

# RESEARCHING POLICY SETTINGS FOR SCHOOLS AS COMMUNITY HUBS

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## RESEARCHING POLICY SETTINGS FOR SCHOOLS AS COMMUNITY HUBS

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### **Abstract**

Schools as Community Hubs are recognised for their significant contribution to communities. Yet these projects must negotiate complex policy relationships, across disciplines and various government jurisdictions to achieve stakeholder and community support, funding, and delivery for long-term integrated benefits. Policy research in this area has been scarce. This study – in the early phase of a PhD – researches policy relationships for schools as community hubs through an interpretative analysis lens of both Bacchi's 'What's the Problem Represented to be?' (Bacchi, 1999), focussing on policy 'problematization(s)', and that of performative and locally enacted policy (Ball et al., 2012). This framework is applied to an interpretative policy narrative of Yuille Park (Prep to Year 8) Community College, in central Victoria, Australia. Now proclaimed as a 'whole of life' community centre (DET, 2020), Yuille Park relied on the skill and continuity of key actors who gave – with little formal policy direction – coordinated solutions across service provision, urban planning and facility design that has made a difference to a struggling community, generating neighbourhood uplift and helping to overcome entrenched intergenerational challenges.

*Keywords:* schools as community hubs, interpretative policy analysis, policy problematisation, performative and enacted policy

## **The Problem with Policy for Schools as Community Hubs (SaCH):**

### **Some Background**

The opportunity to better use and enhance school infrastructure through integration with programs and services directed towards the broader community has long been recognized. Proposals and projects for such integration date back at least a century. More recently, Cleveland and Woodman (2009) observed that school facilities are some of the most underutilised public and private assets in Australia, with most used sparingly outside of school hours, on weekends, or during school holiday periods. Additionally, Tayler et al.'s (2002, p. 1) observed that “a history of single focus, separate, specialised, and competing services has led to widespread dissatisfaction with service provision ... viewed by many to be inflexible, inaccessible, or out-of-touch with the needs of contemporary families”, a situation that continues to resonate almost twenty years later. Proposals to develop schools as community hubs are gaining momentum across Australia and internationally (Cleveland 2016). However, these proposals must negotiate a complex terrain of policy, coordinating objectives, priorities and funding sources within and between governments, as well as build and sustain partnerships with service providers and local communities.

Policy research analysis in this area has arguably been neglected, with research in the field predominantly focused on architectural design and program elements of shared schools. Limited attention has been paid to the challenges involved with coordinating social infrastructure provision (McShane and Wilson 2017), or the intersections of education, social and urban policy and planning (Vitiello 2006). This lack of researched into policy analysis may have had a significant impact on schools as community hubs – or the lack of formal policy associated with such entities and partnerships.

Informed by Bacchi's (1999) concept of policy as constituting or representing problems, this paper contributes to filling this policy research gap by discussing the policy determinants and dynamics associated with developing schools as community hubs. Using complimentary performative and enactment perspectives (Ball, Maguire & Braun, 2012), the paper analyses a schools as community hubs project: Yuille Park (Prep to Year 8) Community College, located in Wendouree, in the central Victorian City of Ballarat. This case study example demonstrates the ‘problem’ of a significantly disadvantaged community, while showing the contingency of policy-making ‘on the run’, evident in the gap between formal written policy issued by government and the local adaptation and enactment of policy in this particular community setting. This example, it is argued, highlights conceptual and methodological challenges of policy research in the field.

## **Interpretative Policy Approaches**

### ***Working Back from the Problem***

Bacchi's (1999, 2006, 2012; Bacchi & Goodwin 2016) 'What is the Problem Represented to be?' (WPR) framework provides a critical interpretative policy analysis approach that offers utility as a resource, or tool, to facilitate interrogation of public policies, including those associated with school as community hubs. WPR is intended to make clear that the point of the analysis is to begin with postulated 'solutions', such as policies, in order to tease out and critically examine their implicit problem representations. Bacchi expands with the following questions guiding analysis:

1. What / 'Problem(s)' are represented?
2. Presuppositions, Assumptions ?
3. How did / Representation Evolve?
4. What is / Unproblematic?
5. What can be / Thought differently?
6. What / Effects produced?
7. What is / Questioned, disrupted and replaced? (Bacchi, 2012)

### ***Performative and Enactment Policy***

As the case of Yuille Park shows, policy may not necessarily be formalised, authorised, or sometimes even written down. However, it is possible to identify a set of texts and practices, central-level policy directives, local adjustments and adaptations, to identify what was 'problematized' and how the framing of this problem shaped the evolution and outcomes of the project. As described in some detail below, a significant feature of the Yuille Park project was what Ball et al. (2012) refer to as performative, or enacted policy, where key central policy mandates are interpreted and enacted locally, and local policy developed to respond to silences and gaps created by the centre.

### **Policy Case Study: Yuille Park P-8 Community College, Wendouree, Victoria, Australia**

In the Australian context, Yuille Park is illustrative of an interruptive education-community model that was planned, programmed, and designed to what was represented as the specific service needs of its community. It opened June 2008 as an exemplar 'school as community hub'. Its genesis was the closing of two schools, Grevillea Park and Yuille Primary, which were amalgamated to become a new education-community hub pilot, with twenty-two community service functions. Significantly, a pre-school operated by Uniting Care and Wendouree West Community House were relocated to the site to become 'Wendouree West Community Learning Hub', a "whole-of-life" learning and community centre. Today, Yuille Park continues to be used seven days a week by school and community groups:

The shared facilities include: meeting, conference, training, interview rooms; library; large multipurpose space designed for school assemblies; indoor sports (including basketball half court),

functions and performances; home economics kitchen, and canteen space; art studio, and materials technology workshops complete with segregated storerooms; music activity, band practice, editing suite' (Department of Education and Training, 2020).

The following account arises largely from resources and direct experience from my work with the architectural firm that planned, designed, coordinated delivery and led post occupancy evaluation for Yuille Park.

### ***Policy Contexts***

The policy narrative at Yuille Park begins with the 'problematism' of a failing neighbourhood. The suburb of Wendouree West was originally built to accommodate rowing athletes for the 1956 Summer Olympics. Prior to the Yuille Park project commencing Wendouree West remained run down, featuring boarded up shop fronts and poorly maintained infrastructure. Petty crime, unemployment, student truancy (often greater than 50%), and poor community mental health were among long-term challenges.

The implications of this situation became interventions led by education, where new infrastructure investment by State Government generated alignments with a community partnership focus on disadvantage. This policy problematisation, and its focus on human and social capital and service engagement, superseded earlier policy interventions (including crime and welfare entitlements/work activity) that saw the problem as individual and cultural.

### ***Adaptive Education and Community-enacted Policy***

An integrated, education-led, community policy model was fundamental to Yuille Park's planning and facility delivery. This policy platform was an outcome of community consultation and collaboration from which the outcomes at Yuille Park can be seen as contingent. As an enacted policy process, this may be seen as the project's most significant policy achievement. The creation of 'policy on the run' was essential for achieving community consensus around services selection, programming, site planning, design options, operations, and facility management.

Community consultation and planning for Yuille Park began in 2001, seven years before the school and community hub eventually opened in 2008. The brief for the amalgamated school developed from both formal and informal participatory community engagement, through phases that loosely corresponded with feasibility, master planning, and functional briefing.

### ***Customised Education Policy***

*Interdepartmental Advocacy:* State government advocates from both Education and Community were pivotal to a locally determined brief that achieved a high level of community consensus. Atypically leaders, willing to take calculated risks, from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD)/Department of Education and Training (DET) and Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) worked pro-actively to bring their agendas together, supporting locally generated

solutions.

*Responsive Pedagogy and Customised POD Learning Environment:* With respect to school operations and learning, an adaptable education policy enabled the development of a customised 'learning hub pedagogy' that was supported by a 'pod' learning hub architectural solution that allowed for individual, group and specialist learning within an interdisciplinary environment. A team-teaching approach was planned and designed, with buildings accommodating learning communities for Grades Prep-2, 3-5, and 6-8. The shared teaching environments were facilitated through connectivity with staff work areas, both visually and physically. The learning spaces also included outdoor landscapes, multi-sport environments and a Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden, providing nutritious food that was used for student breakfasts and lunches, prepared at the shared commercial and community kitchen at the heart of the Centre

As a relatively unknown pedagogical model in the State at the time, its adoption required trust-based leadership at local and State level. With support from DEECD, the school Principal led the 'new' learning hub pedagogy, working closely with a predominantly new and enthusiastic teaching cohort.

### ***Policy Enactment for Skills, Training and Local Employment***

In addition to primary and middle school education (P-8), adult education on site was supported by DHHS. Employment training, with a focus on technology skills, became popular, supported by the development of a shared learning space connected to the community library. The employment program became successful, supporting community members with skills for new roles at Yuille Park, as well as in the wider community.

### ***Flexible Procurement Policy***

Over the unusually long consultation and planning period, year-on-year funding was budgeted by the Department of Treasury and Finance in response to emerging needs that were agreed by DEECD and DHHS. The acceptance of a longer than typical timeframe allowed planning and architectural design teams to be engaged earlier and for longer, enabling deeper engagement with members of the community, state department representatives and school leaders. This approach supported various forms of adaptation and refinement, as local needs were determined and suitable design responses created and iterated. For example, the master planning process generated new neighbourhood transport connections to a new railway station and upgraded public space. These transport and recreation nodes later became locations for student-produced art installations, representing community identity and pride.

*Neighbourhood Uplift:* The school's opening became a catalyst for new housing development, which continued to expand from the surrounding streets over subsequent years. Residential upgrades also stimulated economic activity for the neighbouring commercial street.

## **Policy Gaps**

### ***Policy failure: Overcoming years of disadvantage and poor socio-economic conditions***

Yuille Park can be seen as the consequence of historic policy failures that prolonged long-term unemployment and disadvantage, evidenced by consistently low socio-economic demographic data and conditions until recent years.

The problematisation realised and responded to by policy enactment through the process of Yuille Park's community centred planning process ultimately filled policy gaps and failures to generate a place of community activity, pride, employment over the course of the past decade. Yuille Park represents investment in, and development of, social capital for what is now proclaimed as a 'whole of life' community centre (DET, 2020). It is notable that no detailed written policy precedents, beyond the standard education and community health policies, were available to guide social infrastructure development when Yuille Park was developed. Subsequently some written policy advocacy has occurred retrospectively (Department of Education, 2010, 2015), capturing some, but not all, of the lessons learned.

Yuille Park attracted Prime Ministerial visitation and support (Prime Minister Gillard) and attracted many local, interstate and international visitors in the first few years of operation. Furthermore, the project was recognised with school design awards (from the Victoria State Government and Council of Education Facility Planners International – now Learning Environments Australasia), and received recognition for its urban community transformation and design (from the Urban Design Institute of Australia).

### **Toward Integrative Policy Futures**

As a case study, Yuille Park's interpretative policy narrative provides opportunity for applying Bacchi's (1999, 2006, 2012; Bacchi & Goodwin 2016) 'What is the Problem Represented to be?' (WPR) framework. WPR policy analysis reveals vital perspectives of policy determinants, such as those 'all-too-complicated' integrative policy arrangements common to schools as community hubs. Despite fragmentation and a lack of pre-determined policy coordination, the skill and continuity of key actors gave rise to a range of coordinated solutions across service provision, urban planning and facility design that has made a difference to a struggling community, generating neighbourhood uplift. Yuille Park represents investment in, and development of, shared resources that have aided the development of social capital in the area. The development of a 'whole of life' community centre (DET, 2020) has helped tackle complex intergenerational challenges, where less holistic policy approaches had previously failed – having (perhaps) mis-represented the problem(s).

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