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Learning to Share: Australia's *Building the Education Revolution* and Shared School Facilities

Ian McShane

Abstract

This article analyses the conceptual and policy contexts of the Australia's *Building the Education Revolution* (BER) program. This \$A15 billion commitment to renewing school facilities is the Australian government's largest single measure of economic stimulus in response to the recent global financial crisis. Public debate and analysis of BER has focused on its economic objective. This article looks beyond that debate to discuss the program's second, less publicised aim, to promote community engagement with schools by specifying that funded facilities will be available for community use. Contrary to competing claims that BER is an education revolution or an exemplar of government mismanagement, the article argues that BER's building-led approach is consistent with the Australian national government's role in infrastructure provision, and its focus on shared schools complements state-level priorities. However, the article identifies several areas of the program's design that require attention to optimize this highpoint of investment in school facilities.

Keywords: policy analysis, planning, shared facilities, governance, community engagement, school libraries.

Introduction

In 2009 the Australian national government committed around \$15 billion dollars to build or renew facilities in every Australian primary school. *Building the Education Revolution* (BER) is a major component of the Australian government's fiscal stimulus package to combat the recessionary impact of the global financial crisis (GFC), and the largest single program of investment in school infrastructure in Australia's history. The Australian government justified school construction for its effectiveness in stimulating the national economy, a claim that has been contested in a highly charged public debate. BER has a secondary aim, to "build learning environments to help children, families and communities participate in activities that will support achievement, develop learning potential and bring communities together" (Australian Government, 2009, p. 2). Beyond BER's statement that use of the new facilities will be shared between schools and community groups, there has been little elaboration or public discussion of this aim.

Parent and community engagement with schools has been located by a number of analysts within a partnerships discourse that is a key component of current educational reform and civic renewal (Black, 2008; Franklin, Block, & Popkewitz, 2004). Associated with recent forms of neo-liberal governance, educational or civic partnerships are not new in Australia. Since its inception in the nineteenth century, public schooling has been asked to forge stronger links between teachers, parents and communities (Theobald & Selleck, 1990). Partnerships between civic groups and governments have also played an important role in providing and managing Australia's local-level social infrastructure. However, Filardo et al. (2010) have drawn attention to the indiscriminate use of school partnership terminology. They argue that different philosophical, funding, regulatory and operational concerns are engaged by terms such as shared use, co-location, full service and community schools, and call for more critical analysis of these different institutional arrangements. This article reflects that concern by situating BER as a shared-use program within this institutional typology. In doing so, the article foregrounds physical infrastructure, a subject that is gaining attention within education studies.

The concept of shared schools recasts civic engagement in educational terms, bringing children, families and community members within a project of learning and community building. BER's use of the term 'participation' calls up Deweyite concepts of full democracy that Semmens and Stokes (1997) saw as an objective of Australian experiments with extended schools in the 1990s. The top-down, infrastructure-led approach of BER has so far provided little opportunity for local involvement in program design. However, as this article argues, such an approach is embedded within Australian federal political structure and broadly consistent with the national government's role in infrastructure provision. While conceding the circumstances in which BER was developed, the article identifies three areas that require attention if the program's second aim is to be effectively and sustainably achieved. The first is BER's concept of participation. BER's promotion of *use* as the basis of sharing takes a narrow view of community engagement with schools. Setting this issue within a wider discussion of community governance, this section asks whether more ambitious educational and developmental goals can be set for shared schools? A second area of concern is BER's inattention to distinctive facility types in its pre-set design menu. In particular, BER overlooks the requirements and capabilities of school libraries (the program's funding priority) by excluding funding for information communication technologies (ICTs) from the program. The third area of concern is BER's focus on buildings – on so-called 'hard' infrastructure. Positioning this as a typically modernist response to infrastructure provision, this section calls for attention to the 'soft' infrastructure of staff, networks and skills.

The following section of this article analyses schools within a wider history of education and community infrastructure provision in Australia. Then follows a detailed discussion of BER's development and roll-out. The fourth section of this article discusses BER's deficiencies in the three areas identified above.

Australian Education and Civic Infrastructure: A Brief Introduction

Mass public education was established in the late nineteenth century by Australian colonial (later state) governments. They retained responsibility for compulsory schooling following Australia's federation in 1901, although the centralisation of fiscal power during the twentieth century led to growing national government support for both state and non-state education systems (Dowling, 2008). Previous bursts of national funding for school building programs have been framed by a discourse of educational crisis. For example, Western world concern over science education during the Cold War prompted Australian government funding of science laboratories (Marginson, 1997). However, as detailed below, investment in public infrastructure may rely on crisis rhetoric to mask earlier government inaction and gain electoral support. BER's distinctiveness lies in its equal treatment of schools in government and non-government sectors, including the latter's wealthiest members. This means that facilities in 'private' schools funded under the program will be available for public (or at least 'community') use, although a recent survey of the existing non-government school facilities suggests this is already widely occurring (Victorian Competition and Efficiency Commission, 2009, pp., p. 48).

Less contested are observations of deteriorating Australian state (and poorer non-state) school infrastructure (Caldwell & Hayward, 1998; Campbell, Proctor, & Sherington, 2009). Similar observations have been made of local-level community infrastructure, consisting of civic, health, educational and recreation facilities controlled by municipal ('local') governments. The sources and impact of disinvestment in social infrastructure in Australia in the late twentieth century have been discussed in detail elsewhere (McShane, 2006, 2009). To summarise, the scramble to provide infrastructure for Australia's growing population in the post-World War 2 period produced some building stock of inferior quality and limited utility. Rapid demographic change, as well as modernist architectural precepts, influenced a trend towards modularity, seen for example in the provision of classroom 'dismountables'. The limited service life of such constructions was exacerbated in many cases by the widespread deferral of asset maintenance, as state and local government authorities dealt with budget pressures and widening demand for community services. Changing regulatory structures and building codes, growing dislike of government debt, and the adoption of a strategic approach to corporate real estate were additional factors contributing to asset run-down and disinvestment. Crowning these factors was a change in the ideological stance of Western governments, as the mid-century rhetoric of nation building gave way to neo-liberal conceptions of the contract state and consumer sovereignty.

The 1990s saw local government amalgamations occur throughout Australia, with some bitter contests where principles of structural efficiency trumped local democracy (Aulich, 1999). The closure of some community facilities and the regeneration of others as larger, multi-purpose structures followed a similar efficiency logic. This strategy was also pursued at state government level. School closures and amalgamations were

undertaken during this time, most aggressively in the state of Victoria as the Kennett Liberal government, elected in 1992, pursued a program of reducing public debt and public sector outlays (Caldwell & Hayward, 1998; Costar & Economou, 1999).

By the end of the twentieth century, Adams and Hess (2001) and Kenway (2006), amongst others, observed a challenge to the dominant individualistic focus of neo-liberalism by policy makers seeking to return social issues to policy agenda. Concerns about run-down schools and surrounding community facilities gained electoral traction in Australia, supported by growing evidence of the economic and social cost of public disinvestment (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2006). The “return of the local” (Bentley, 1996) in social policy has focused on new programs to mobilise the “magic of community” (Amin, 2005) through a diverse range of partnerships involving the state, businesses and community organisations. Much of this concern has focused on strengthening the social and physical fabric of local communities, through community capacity building measures and urban renewal. Schools are pivotal institutions in many urban regeneration projects in Australia and elsewhere, as governments seek to revitalize local communities and invest in human capital (Cummings & Dyson, 2007; Dahlstedt, 2009).

The Road to Revolution

The rhetoric of an education revolution is recently identified with the UK New Labour administration (Caldwell & Harris, 2008, p. 164). Under this rubric the Blair government promoted a range of educational reforms: improvements to school facilities, the use of digital communication technologies in classrooms, greater parental voice and choice in schooling, and an emphasis on standards and accountability. In the lead up to the 2007 Australian national election, the Australian Labor Party, in opposition since 1996, focused its education policy on digital technologies. Its election platform titled *Digital Education Revolution* promised to provide “the toolbox of the twenty-first century” – notebook computers – to every Australian senior secondary school student. In 2008, now in government, Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd announced a plan to invest \$42 billion in a high-speed (100Mbps) national broadband network, with educational uses featuring in the scheme’s promotional material. In the same year Rudd also announced his government’s intention to make a “long term investment to improve the quality of facilities like gymnasiums, libraries and science laboratories in Australian schools” (cited in Australian National Audit Office, 2010, p. 109). In January 2009, following Cabinet and Council of Australian Governments (COAG) discussions over the global financial crisis, Rudd announced BER. While existing policy strands were woven together with language about the funding of new “learning environments” and implementation of a “flexible learning” pedagogy (Council of Australian Governments, 2009), policy attention and funding effectively shifted from digital to built infrastructure. If on the one hand this could be seen as a de-railing of policy, it also injected a large amount of new funding into an area of shared concern amongst the states.

BER was principally designed to deliver sustained, medium term economic stimulus, following an immediate boost from direct payments to Australian households (Stilwell & Primrose, 2010). The geographic spread of schools, their exemption from local planning laws, and the low import costs associated with school construction aligned with the national government's desire for a widespread and effective stimulatory response (Australian National Audit Office, 2010). Primary schools were the centerpiece of BER. All Australia's 6,500 or so primary schools (except those slated for closure) were eligible for new structures in the form of libraries, multipurpose halls, classrooms or covered outdoor learning areas. Implementation through agreements with Australia's 22 school funding authorities (covering the state and non-state education sectors) took priority over school-based processes of local consultation and needs assessment. To speed up construction, schools were instructed to use pre-set building designs, unless they had approved (or 'shovel ready' in Rudd parlance) building plans.

BER sat alongside a smaller funding program for local community facilities, involving payments to local government authorities. The federal department of infrastructure, regional development and local government administered this scheme. BER was premised on shared school-community use, but there appears to have been no coordination between the two programs investing in local-level social infrastructure. This lack of coordination, plus the cyclical investment pattern to which both programs conform, renders them vulnerable to criticism by the Business Council of Australia: that recent investment in public infrastructure was merely a catch-up for past under spend (Stilwell & Primrose, 2010).

As leader of the Australian Parliamentary opposition, Kevin Rudd wove infrastructure into a story of economic bottlenecks, dysfunctional communities and archaic schools (Australian Labor Party, 2009). In government, the message grew more urgent with the GFC, feeding Rudd's predilection for seemingly endless detail in speech making. "Has he so little on his mind about Australia", complained a journalist observing the Prime Minister at an Australia Day ceremony, "that the best he can do to celebrate our national day is give an interim report on infrastructure spending?" (Marr, 2010, p. 76). Rudd's empiricism set the tone for the public debate and series of inquiries into BER that followed.

The scale and speed of BER's rollout generated significant political controversy, amplified in the 2010 national election campaign. Scrutiny of the program focused on questions of program implementation and value for money. Critics identified cost blowouts and project management problems created by short construction timelines and lack of flexibility and choice in template designs. Some school boards and principals voiced concern over lack of consultation and conflict with existing state-level school renewal projects (Building the Education Revolution Implementation Taskforce, 2010, pp. 49-65). Detailed modelling by a review body appointed by the Commonwealth department of education gave limited support to critics of the national government, but

identified concerns at state government level (Building the Education Revolution Implementation Taskforce, 2010).

Concern over the national economy and the focus on building works masked BER's longer-term educational and community building aim. While this has received little scrutiny, program documentation has offered little to examine, simply specifying that the funded facilities are made available for use by community or not-for-profit groups at no or low cost (Australian Government, 2009). BER's functional orientation discloses little in the way of a developed educational rationale, or awareness of potential problems and pitfalls of shared use, especially within closely regulated school environments. Performance measures for BER devised by COAG and the Australian department of education are quantitative, focused around building timetables and expenditure (Australian National Audit Office, 2010, pp. 126, 130). While an Australian National Audit Office report (2010, p. 168) noted that BER's qualitative outcomes will not be immediately apparent, neither this report nor any of the four other inquiries into the program (Australian Senate Education Employment and Workplace Relations Committee, 2010; Building the Education Revolution Implementation Taskforce, 2010; Legislative Council General Purpose Standing Committee No. 2, 2010; Parliament of Victoria Education and Training Committee, 2010) discussed in any detail the background, rationale, operation, or expected outcomes of facility sharing.

Does it expect too much for such detail in the circumstances in which BER was put together? Australia's stimulus package was one of the first announced by the G20 countries following their November 2008 agreement on joint action to combat problems in the global economy. Australia's response was biased towards a complex program of capital spending, where other G20 countries favoured tax cuts (Prasad & Sorkin, 2009). National government discussions with state counterparts appear to have been influential in framing the shared use objective. Concepts of shared schools and co-located educational and community services are well developed in state-level policy on school and urban renewal. For example, the Victorian education department states that new school facilities should be "assets for the whole community" (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2006), and feature schools as centerpieces in urban renewal projects. The development also owes something to the global trade in educational ideas (Lingard, 2010; Steiner-Khamsi, 2004). Australian educationists are familiar with UK and US extended service and community school models (Black, 2008). Strong Australian links with the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's program for innovative school designs also provided a platform for BER's confident intervention (Fisher, 2000).

After the Revolution

There is a growing body of evidence about the impact of investment in school infrastructure and the quality of school facilities on student outcomes (Uline, 2009). However, little is known about the influence of school environments on BER's other goal

of encouraging participation and community building. There has been little published analysis of shared schools (Victorian Competition and Efficiency Commission, 2009), and BER relies on the normative appeal of terms such as community and participation rather than evidence-based policy inputs. It is now time for policy-makers to turn their attention to the program's second aim. This section draws on historical and policy literature to identify and discuss three issues that are central to realizing that aim.

Instrumental or Developmental?

Public infrastructure policy in Australia cycles between moments of policy and funding priority (often triggered by major infrastructure failure), and long periods of benign neglect. This pattern is influenced by political behaviours and the long-lived nature of physical infrastructure assets. As Neutze (1997, p. 11) observed, no minister of state was ever presented with a plaque for initiating a spending program on deferred maintenance. Opening new public works is a different matter. BER's funding conditions specify project signage requirements and ministerial launches for completed projects. Australian scholars and industry consultants have criticized what might be called a 'set and forget' mentality characterized by a neglect of the future costs of public infrastructure assets (Cardew, 2003; Regan, 2008). Awareness of the cost-shifting implications arising from local-level capital works financed by one-off contributions from higher governments has grown in Australia in recent years (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Economics Finance and Public Administration, 2003). The burden of cost shifting has fallen mostly on local government authorities in Australia, the tier of government most reliant on physical infrastructure for service delivery (Lang, 1991).

The national-state government agreement on BER states that the national contribution is a one-off, and "co-investment" costs such as maintenance will be borne by the states. The Queensland Department of Education has raised concerns about the addition of an estimated \$50 million per annum to school running costs and maintenance bills (Australian National Audit Office, 2010, p. 142). National government funding of local infrastructure characteristically focuses on built capital (national funding of local roads is a good example), often with economic pump-priming in mind (Productivity Commission, 1999, p. 6). It characteristically requires some form of co-contribution, which may distort local or state government budgets, or community priorities. The governance and uses of that infrastructure, the human element, is customarily organised by lower governments or by civic groups. This schema has its formal elaboration in subsidiarity theory - the principle that authority should be vested in the smallest effective administrative unit, or that closest to the consumption of the good or service (Oates, 1972). Framed thus, the national government, with its fiscal and constitutional power, is uniquely capable of authorizing BER's funding and coordination through COAG and non-state education authorities, the education authorities are best placed to develop system-wide policy, and schools most capable of organising shared use.

What role, if any, is there for local communities in governance processes? BER conceptualises community participation in terms of facility use, calling up a clientalist or consumerist rhetoric that pervades late twentieth century new public management (Needham, 2007). This rhetoric has been challenged by a renewal of policy interest in participatory forms of governance, placing emphasis on involvement in planning and decision-making, rather than implementation (Stewart, 2009). Is community engagement with schools purely instrumental, or are there developmental or learning objectives associated involving community members in future planning and decision-making around shared-use facilities? This is a complex issue that raises questions about representativeness and community capacity in participatory processes (Brackertz & Meredyth, 2009), as well as the role and resources of schools. Earlier advocates of community governance of schools and community facilities were confronted with problems of local apathy, lack of expertise, and bureaucratic intransigence (Howard, 1988; Interim Committee of the Australian Schools Commission, 1973). Filardo et al. (2010, p. 1), while advocates of a new “social contract” for the use of school facilities, have nevertheless cautioned that the main purpose of schools is schooling. BER’s conceptualisation of participation is firmly focused on implementation. Whether it might be a platform for the development of more ambitious educational and community-building agenda, and how this might impact on schools, is an issue that warrants further examination.

Prioritising Libraries

BER rules identify school libraries as a priority for program funding. Over three thousand library projects have been funded (Building the Education Revolution Implementation Taskforce, 2010, p. 1), although it is unclear how many of these will share library services as well as spaces with communities. BER was rolled out amidst debate over the relevance of stand-alone school libraries, as pressures on school budgets increase, the supply of teacher-librarians dwindles, and the view that teachers and students can organize their own information resources through on-line tools gains currency (Lee & Gaffney, 2008). In March 2010 the Minister for Education, Hon Julia Gillard MP, asked an Australian parliamentary committee to inquire into school libraries and teacher librarians. Libraries are relatively specialized and costly facilities, quite different from utilitarian structures such as school halls in their requirements and capabilities. What expectations and opportunities flow from their prioritization under the scheme?

Let’s imagine that facility sharing in this instance includes some level of shared library services. Shared libraries have a century-long history in Australia. The Australian library authority Alan Bundy (2003) estimates that almost 10% of Australian public libraries are shared use, the “school-housed” public library being the most common type. A supporter of the concept, Bundy nevertheless argues that shared use libraries are susceptible to dysfunction or failure for a host of reasons, including financial stress, poor design and siting, fluctuating school enrolments, lack of congruence between partners, public reluctance to use ‘school’ libraries, and conflict around censorship. If community

use of school library services takes service pressures off local municipal libraries, it can be presumed that some level of external funding will flow to the school. Australian state and local governments jointly fund municipal libraries. In recent times, the funding proportion provided by state governments has decreased (Australian Senate Environment Communications Information Technology and the Arts Reference Committee, 2003, p. 73). Following conventional public finance theory, the implication of that change is that local libraries are increasingly funded as ratepayer services rather than educational public goods (such as schools) that are funded by higher governments.

On the other hand, as Breivik (in Bundy 2003, p. 8) notes, public and school libraries share around 30% of their clientele, and shared use libraries present an opportunity to develop a whole-of-community approach to changing information literacy needs. BER's focus on buildings, together with program rules that only fund ICTs for building operations (Australian Government, 2009), overlooks the possibility of developing shared school-community ICT resources. This move would be consistent with wider public library developments to promote information literacy and combat the digital divide, and the attempts of schools to grapple with the changing relationship between 'in-school' and 'out-of-school' literacies (Sefton-Green, Nixon, & Erstad, 2009). It also seems a modest ambition for a program that offers learning environments for the twenty first century, put forward by a government promising a digital education revolution and a high-speed national broadband network.

The Role of 'Soft' Infrastructure

School renewal programs such as BER bring welcome improvements to school physical environments and contribute to positive educational outcomes, although, as Fuller et.al. (2009) conclude from a study of school regeneration in Los Angeles, precisely how positive effects are produced is not known. These authors suggest that the symbolic message of investment in new school facilities – that society cares about these places – may be as significant as design effects. However, as Fuller et al. (2009) argue, new schools are unlikely to compensate for uneven teaching quality and student disengagement, nor impact on the social architecture of communities, without attention to the 'soft' infrastructure of organizational systems, networks and human resources.

Hierarchical distinctions between hard and soft infrastructure are long-standing and increasingly questioned. Urban theorists have challenged an epistemology that labeled hard infrastructure as 'economic' and 'essential', and soft infrastructure as the obverse (Troy, 1996). Structural transformations brought by digital technologies and knowledge-based economies have reinforced this challenge. In the educational domain, the concept of learning environments suggest the removal of grid-pattern desks and classroom walls, through the influences of constructivist pedagogies, digital technologies, and collaboration between formal and informal educational sectors. Additional demands for schools to develop partnerships with parents, communities and businesses further suggest the limitations of 'hard' and 'soft' distinctions, and the rising pressure on

principals and other school leaders (Douglas & Harris, 2008, p. 2). School leaders have expressed concerns over their lack of resources to form and keep links with community agencies and businesses, particularly in socially and economically disadvantaged areas (Black, 2008, p. 22). Watkins (2010) has argued for the significance of human intermediaries to encourage take-up of new information technology opportunities in health and education. This point has particular significance if the Australian government's proposed national broadband network, with high expectations for its transformative impact on formal education, goes ahead.

The circumstances of BER's development, and its emphasis on hard infrastructure, conform to Samuels (2009) concept of infrastructure optimism. Drawing on US responses to natural disasters, Samuels (2009) points to the political significance of a "recovery narrative", expressed through rapid response, symbolically-charged physical infrastructure projects. Prime Minister Rudd's frequent references to the crisis proportions of the GFC, together with the speed of BER's rollout, gives the program the talismanic quality described by Samuels. Following Samuels' analysis, this is an archetypically modernist response, designed to demonstrate mastery over environmental circumstances, focused on reconstruction rather than innovation. As we have seen, structural features of Australia's federal system also influence such a response. By contrast, school regeneration projects under the charge of Australian state governments have placed greater emphasis on the soft infrastructure of institutions and networks. In Victoria's case, this has involved shifting policy oversight of early childhood development from the health to the education portfolio, and co-locating early childhood services with school sites. This emphasises service engagement and coordination - a particular problem in early childhood (Brennan, 2009) - over more abstract notions of community participation. Whether closer articulation between BER and state regeneration programs would have achieved the stimulus aims is an open question. The challenge now is aligning hard and soft infrastructure to shift BER from a heroic economic intervention to a program with long-term educational and social value.

Concluding Remarks

Australia experienced a mild economic downturn following the GFC. There may be valid concerns with BER's rapid rollout, but much criticism of the national government's response to global economic instability lost sight of the fact that the stimulatory measures were designed in a period of great uncertainty. However, the Australian government's view that BER was developed in exceptional circumstances can be contextualised with earlier phases of social infrastructure funding. As we have seen, the portrayal of infrastructure crises and economic pump-priming are standard policy tools. The cyclical pattern of public infrastructure funding in Australia, though, suggests that this scale of investment in schools comes once a generation, and a pragmatic assessment of the program is warranted.

The view that schools are central social and physical resources of local communities has animated Australian educational and social policy for a century or more. BER attempts to realize this vision through the concept of shared-use, treated as a self-evident notion that in turn generates participation and community cohesion. The contribution of particular educational spaces prescribed under the program to this aim is unspecified. Complex places such as shared-use libraries, and relatively simple structures such as halls, are undifferentiated in a set of program rules focused on building start-ups. Alternatively, the exclusive focus on buildings overlooks other essential components of education and community infrastructure – digital resources and broadband, institutional networks, skills. The focus of BER on what happens within school boundaries also seems anachronistic when ‘learning environments’ know no such limits. This inward-looking perspective is reinforced by leaving the local government sector, the major provider of community facilities, entirely out of the picture.

However, in the polarized public debate over BER, little attention has been paid to the constraints on the national government in funding local level programs. Blanket criticism of BER can be read as a desire for greater control over the implementation of the scheme – that is, for more top-down direction. Minimal detail has been provided on how BER’s funding conditions will be audited or enforced. Given the wide social, spatial and financial circumstances of schools, it is likely and appropriate that a range of local responses to the new facilities will evolve. It is now timely to think about what future uses can be made of these resources, and what additional inputs are required to optimize those uses. However, as Cummings and Dyson (2007) argued in connection with UK regeneration programs, there is a significant research challenge in evaluating responses to such programs, and developing stronger empirical and theoretical insights into school renewal, and the wider field of policy and cultural practice in which it is situated.

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