence (2007) argues that:

Hubs provide a place for the development and use of community members’ skills and ideas. Potential is limited if participation is limited to only those with direct involvement with the schools or services involved in the Hub (p.15).

Furthermore, the challenges of community engagement are specific: relatively affluent communities may focus on questions about how to ensure representativeness in participatory processes – and how to prevent articulate and well-resourced minorities from dominating (Brackertz & Meredyth, 2009). In disadvantaged regions, the problems may be around connection with social and educational services, rather than challenges of participation and governance associated with shared use. It is understandable that prolonged debate over who constitutes a target community would be avoided by those policy makers and infrastructure providers charged primarily with delivering bricks and mortar and/or digital resources. Nevertheless, any genuine design process for a hub requires clear definition of the target community (including stakeholder groups, interest groups and those who can be identified as hard to reach) to ensure that those affected are adequately consulted during planning, on the basis that “most community collaborations fail because they do not pay adequate attention to building and sustaining relationships” (Ferguson, 2009).

Summary: policy intersections and challenges

In Australia, the joint consideration of substantial government infrastructure investment in both physical educational facilities (Building the Education Revolution) and digital communication (National Broadband Network) forces the consideration of new possibilities enabled by the intersection of policy and technology factors:

- Redesign of school buildings to reflect new learning modes and technologies;
- New approaches to education as life-long learning delivered via formal and informal learning and physical and digital experiences; and
- Stronger connections between education, family policy and social services e.g. early intervention, early childhood and primary health care.

The Colac Community Hub example provides some evidence for the emergence of new whole-of-government approaches to strengthening community networks, social capital and social inclusiveness.

In contrast, the Derrimut and Blue Mountains examples shows how the school as community hub concept can focus on the provision of learning and parent support services. Even from the limited range of examples presented in this paper, it is apparent that there are many directions that a school as community hub can follow. There is a history of experimentation in community hubs, but it remains undeveloped and underexplored. There is no lack of ideas about how schools could function as hubs for communities, or about how more creative use of these civic facilities could add value, opening up new possibilities for adult education, day care, health care, local sports or local cultural amenities (see Clandfield, 2009 for a North American instance). Yet such proposals have been countered, recurrently, by arguments to the effect that the main purpose of school is schooling, and that extending the remit of schools stretches resources unreasonably (Black et al., 2011; Filardo et al., 2010).

We conclude with four key challenges that must be addressed, if sustainable schools-based community hubs are to be designed and built more widely:

- Governance and consultation. The rapid roll-out of funding to schools infrastructure projects during the Building the Education Revolution program undercut community consultation at state level. Integrating educational planning with emergent uses of information and communications technologies, as discussed above, depends on planning and governance approach that engage with target communities more effectively.
- Cross-jurisdictional issues are frequently raised in the Australian context, where compulsory education is a state concern, while community services and facilities are provided by local authorities. Cross-jurisdiction planning and negotiation raises complex questions around the ownership, contracts, costs and staffing of any school hub intending to provide wider community services.
- Bricks vs. bits. The ongoing failure of major public education investment projects to leverage parallel digital infrastructure investment as a mechanism for community engagement points to the valorisation of bricks-and-mortar in policy and a failure to recognise the interdependency between brick and bits. The development of school internet sites and digital resources challenges the limitations of this place-based view and calls for examination of the relationship between schools' physical and virtual spaces.
- Measurement of effectiveness. What mechanisms should be used to measure the extent to which schools-as-community hubs achieve their educational and/or community engagement goals? School leaders have expressed concerns over their lack of resources to form and keep links with community agencies and businesses, particularly in socially and economically disadvantaged areas (Black, 2008, p.22). Social and educational changes happen over the long term and therefore require long-term investment and evaluation. It is uncertain whether tools such as educational league tables can adequately measure such changes.

These are only four of the immediate challenges that face any attempt to rethink the local school as a hub for broader community use. Addressing these challenges is in part a matter of detailed empirical investigation and negotiational grind. It also helps however to have a broader historical perspective on the why the aspiration to build school community hubs has not been more broadly realised. This paper is an initial contribution to that broader understanding.

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