

REAR VISION: LESSONS FROM COMMUNITY EDUCATION IN THE '80S – MELBOURNE, VICTORIA AND FLINT, MICHIGAN

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REAR VISION: LESSONS FROM COMMUNITY EDUCATION IN THE '80S – MELBOURNE, VICTORIA AND FLINT, MICHIGAN

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Abstract

This paper presents an historical framework of community education concepts with roots in Flint, Michigan (USA) and an early Melbourne, Victoria (Australia) example of a school as a community hub: the Princes Hill School Park Centre. The writer's reflective narrative reveals experience of a rich history of interaction between schools, communities, and local government, all fostering place-based neighbourhood decision making. It demonstrates the radical moves that were made to expand the concept of community education, 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 Michigan and Melbourne, Victoria, can inform how 'schools as community hubs' embraced 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, local 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 participatory decision-making in a post pandemic and increasingly fractured world.

Keywords: school community, empowerment, connectedness, resilience

Rear Vision:

Lessons from Community Education in the '80s – Melbourne, Victoria and Flint, Michigan

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, as it was termed, was fostered through a partnership between school districts and local authorities. It became synonymous with lifelong learning and school-based adult education programs and recreational activities. This was seen as an important part of a community's educational process in a changing society (Hiemstra, 1972).

Michigan roots, Melbourne beginnings

In 1974 the Recreation Superintendent of the City of Melbourne visited Michigan, USA, to research the birthplace of community education. The City of Melbourne subsequently promoted the role of the City in community education with its focus on lifelong education and recreational pursuits. The following year, the Hamer Liberal Government, recognising the need to facilitate community use of schools, amended The Education Act to become The Education (Schools Council's) Act 1975, and together with the Youth Sport and Recreation Act 1972, handed schools the power to enter into agreements for community use of school facilities.

In that same year, at an inner-city suburb of Melbourne, a public meeting of the Princes Hill school community was held in the school theatre. The meeting adopted a Constitution establishing the Princes Hill School Park Centre, a joint initiative of the Princes Hill High School Council, the Princes Hill Primary School Council and the Melbourne City Council. The Princes Hill School Park Centre (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. It was made up of 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).

Most people 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 was a reflection of 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 change – economically, socially and politically – and community education became less focussed on 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.

Radical rules

The dismissal of the democratically elected Whitlam Federal Labour Government in 1975 enlivened many in the community who were seeking ways to realise the benefits that could be derived from a more active, influential and empowered community. The election of a new Melbourne City Council in 1983, following the sacking of the previous one, resulted in an increase in residents' representation. They sought to grow the City's social and environmental capital 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 increased participation of parents, teachers and students in decision-making. Princes Hill Primary and High schools, through the Princes Hill School Park Centre were at the forefront of these changes.

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, 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 towards community empowerment in an address by Sugata Dasgupta titled 'Community Education as a Concept for a New Society'. In her address, Dasgupta stated that 'community education should be a movement towards a new society' a society that seeks 'not devolution of power; it is evolution of power' and 'evolved so that decentralisation is the result' (Dasgupta, 1981). Much of the thinking on empowerment at the time had its roots in the work of 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. Alinsky's guide aimed at uniting low-income communities to gain political, social and economic power. He put forward tools 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.

Roots and new rules

In 1983 I undertook a reciprocal exchange to St Ignace, Michigan, USA as Community Education Director for the Straits Area Community Education. As in Melbourne, the 80s in the USA was a time of change in the role of community education from adult education to community participation in both school and community. Community education in the Straits Area Schools District was not immune from this groundswell of action to empower citizens. When I arrived in St Ignace I found grassroots community activity being taken on board and was encouraged to respond with some of my Melbourne experiences and beliefs. 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 Council election was given greater coverage through the community television station that was beamed into every home and business. A Meet-the-Candidates at the local hamburger joint 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 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, the Michigan experience contributed to the Princes Hill School Park Centre continuing to be at the forefront of the community education movement. The Centre 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 Centre 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 Centre provided after school and holiday programs and sporting activities, whilst the Centre for Adult Education (CAE) introduced adult education classes of interest to local residents. Community artists were contracted to undertake writing and arts-based activities with residents and local groups to build connections across the diverse community. The Centre became a sought-after venue for a range of cultural and ethnic groups for regular functions and special events.

Innovative responses relevant for 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. A locally based and owned community newspaper, 'City Alternative News' (CAN) became a voice of the community and on a monthly basis was distributed across Princes Hill and Carlton raising issues, interests and networks for the school community to join and support. As a result of the CAN lobbying, the North Carlton Railway Station Neighbourhood House was established in 1982. Previously abandoned and ripe for commercial investment, the station was handed over to the PHSPC at a 'peppercorn' rent following community lobbying of the Melbourne City Council and the State Government.

In partnership with the Montemurro Bocce Club, the Station was restored for use as a neighbourhood house and as a bocce court and barbeque area for an Italian community that had previously been isolated. The Neighbourhood House subsequently supported the establishment of a community flat in a nearby Housing Commission Estate that provided residents with a platform for 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. 'Curtains for Carlton', a community arts project led by an artist, produced a joined-up community curtain comprising a tapestry of squares hand made by community organisations, groups and agencies. It was hung in the Princes Hill High School Community Cafeteria. The well frequented cafeteria provided before-school breakfasts and lunches and was a social venue for evening dining for local families.

A 'Case for Carlton' was published and presented to the Melbourne City Council following extensive community consultations. This was in response to widespread community concern that the needs of residents, especially those in public housing, were not being adequately met, particularly in relation to welfare support, employment and social housing. The 'Case for Carlton' contained overwhelming evidence of the need for expanding and improving the planning and delivery of community and childcare services provided by the City of Melbourne. The One C One Youth Centre in a nearby warehouse was established to provide school leavers with a place to socialise while gaining post-school advice on jobs, training and tertiary education. The establishment of 'The Island' in an off-site former kindergarten centre, provided students experiencing learning difficulties with a full-time structured classroom setting offering trade, craft and art skills to complement their time in the classroom. The high level of youth unemployment was a major issue that bedevilled the Australian economy and impacted on local communities, families and young people. While many of those issues remain today, communities are now faced with additional challenges as a consequence of the pandemic.

Looking back to look forward

Looking back on these examples of the role of school community hubs, we can see how it was '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). Today this definition holds true with its call for empowerment to ensure justice, equality and access to decision making that impacts the individual and community.

As we seek to build our resilience to those environmental, economic and social challenges, we will need to develop anticipatory and participatory ways of operating. Having schools as community hubs, building connections that pivot on the interface between the school community and local government, and empowering individuals and their communities in decision-making, will be some of the pathways that will help to secure our future in a post pandemic and fractured world.

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