UNDERSTANDING THE DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION OF SCHOOLS AS COMMUNITY HUBS: A CASE STUDY APPROACH

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Building Connections
Schools as Community Hubs

UNDERSTANDING THE DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION OF SCHOOLS AS COMMUNITY HUBS (SaCH): A CASE STUDY APPROACH

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Abstract

There is increasing interest in schools as community hubs, both within Australia and at an international level. In the Australian context service provision, the role of infrastructure, as well as the implications of these spaces for community engagement are some of the challenges when implementing community hubs. This paper will provide a research overview of the work being undertaken by the author to investigate the development and implementation of schools as community hubs. Based on a case study approach, the aim is to understand the processes, challenges, successes, needs and opportunities of schools and their communities.

Keywords: community hub, school facilities, school infrastructure, case study, space

Understanding the Development and Implementation of Schools as Community Hubs (SaCH):
A Case Study Approach

Community centres have been a feature of Australian culture for more than 100 years with the vision and intended purposes changing and adapting to the community over time. As Lewi et al. (2010) noted, in the 1920s residents demanded spaces like community centres to socialise in their spare time after working hours, while during the 1940s the vision moved towards more inclusive and family-oriented spaces. Nowadays, this vision has been re-shaped in the form of 'community hubs' bringing together a variety of municipal services into a central location.

In recent decades, as cities have grown, local governments have been under pressure to provide services to the community particularly in urban fringe areas, where land space to build new infrastructure is scarce (Infrastructure Australia, 2019). For that reason, schools are gaining significant attention concerning how their infrastructure can serve as community facilities. The current underutilisation of school infrastructure outside school hours (Cleveland & Woodman, 2009; Infrastructure Australia, 2019) means there are opportunities to maximise these spaces to include the community as users and participants of the school environment and to deliver services and programs for them. Moreover, the school system is expected to develop connections between families, schools and communities that can be addressed through schools as community hubs (McShane et al., 2012). Australian schools are therefore regarded as having the potential to provide more than just spaces for the education of children, but to become spaces that welcome the whole community to provide them with the necessary infrastructure and services to flourish.

This paper provides a research overview of the work being undertaken by the author to investigate the development and implementation of schools as community hubs in the Australian context, aiming to understand the processes, challenges, successes, needs and opportunities of schools and their communities.

Background

As part of society, schools play a fundamental role not only in their knowledge transmission and skills acquisition roles but also through introducing children and youth into the dynamics of socialisation (Biesta, 2015). Schools developing strategies and programs to engage with families and surrounding community are not a new idea, and there have been different approaches and rationales behind the implementation of school-community relations (Cleveland. B, 2016; Dryfoos et al., 2005; McShane et al., 2012).

Terminology to define approaches to schools linked with the community is extensive. A review of the literature of US, UK, and Australia reveals that some of the most common nomenclature includes full-service community school, community school, full-service extended schools, extended school, and school

integrated services. In the case of Australia, the term school as community hub (SaCH) is widely used, as McShane et al. (2012) note, indicating a spatial, educational and social planning articulation.

Regarding school-community partnerships, Australia shares some commonalities with the UK and US models. This includes an engagement with an improvement of the students' learning outcomes, strengthening the relationship between the school, home and community, and coordination and collaboration between agencies and other service providers to deliver service's (Semmens & Stokes, 1997). Furthermore, Black (2008) emphasises in her definition the role of community as the protagonist of the educational process and not only as a 'recipient' of programs and benefits:

> We need new models of schooling that recognise the future of children and young people is the responsibility of the whole community, and which form the basis of a social alliance for all young people to take an active—if not a leading— role in their community (Black, 2008, p. 15).

A distinctive characteristic in the Australian context, as described by McShane et al. (2012) is the governmental concern about 'infrastructure efficiency'. This rationale seeks to provide a community benefit through schools, at the same time as optimising investment through the promotion of multipurpose buildings with service integration. The latter might arise as a response to prior claims of widespread dissatisfaction with service provision, which was viewed by many as inflexible or inappropriate for contemporary community necessities (Tayler et al., 2002). The latest Australian Infrastructure Audit (2019) recognises this claim as problematic, pointing that 'the complexity of systems in place to enable shared use of space can also deter community members from engaging with schools' (p. 419).

Sanjeevan et al. (2012) highlight some critical challenges for the development of future community hubs. These include the need for more holistic and in-depth understandings of how community hubs can emerge, the appropriateness of the design of school buildings and the suitability of strategies for managing community access. The literature reveals that research has been addressed mainly from the perspectives of experts, professionals and practitioners (Kerr et al., 2016), overlooking the representation of community perspective regarding the development and implementation of such initiatives.

The project described in this paper aims to investigate the development and implementation of schools as community hubs in the Australian context to understand the processes, challenges, successes, needs and opportunities of schools and their communities. The research question that will drive the project is: How are schools as community hubs being produced through the interplay of planning, design, governance and management?

Research approach

Research will be undertaken via a series of case studies that will focus on community hub schools in the eastern states of Australia: Victoria, New South Wales, South Australia and Queensland. It will seek insights into the dynamics of their functioning, connecting the processes of planning and designing new

facilities for communal use with the governance and management approaches underpinning the use of these facilities. This inquiry is based on a qualitative approach that seeks to understand, using Merriam and Tisdell's model that explores: (1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences. "The overall purpose is to understand how people make sense of their lives and their experiences" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p.24).

Furthermore, as suggested by Miles (2015), the case study approach facilitates new ways to study complex practices, allowing analytical study bounded by spatial and temporal elements contributing to a deeper understanding of what is being investigated. A similar approach to this was adopted by Rose et al. (2009) in their UK study of extended schools. The authors highlighted that:

> ...the verification of experiences across case studies enabled the researchers to provide the study schools with information about consistency of practice, the experiences of individuals and the impact upon identified needs illuminated by exemplars' (2009, p.59).

The conceptualisation of space

This study will engage with an analysis of SaCH through a spatial lens, providing a research perspective that has not received much attention. As Gruenewald (2003) suggested, the emphasis on accountability in the educational context has little consideration of the role of space or place, failing to recognise the role of school in the production of space, through the interaction between schooling and community life. This perspective will be helpful considering the writer's interest in exploring the experiences of schools engaging with the wider world through facilities that offer/accommodate programs and services for the benefit of children, families and members of the wider community.

The case study design will be approached using the ideas of the French philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre whose seminal work 'The Production of Space' remains highly influential in understanding the role of space in urban, architectural and design studies (Buser, 2012; Butler, 2012; Merrifield, 1993; Middleton, 2017; Watkins, 2005). In 'The Production of Space' Lefebvre (1991) developed his conceptual understanding of space to highlight that space is a social product that is the result of social action, practices and relationships, and at the same time is part of them. Lefebvre proposed to think of space as 'the physical space (nature), mental space (formal abstractions about space), and social space (the space of human interaction)' (Merrifield, 2006, p. 102). By bringing together the idea of multiple natures of space, Lefebvre aimed to understand space and its relations through the 'dialectical character of their interaction' (Merrifield, 1993, p. 523).

This project will engage with space from a comprehensive point of view that considers not only the voice of experts regarding SaCH (conceived space) but also how their users and workers are experiencing these spaces (lived experience) and observing the daily reality of SaCH (perceived space). In acknowledging these three dimensions, the aim of the research is to recognise the different perspectives

of how the connections/disconnections and relationship between spatial practices and representations of space and spaces are shaping the experience of community hubs. This may reveal possible contested views of the research problem. Figure 1 offers an overview of how Lefebvre's conceptual understanding of space will work in the context of the project.

Rationale for case study selection

Schools will be selected on a purposive sampling basis, meaning that sites will be selected based on whether they meet criteria concerning the kind of cases needed to address the research questions (Bryman, 2012). In the context of this study, schools working as a community hub in shared or co-located facilities or a group of schools working as a cluster to offer services to the community will be considered

Figure 1

Conceptual Overview of the Research Project
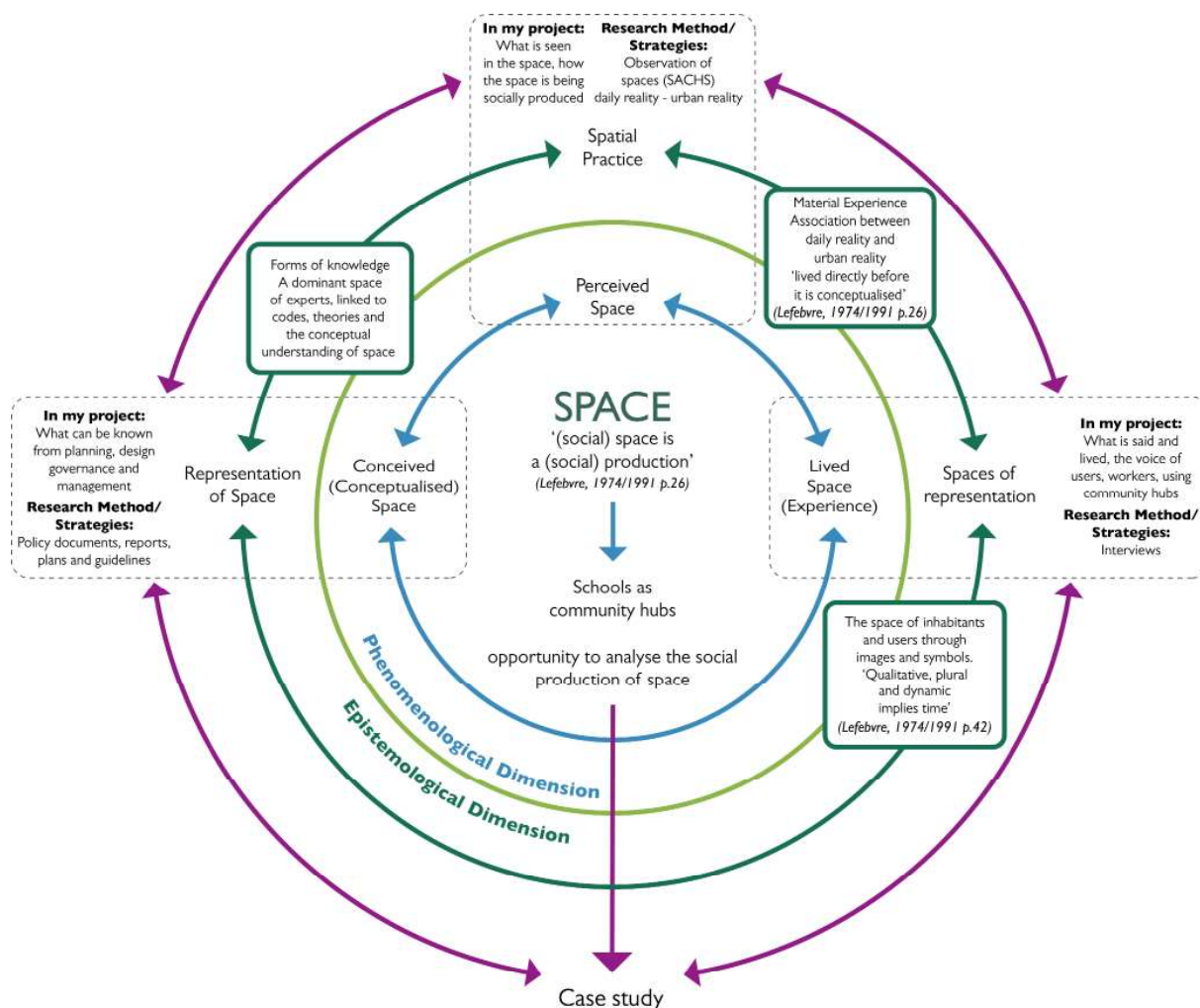
Source: By author.

as SaCH. Interviews with key informants will be conducted to identify potential cases, with the following characteristics:

- Schools with an explicit vision to work as a community hub or including the community as one of the main actors in their school vision statement
- Schools working in partnership with different organisations to provide services and programs to the community (local authorities and/or non-government agencies)
- Schools recognised as exemplars in their work and relationship with their community
- School willingness to share practices and to participate in a research project

Data collection

The data for the cases studies will be drawn from a variety of sources to improve data triangulation (Yin, 2014). Considering the nature of the cases and the central role that space plays in the development and implementation of social infrastructure/community hubs, data collection methods will be organised using Lefebvre's conceptualisation of space as detailed in Table 1.

Table 1

Data Collection Overview

Lefebvre's epistemological perception of space	How this is understood in the context of this project	Data collection process
Representations of space	What can be known from planning, design, governance and management	*Focus groups:* experts and practitioners in education, planning and architecture, government representatives, NGO representatives, Building Connections project partners. (Plan A: face-to-face Plan B: virtual meetings)
		Document analysis contextualisation: documents related with the design and implementation of SaCH cases.
Spaces of representation	What is said and lived, the voice of users, workers, using community hubs	*Interviews*: School leaders, teachers, students, families, hub users, hub leaders or community hub coordinators and users.
		(*Plan A*: face to face. *Plan B*: virtual meeting plus photo-elicitation (Tonge et al., 2013)
Spatial practices	What is seen in the space, how space is being socially produced	*Site observation*: SaCH in use, observation of facilities

Conclusion

This paper outlined the research process being undertaken by the author to investigate the development and implementation of schools as community hubs in the Australian context. The aim is to understand the processes, challenges, successes, needs and opportunities of schools and their communities. Multiple case studies will focus on Australian schools as community hubs. The research will provide new knowledge into the fields of design, architecture, education, and social planning, producing an in-depth and detailed examination of the experiences of SaCH, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how schools can develop as whole-of-community resources.

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