OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM: SPATIAL CONSIDERATIONS TO FACILITATE COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS WITH SCHOOLS

Benjamin Coulston

Australian Government
Australian Research Council

THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE

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Building Connections
Schools as Community Hubs

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Benjamin Coulston

Architect and Urban Designer

Abstract

Densification of urban environments has led to increased pressure on existing school infrastructure throughout Australia's major cities and elsewhere. Schools have continued to evolve as part of this process and facilities are more frequently leveraged for both public use and enabled for a range of education-related activities that foster community building. Design and procurement of schools currently builds upon acceptable minimum standards that often lack generosity to establish social spaces and spatial facilities that can be 'borrowed' by external users and provide critical social benefits. Through a review of New South Wales' planning policy this article aims to identify the benefits of providing school infrastructure facilities that compliment public assets. It also discusses the challenges faced with the delivery of these assets within an on-going trend of urbanisation. It is argued that on-going planning for school environments will need to consider a holistic, community-wide view through a considered approach to shared facilities.

Keywords: community schools; educational planning; urban planning; urban schools; vertical schools; Australia

Outside the Classroom:

Spatial Considerations to Facilitate Community Relationships with Schools

The ongoing discussion between today's planning and policy makers about the best use of land within cities is particularly evident when such land use focuses on the delivery of public assets (Infrastructure NSW, 2018). School and community facilities have gathered increasing interest within this context. Stakeholders are seeking measurable gains in the performance of these facilities and aim to build upon the value created while ensuring there is effective ongoing investment (Infrastructure Australia, 2019). Both schools and local communities are in the position of there being competing demand for open space and facility use while innovative partnerships are being formed to help achieve positive outcomes.

Background on schools and community within Australia

The diverse choice of schooling options available today has been formed from what was quite a different setting throughout Australia during the nineteenth and early part of twentieth centuries (Miller & Davey, 1990). Where once there was a clear separation between home and school life (Vick, 1990), the rise of 'comprehensive schools' in the 1960s and 1970s focused on a geographically defined district with goals of equal opportunity, collective socialisation and connection with the community.

The policy development that followed included the de-zoning of geographically constrained schools to cater for market selection. Government schools have continued to be affected by these changes, where 'community' around schools means less and less about the proximity of families to the campus (Campbell & Proctor, 2014).

Planning of schools - Current scenario in NSW

Sydney, like other Australian capital cities, is in a current state of transformation led by strategic planning visions that express the need to reshape the city environment with a planned focus on infrastructure and collaboration (Greater Sydney Commission, 2018). Land economies within established middle and inner city areas are contested between the on-going demand for housing and the need to provide social and community assets required to make cities liveable, sustainable and able to respond to issues of disadvantage (City of Sydney, 2008).

As more than 80% of student growth within NSW is expected to occur within metropolitan Sydney, schools within the city area face the combined pressures of growing enrolments and scarcity of land supply. Acknowledgement of this issue has led to changes in the physical composition of planned schools, both in the arrangement of classroom and teaching spaces (with a renewed focus on verticality) but also non-teaching spaces. The NSW government's 'School Assets Strategic Plan' identifies key changes in this regard and in some cases proposes the near doubling of school enrolment numbers while also reducing spatial size by half (in effect a quadrupling of student density) (Infrastructure NSW, 2018). While

recommendations for the Plan acknowledge the required need to rethink the architecture of the school itself, an understanding of the impacts to both programmed and non-programmed open space is absent.

Such quantitative approaches to school development are useful for achieving a 'streamlined' approach to upgrading education facilities. In New South Wales the State Environmental Planning Policy (Educational Establishments and Child Care Facilities) aims to enable a less cumbersome pathway to establish facilities within schools (Department of Planning Industry and Environment, 2017). However concern has been expressed concerning the ability of such broad planning instruments to be properly accountable for the provision of open space and density, particularly where development by-passes usual authority approvals (Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations of New South Wales, 2017).

Understanding the physical setting of schools

There is a general consensus between educators, education planners and community groups that schools well integrated into their community and offering rich assets available for both educational and community use, are beneficial for all parties (Haar & Robbins, 2002; Krishnamurthy, 2019; Mckoy et al., 2011). While there is comprehensive literature to assist when planning for assets with established spatial standards (for example libraries and community halls), open space and green space issues have not received the same level of attention to inform their delivery (Evans & Freestone, 2011). This begins to shape questions around both the quantity and the quality of open space needed for a school, how the school or community might leverage existing open space within the local surroundings, and how the community might benefit from open space provided by the school.

Green open spaces

Within school planning, open space can be thought of as anything outside the land area built on, while green open space is regarded as the landscaped parts within the former (Victorian Planning Authority, 2017). Studies show that both in schools and within the community access to green space is important for the development of young children, providing it benefits not only physical health but also mental development and enhanced academic outcomes (Krishnamurthy, 2019; Nauert, 2018).

Green open space has been found to provide a vast array of benefits, particularly at the local scale (Ives et al., 2014), yet while our major cities are densifying there will be challenges to accommodate more open space within a finite land supply (City of Sydney, 2016b) and this in part forms the public opinion about a schools' quality and performance (Baker & Gladstone, 2019). In 2019 the NSW Government announced its vision to support additional open space and parklands for Sydney (Sullivan, 2020) along with the establishment of a Greater Sydney Parklands Agency. This vision aims to empower the government to better co-ordinate land use and management through the implementation of a forthcoming

Design and Place State Environmental Planning Policy which brings contextual relationships to the fore. It is unknown at this stage how school planning will be included.

Tools such as the New South Wales Educational Facilities Standards and Guidelines (EFSG) are useful starting points to enable the efficient planning of school spaces (Department of Education, 2020). Here, basic minimum dimensions and descriptions of open play space types are included within a toolset. However, an understanding of how these dimensions have been established or the quality of the open spaces is less detailed. Similarly, objectives around landscape and the integration with community are listed, but relate to the physical context rather than the societal one.

Agreeing on the right amount of open space for schools is a challenge, though the common opinion is that bigger is not always better where the correlation between larger schools and lower student outcomes is made (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2009; Schneider, 2002). Similarly, there are arguments that the overall amount of play space matters less than the actual time available for play (Sahlberg, 2019) and that the programming and design of the space impacts physical activity in certain cases more than the quantity of open space (Grunseit et al., 2020). These findings point towards the need for consolidated and purposeful outdoor environments where physical size is balanced with opportunity and quality.

Community benefits

Overarching the debate about the provision of open space facilities is the theme that they are both beneficial to the student and to the community. Education facilities and their supply of playing fields, sporting halls, libraries and performing art spaces are just some of the assets that are recognised as essential to forming part of an integrated service delivery that can provide positive outcomes within a community (Mckoy et al., 2011). Schools are noted here for their ability to engage people of diverse ages and backgrounds and also through their role as established education providers, forming a position of trust within community groups (Diamond & Freudenberg, 2016).

The concept of the school as a community hub has been formed throughout varying degrees of school–community service sharing but has grown as a central point of discourse along with the theme of infrastructure delivery efficiency in general (McShane et al., 2012). In the case of open space, schools have been recognised to have the potential to act as a 'green hub', providing the opportunities for physical activity and other open space use to the broader community (Department of Science Information Technology Innovation and the Arts, 2011). It should be noted that this is not simply a case of adding a playing field and anticipating successful community engagement. Cases identified by the Queensland Chief Scientist and elsewhere (Haar & Robbins, 2002; Khadduri et al., 2007) show that successful outcomes within the community rely upon early formed partnerships as part of the planning process and, importantly, require schools that are designed to be open and connected to their physical neighbourhood.

Schools within the community – forming partnerships

Access to schools, sporting fields, community centres and libraries is increasingly being recognised as beneficial to increasing the quality of life and social inclusiveness within communities (City of Sydney, 2016a). Yet policy and funding change continues to leave schools facing common challenges of under-funding, ageing building stock, increasing enrolments, and increased usage demand by groups outside of the student population (Infrastructure Australia, 2019).

In 2017 the NSW Legislative council concluded an investigation into (Sydney) Inner-city public-school enrolment capacity and published seven key recommendations. The recommendations focused on: amendment of the inner city school cluster model to emphasise the importance of connecting schools with their communities; update of the NSW Department of Education demographics projections and the sharing of this information with councils; better co-ordination between State entities in the development and planning of schools including future land identification; and a requirement that standards around the assessment of land remediation (for future school use) should rely on standards set by the relevant authority (Legislative Council New South Wales, 2017). Governments have acknowledged these issues and adjusted the language around infrastructure priorities to frequently seek community benefits and participation in schools (for example; Victorian Competition and Efficiency Commission, 2009) with the output of these often resulting in partnership programs and the joint use of facilities.

Both NSW and Victoria have published policy guidelines that help guide schools and local governments to move beyond simple co-location of assets and to develop 'key community hubs'. Documents such as New South Wales' Community Use of School Facilities implementation procedures and Victoria's Shared Facility Partnerships - A Guide to Good Governance for Schools and the Community, give detailed guidance to schools on the process of implementing partnerships to share facilities. Reliance on participation here is not limited to the initial planning or upgrade of schools, but to their on-going success as nurturers of successful students and the enhancement of community through local networks of social support (Black, 2008). How to adequately represent the community in some cases (Sanders, 2020) or to encourage participation in others (Mcshane et al., 2012) remains a challenge. The inclusion of community stakeholders in the conversation for the planning of shared facilities is more commonly seen as a benefit to achieving positive outcomes. Continued knowledge- and success-sharing, combined with adequate resourcing to engage communities from both the government and school, will likely play a key role in the formation of these hubs.

Moving forward

The unpacking of a school into spatial 'compartments' has the tendency to be short-sighted in relation to the possible benefits for student and community. Holistic planning for schools and communities around open space is essential to ensure access to the benefits it provides. Policies around open space,

education and shared use continue to be developed and currently include the aim of forming better partnerships between schools and their community and improving the outcomes for both. As policy continues to evolve, policy makers' co-operative models of engagement with all users have the potential to identify gaps and shortcomings in open space provision. While integrated school planning and innovative approaches to partnership models may promote learning spaces/community facilities that are adaptable and can support a range of activities for multiple users, on-going evaluation of these tools and policy development should be undertaken to identify positive outcomes for both students and their communities.

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