

Rear Vision: Lessons from Community Education in the 80s



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Abstract This chapter presents an historical framework of community education concepts through its roots in the USA and a 1980's Australian example of a school as a community hub: Princes Hill School Park Centre. The writer's reflective narrative reveals experience of a rich history of interaction between schools, communities, and local government and how the concept of community education expanded from community use of school facilities to community empowerment and resilience. In the context of reviewing the current largely untapped potential of schools as community hubs, the term 'rear vision' emerged, reflecting a sense of 'looking back to look forward'. The experience of community education in the 1980s in Australia and the USA, informs how 'schools as community hubs' can embrace the building of new connections. In the 1980s the Princes Hill School Park Centre adopted a community empowerment model reflecting the need to move beyond the use of school facilities and instead radically engage the school, community and the local government in a range of activities that promoted and facilitated participatory decision-making. The history of the community education movement provides evidence that broadening the role of schools beyond the use of their facilities can build connections, resilience and empower communities.

Keywords School community · Empowerment · Connectedness · Resilience

Introduction

In 1978, I was appointed as the Community Education Officer for the Princes Hill School Park Centre (PHSPC), Melbourne, Australia. The role was to move the PHSPC beyond the use of school facilities and radically engage the school, community and the local government in programs and projects that fostered participatory decision-making. The PHSPC adopted an empowerment model that opened the

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school to the community and engaged the local government in place-based neighbourhood decision-making. My story reveals a rich history of interaction by the school, community and local government and is an example of the potential of a school as a community hub.

The school community movement in the USA was founded in Flint, Michigan in the early 1930s in response to the impact of economic decline. This resulted in a range of issues, including unemployment, crime, youth delinquency, property damage to public buildings and increased community tensions, leading to an unstable and unsupported school system. Over the following decades, Community Education fostered a partnership between school districts and local authorities and delivered lifelong learning through adult education programs and recreational activities. This was seen as an important part of a community's educational process in a changing society. Hiemstra noted at the time that 'in Flint, Michigan, many traditional community school directors are now called community education agents and they are responsible for designated advocacy areas, such as parent involvement, health, academic support, and neighbourhood development and safety' (Hiemstra, 1972, p. 24).

Michigan Roots, Melbourne Beginnings

In 1974 the Recreation Superintendent of the City of Melbourne visited Michigan, USA, to research what many in the community education movement saw as the birthplace of Community Education. The City of Melbourne subsequently promoted the role of the city in community education with a focus on adult education and recreational pursuits. The following year the Victorian Liberal Government recognising the need to facilitate community use of schools amended The Education Act to become The Education (Schools Councils) Act 1975. When combined with the Youth Sport and Recreation Act 1972, this handed schools the power to enter into agreements for community use of school facilities.

In that same year, a public meeting of the Princes Hill and Carlton communities was held in the theatre of an inner-city suburb of Melbourne. The meeting adopted a constitution establishing the Princes Hill School Park Centre (PHSPC), a joint initiative of the Princes Hill High School Council, the Princes Hill Primary School Council and the Melbourne City Council. The PHSPC derived its name for its educational and recreational role from the contribution of school buildings and facilities and Princes Park, by the City of Melbourne. A Committee of management was elected comprising school community representatives, nominees from the staff of both the schools, and a City Council representative.

Since it first came into use in Australia in the early 1970's the term community education has been made synonymous with adult education, non-formal education, parent participation in schools, community development, improved use of community resources and so on. (Townsend, 1990, p. 61)

Many in the Australian education sector in the 1980's viewed community education as school-based adult education, reflecting the North American influence. However, this changed over coming years to 'the identification of needs, wants and problems in a community' with an emphasis on participatory decision-making in the provision of services, programs and facilities (Townsend, 1990, p. 62).

The establishment of the PHSPC in 1974 reflected the early definition of community education being the community use of school facilities for adult education programs and recreation activities. But the late 70s and early 80s were periods of economic, social and political change and community education became less focussed on adult education, recreational activities and the use of school facilities, moving towards the development of strategies for the empowerment of communities through the interface of school and community and the strengthening of community participation in local agenda setting and decision-making.

Changing Times

The political scene was volatile during this period as reflected in the sacking of the Melbourne City Council in 1980 by the State Government and the appointment of Commissioners with the aim to stall the rise of progressive residential candidates and their election to a central business district dominated Council. The economy generally was suffering from high inflation with high levels of unemployment alongside increases in industrial disputation. The earlier dismissal of the democratically elected Whitlam Federal Labor Government in 1975 was the most dramatic event in the history of Australia's federation. When elected in 1972 as the first Labor Government for twenty-three years there was a national mood of hope and anticipation and it continued to enliven many in the community who were now seeking ways to realise the benefits that could be derived from a more active, influential and empowered community. The election of the Melbourne City Council in 1983, following the sacking of the previous council resulted in an increase in residential representation. The council sought to grow the social and environmental capital of the city and respond to the needs and aspirations of the community. Change was in the air, with an increasing realisation of the need to bring the community into education, welfare, arts, recreation and public housing. School governance had shifted toward greater autonomy with the introduction of school councils with control of school finances, school policy and curriculum and the participation of parents, teachers and students in decision-making. Princes Hill Primary and High schools, through the PHSPC were at the forefront of these changes supported by the Federal Government.

Earlier in 1973, the Whitlam Federal Labor Government had established the Schools Commission as its education policy making agency to reform the role of the Government in the educational system and introduce a needs-based assessment of schools. The Commission was an election promise of the incoming government with its aim to promote equality of outcomes and opportunity and progressive teaching for

citizenship. The Interim Committee for the Australian Schools Commission in 1973 reported that ‘the aim of schooling is not to prepare people for school. Rather it is to prepare them for living in society (Balmer, 1975, p. 35). It sought less centralism and ‘more diversity in education’ and ‘for the school to be more open to society’ (Balmer, 1975, p. 28). Reports during the seventies by the Schools Commission were significant in promoting a changed view of schools and the importance of participation that has ‘intrinsic value as it teaches the skills of give-and-take, of power relations, and of planning and working towards goals’ (Beacham & Hoadley, 1981, p. 12).

The mood of the times was also reflected in parent-initiated publications with titles such as ‘Techniques for Participation in Decision Making for Previously Uninvolved Groups’ (Beacham & Hoadley, 1981). Such publications grew from not formal research but from ‘talking, talking with many parents, listening to them generalise their experiences with each other, listening to them realise that their experiences are not unique’ (Beacham & Hoadley, 1981, p. 7). There was an emphasis on the role of the parent in school decision-making and the education of children. ‘Parents make powerful allies and dangerous enemies’ (Beacham & Thorpe, 1980, p. 14). While substantially focused on equity of educational opportunity, such publications also reflected the broader issue of social inequality.

The Schools Commission introduced the Disadvantaged Schools Program in 1974 to provide extra funding to those schools with the poorest students. Jean Blackburn, Schools Commissioner responsible for the Disadvantaged Schools Program, believed that the program ‘does not attempt to impose answers but rather to engage people in the power and responsibility of finding their own’ (Campbell & Hayes, 2019, p. 231). Princes Hill High School and Princes Hill Primary School were designated Disadvantaged Schools. Both primary and high schools reflected a diversity of community that included recently arrived immigrants, Indigenous and locally born residents. *Yabberstick*, the student high school newspaper, reflected this diversity but also sought a joined-up school community through an inclusive attitude and an openness to issues beyond the school curriculum. ‘Yabba is an aboriginal work meaning speech and a Yabberstick was a stick which an aborigine of one tribe was required to carry with him when visiting another tribe’ (Vlahogiannis, 1989, p. 182). Amidst articles and letters on issues such as work experience and sport, topics such as racism were also featured with articles like ‘Racism in Australia’ (Grimshaw, 1981, p. 4).

Much of the thinking on empowerment at the time, including my own, had its roots in the work of the American community activist, Saul D. Alinsky and the lessons he had learned throughout his experiences of community organising. His guide ‘Rules for Radicals: A Pragmatic Primer for Realistic Radicals’ published in 1971 set out how to run a movement for change. While Alinsky’s guide aimed at uniting low-income communities in Chicago to gain political, social and economic power, the lessons were transferable beyond the United States and to the field of education. He provided lessons on how to create powerful and active organisations through the sharing of social problems to increase resident awareness of their commonalities and thus their capacity to seek change. Importantly he understood the role of working within to create change, the value of first-hand experience and the power of grass roots action. Each of these was central to the emergence of schools as community

hubs extending beyond adult education and recreational activities toward community empowerment and the expansion of the role of schools within their communities. Alinsky believed that as an organiser ‘I start from where the world is, as it is, not as I would like it to be...that means working in the system’ (Alinsky, 1971, p. xix). Such thinking provided a rationale for those working in Community Education to seek change by forming alliances and empowering the community.

Architects for Change

The stage for the establishment of the PHSPC was set not only by growing awareness of social inequalities and more general political and social change but also by the unique design of Princes Hill High School. A fire destroyed the school building in 1970. Uncertainty and disarray followed until a delegation of parents, teachers and residents joined together to demand action and a new building was approved to go ahead immediately. The urgency of the problem and its potential political consequences led to the commissioning of private architects for the first time by the Victorian Department of Education. Since 1885 the Department had relied solely on the Public Works Department to design schools. The new building was designed by architects Daryl Jackson and Evan Walker who had a reputation for expertise in school design. Earlier Walker had toured Britain, Canada, Russia and Sweden on a study tour made possible by private sector funding. His brief was to ask planners how they planned—‘to what extent for instance, they consulted outside government offices and used experts other than architects, and conferred with the pupils, teachers and citizens who after all use the schools’ (Walker, 2014, p. 226). Central to Walker’s report was the possibility of school buildings being resource centres for the whole community. The design for Princes Hill High School gained them the Royal Australian Institute of Architects’ Victoria Architecture Medal for ‘the outstanding building’ of 1973.

Jackson and Walker had been presented with a challenging brief. ‘It can be confidently asserted that Princes Hill’s new building bore no relation whatsoever to what the Education Department officials or the representatives of Princes Hill High School would have expected’ (Vlahogiannis, 1989, p. 38). While the architects conceived the basic concept, the final design grew out of consultations between the architects and the broader school community. The community was open to new ideas and embraced the architects’ design philosophy. ‘If a place is to work as an educational centre it is vital that people who use it have a say in its shape. They even have to be involved in making mistakes’ (Walker, 2014, p. 226).

Unlike the usual school design at the time, the new Princes Hill High School building design focused on a sense of openness and flow with the potential for accessibility to a wide range of users. Its unpainted concrete Brutalist form with bold interior colours created a non-school atmosphere. Common hubs of interest were created rather than arbitrary locations of classrooms. The theatre and the library were at the core of the building design. The library on the second floor was surrounded by high user classrooms while the theatre and canteen led off a wide foyer area located

on the ground level that was seen as ‘the social heart of the school’ (Vlahogiannis, 1989, p. 39). The openness of the foyer area encouraged and facilitated community use. The theatre for example, was designed for a range of uses apart from theatre productions, including film, exhibitions, social functions and community meetings. The architecture welcomed the community.

Within this social, political and design framework, I was appointed Community Education Officer by the PHSPC in 1978. I was the first Community Education Officer to be appointed under the auspice of the Princes Hill High School Council and paid for by the Education Department. The role was to adopt a community development model and explore and capitalise on the interface between school and community and develop programs and activities that responded to the interests, issues and needs of the school community. The Centre was to move from a centre of adult education to a centre that prioritised community outreach, empowerment and the participation of the school community in the governance of their schools and the wider community. In May 1981, those attending the First National Community Education Conference, Southport Queensland were reminded of the move toward community empowerment in an address by Sugata Dasgupta titled ‘Community Education as a Concept for a New Society’. In her address, Dasgupta stated ‘Community education should be a new movement for social transformation, for a new policy, a new society and a new economy’ (Dasgupta, 1981, p. 65).

Radical Rules in Action

In 1983 I undertook a reciprocal exchange to St Ignace, Michigan, USA as Community Education Director for Straits Area Community Education. As in Melbourne in the 1980’s, the role of Community Education in the USA had moved from a focus on adult education and recreational activities to support participation in both school and community. Community Education within the Straits Area Schools District was not immune from this move to empower the community. Straits Area Community Education functioned across a consortium of primary and secondary schools and provided adult education classes to those needing to complete their high school education as well as develop skills which would best fit future employment opportunities. However increasingly the program expanded its role. The Title IV Indian Education program provided Native American families with access to cultural activities and language skills both in school and the wider community. In addition, the Straits Area Community Education program provided educational and life skills support to young offenders in a local juvenile detention facility. These federally funded programs provided the opportunity to support the participation of marginalised groups in the community.

When I arrived in St. Ignace, I found grassroots community activity being taken on board by the Straits Area Community Education program and was encouraged to respond with my Melbourne experiences and expertise. A central example of applying Alinsky’s ‘rules’ was the establishment of a community run cable television

station that promoted not only local football games, but also local politics. The St Ignace City Council election was given greater coverage through the community television station that was beamed into every home. A meet-the-candidates event at a local family restaurant resulted in increased voter turn-out beyond that previously experienced. The community was ripe for participatory decision making at the school and community level, and the Straits Area Schools District Board was swept along by a wave of 'empowerment that had its roots in an American tradition' (Osborne & Gaebler, 1993, p. 51).

On my return to Melbourne in 1984, my Michigan experience aided my contribution to the PHSPC and its continuing efforts to be at the forefront of the community education movement. The PHSPC initiated and fostered a range of projects, programs and activities drawing on the support of the school community including marginalised residents and those who previously had no interest in the schools apart from having their children attend. The non-school settings and the broader range of programs reflecting their interests and needs encouraged greater interest and participation in both the schools and the community. The PHSPC was open seven days a week for a diverse range of school community activities, a full time City of Melbourne Recreation Officer based at the PHSPC provided after school and holiday programs and sporting activities, whilst the Council for Adult Education introduced adult education classes of particular interest to local residents.

Extending beyond the classroom, community artists and writers were contracted to undertake creative activities with the school community and build connections across the diverse community. 'Curtains for Carlton' a community arts project led by an artist produced a curtain comprising a tapestry of squares hand made by individuals, local groups and agencies. It was hung in the Princes Hill High School cafeteria. The well frequented cafeteria provided before school breakfasts, lunches and was a social venue for evening dining for local families. The Centre became a sought-after venue for a range of cultural and ethnic groups for regular functions and special events. In keeping with its *modus operandi*, the PHSPC expanded its operation beyond school buildings to off-school site locations including the park, an abandoned railway station, a Housing Commission flat and a former kindergarten and warehouse. Community issues such as youth employment and public housing needs found a new forum through a community newspaper and activated submissions to the city council.

Innovative responses relevant to the times focussed on community engagement to address local issues, needs and interests. Building connections across the community became the *modus operandi* for the Centre. The high level of youth unemployment was a major issue that bedevilled the Australian economy and impacted on young people, families and the local community. The PHSPC enabled several linkages between school and post school that addressed this issue. The establishment of 'The Island' in an off-site former kindergarten, provided students experiencing learning difficulties a full-time structured setting with trade, craft and art skills to complement their time in the school classroom. A youth drop-in centre was set up in a former warehouse, locally called 'One C One', to cater for school leavers and provide a place

to socialise whilst gaining post school advice on jobs, training and tertiary education. During school hours it functioned as a drama, film and television facility for high school students. This school-based program funded through the Disadvantaged Schools Program, enabled students to gain experience and skills in theatre and media. The success of several media projects resulted in the students being asked to undertake an episode of the ABC TV current affairs program, *This Day Tonight*. One C One also housed a weekly acoustic music venue that drew in a wide cohort of musicians and audiences. It linked the School Park Centre's support to a growing live music industry in Melbourne that attracted local, national and international musicians.

A locally based and owned community newspaper, *City Alternative News (CAN)*, became a voice of the community and, monthly, was distributed across Princes Hill and Carlton highlighting issues and interests and supporting local community networks. The abandoned North Carlton Railway Station became a focus of community action and CAN lobbying of the State Government and the Melbourne City Council for its use as a neighbourhood house (Brennan, 1980, p. 1, *City Alternative News* 1980, p. 1). Protracted negotiations led to an unofficial Grand Opening in the Railway Station in April 1984. 'We wanted to get our fingerprints on it; to get the community's hands into the building' (Brennan, 2011). As a result, the PHSPC was offered the North Carlton Railway Station Neighbourhood House at a peppercorn rent. In partnership with the locally based Montemurro Bocce Club, the Station was restored for use as a neighbourhood house with a bocce court and barbeque for the Italian community and a place for children, families and friends to be supported in their daily lives.

The Neighbourhood House subsequently supported the establishment of a community flat on a nearby Housing Commission Estate that provided residents with a platform for addressing their issues and interests and a steppingstone into the activities at the Neighbourhood House that included childcare, after school and holiday programs and evening barbeques and bocce plays. The widespread community concern that the needs of residents were not being met, especially for those living in public housing, resulted in extensive community consultation with a focus on welfare services and childcare and resulted in a submission to the Melbourne City Council. The submission titled *A Case for Carlton* contained overwhelming evidence of the need for expanding and improving the planning and delivery of community services provided by the City of Melbourne.

Looking Back to Look Forward

In August 1979 the Australian Association for Community Education organised the Third International Community Education Conference in Melbourne, Australia—'Here come the 80's! Community, Participation and Learning'. A range of workshops, importantly led by practitioners, addressed the need 'to look at the who, what, when, where and how of education which is responsive to the community needs of the

1980's' (Australian Association for Community Education, 1979, p. 3). The conference theme, 'Community, Participation and Learning', provided the framework for future directions. Community, participation and learning continues to resonate in our contemporary world which will be increasingly confronted by stresses and shocks be they the result of increasing population growth, environmental damage, extreme weather and climate related events, social inequalities, economic disruption or pandemics. Through the planning, design and operation of schools as community hubs we can empower communities and foster justice, equality and access to decision making that impacts on both the individual and community.

While the learning drawn from Michigan and Melbourne in the 1980s can be seen as specific to the times, many lessons are transferable to today. Looking back, we can see how the school as a community hub is 'about empowerment, about helping people to gain power over their own lives, thereby working towards a more equal distribution of power in our society' (Townsend, 1990, p. 62). The success of the PHSPC through the collaborative approach by Princes Hill High School, Princes Hill Primary School and Melbourne City Council contributed to community initiated, planned and led responses to the needs and interests of the school community. Together with new and innovative educational thinking at a national and state level, this resulted in the local operation of the school as a community hub. This thinking was embedded in the design of the Princes Hill High School through a process driven architectural response that differentiated its functioning from the traditional school building. The access provided by the PHSPC to a public park, a former railway station and warehouse encouraged the school community to protect and utilise those public assets for the common good. The school community was supported by staff of the PHSPC and its representative local committee to seek a voice of its own through a locally produced and distributed newspaper and participation in community arts activity that focussed on its own local stories. And importantly the international experience provided confidence in the work that was being undertaken and its successes.

The dynamism generated through the PHSPC was the result of a range of inter-connecting factors. The leadership provided by the PHSPC committee, comprising parents, residents, teachers and the local ward Melbourne City councillor, initiated opportunities for engagement with the schools and community on local needs and issues. Funding was made available by local, state and national governments for community education projects that built partnerships across a diverse range of interests. The ability to engage politically to resolve these issues contributed to community cohesion and confidence in the participatory process.

As we seek to build our resilience to environmental, economic and social challenges we will need to develop anticipatory and participatory ways and means to ensure we come out better from crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Schools as community hubs, building connections that pivot on the interface between the school community and local government and empowers individuals and their communities in decision-making should be one pathway that will help to secure our collective future.

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