Yuille Park P-8 Community College

Aims of Innovative Learning Environment, nature and history of innovation: holistic picture of organisation

Background and context of school

At Yuille Park Community College (YPCC), educators, parents and other adult community members work together to achieve generational change for their children. Every aspect of the physical buildings, school operations and curriculum has been carefully designed towards enabling the school motto of *Living to learn, learning to live* to become a reality for each student at the school.

There is a seamless cohesion between the vision, architecture, school social environment and pedagogical approaches throughout the school that is the result of the depth of attention given to every aspect of the planning and operations of this school. Working closely with and listening to the entire school community has facilitated the development and enactment of a shared vision around the well-being and education of the children (See Figure 1). Like in all schools, there is a diversity of community membership, but unusually, Principal, Team Leaders, teachers, teachers’ aides, paid staff, volunteer staff, parents, teachers from other schools, employees of other government agencies and local community members work together at this school in an almost flat structure where all voices are listened to and the focus is the present and future of the students in their care. Visiting Yuille Park Community College is an uplifting experience as the atmosphere of joy for learning and enthusiasm for working with these young people permeates the school.

Figure 1. YPCC framework for lifelong learning
YPCC was formed from the merger of Yuille Primary School and Grevillea Park Primary School. The existing buildings on the Yuille Primary School site were razed and replaced with open-plan, beautifully designed buildings and grounds. Like every aspect of this school, the architectural layout and design of the school - as well as being stunningly beautiful - was developed through a process of extensive consultation with the full school community, with the children’s best interests at the centre of the planning.

Described as ‘the heart of Wendouree West’ (Wendouree West Neighbourhood Renewal Team, 2003), the school is a part of the Wendouree West Community Learning Hub, which includes education, health and community facilities in one location (see Figure 2, below). The Hub exemplifies multi-agency collaboration at its best and what is possible when different government departments, agencies and ministries work together with a shared vision that has the community they serve at the centre. In addition to the school itself, the hub hosts Wendouree West Children’s Services (providing occasional care for children aged 1-3, 3 Year old kindergarten, 4 year old kindergarten, maternal and child health services); Wendouree West Youth Centre; Wendouree West Well-Being Inc. (promoting health, education and encouraging positive life choices) and a dental clinic. It is disappointing to the school community members that the Community House, for a time located at the hub, decided to relocate.

The community facilities are located at the front of the college, and can be accessed from within or outside the school. The school itself is secure, and can be locked off outside of school hours, while a very well-staffed front office monitors both school and community hub visitors carefully.
The range of facilities that can be used by the community outside of school hours include:

- Commercial Kitchen
- Function Rooms
- Woodwork Facilities
- Sewing facilities
- Laundry
- ICT Room
- Gym
- Art Area complete with Kiln
- Library
- Band Room
- Community Garden
- Multi-function Hall that can be hired out to the public
- Dental Clinic

In all of the shared spaces, provision has been made for usage by both the school community and the broader community. For instance, in the art and woodwork areas there are separately keyed school and community storage areas. Each agency that operates within the Hub has their own coloured logo, the design of which depicts an adult with a small child and an adolescent (see Figure 3). The design represents the idea of working in the community through the stages of life. The usage of the logos throughout the school creates a shared sense of identity, and these same logos provide a sense of community belonging as they are displayed throughout the neighbourhood.

An important aspect of the success of this school community is the genuine attempt by the Principal and Leading Teachers to create a flat structure, where all of the staff contribute to planning and provide input to major decisions. The level of staff commitment to the community is extremely high, and staff have a deep sense of the value of the work that they are doing with the children they are working with. All of the staff we interviewed talked about ‘our kids’, and this was clearly the focus of their work. The respect and value given by the leadership to the staff is reflected in the respect and value they give to the children with whom they work.
YPCC is located in one of the most disadvantaged communities in Victoria on any measure. Situated in a neighbourhood of public housing in Wendouree West on the outskirts of Ballarat, the vast majority of parents are unemployed and many families have lived in the neighbourhood for two or three generations. Others are itinerant. The housing was initially a concentrated area of housing commission stock built in the early 1950s, so that newly arrived immigrants could be moved out of housing that was needed for the Olympic Games rowers. Some of these houses have more recently been sold off at a low cost and mostly purchased by landlords who use them as cheap private rentals that are rarely upgraded. Initially there was extensive industry in the area, so most people had some form of employment. However as the Community and Educational Liaison Officer explains:

*when that industry closed down, this was the community that suffered the most... Most members of the community are unemployed now, due to the closure of industry. So when you’ve got third generation unemployment, there’s not a lot of role modelling for the kids. We’re starting to change that.*

The Community and Educational Liaison Officer is jointly employed by the Department of Human Services and Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, a very successful partnership in this school community. She says that:

*People who are being moved on from other areas come into this housing, they have no other option. They’re often the ones that have more social issues and they create issues within the community.*

She classifies the Office of Housing tenants as the ones who have chosen to live here, but explains that:

*you also have a lot of that transient population that comes through, now that’s reducing to a degree. You still find pockets of that and there are still pockets in this community that are still causing problems.*

YPCC is listed as ‘low’ in the Government Schools Performance Summary 2009. The Index of Community Socio-Economic Educational Advantage (ICSEA) for the school rates 4% of students as coming from the most socio-economically advantaged top quartile, 2% from the second highest quartile, 78% for the bottom middle and 16% for the least-advantaged quartile. The school is ranked at 990. The student attendance rate is 91%. Yuille Park Community College has a total enrolment of 205 students, 81 girls and 124 boys. 6% of students are indigenous. The school employs 20 teaching staff (18.2 FTE), 12 non-teaching staff (8.7 EFT), and benefits from a multitude of volunteers.
National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) data shows YPCC as performing well below Australian and similar schools in all assessment areas. The Principal and staff are well aware of this and are working to build academic capacity. The school’s vision is to achieve continuous improvement in student learning outcomes, maximizing opportunities for the development of life-long learning skills (Yuille Park Community College, 2010). There is a Literacy Coach working with staff and students, and the school provides numeracy intervention. There is an expectation that greater uptake of kindergarten places on the Community Hub site will contribute to improved early years results.

The substantial indicators for school improvement since the school opened in late 2008 occur in the Student, Staff and Parent Opinion Surveys, where enormous shifts have occurred across all survey categories. The Attitudes to School Survey (Years 5 and 6) shows significant improvement (from low in the first and second quartiles to high third and fourth quartiles) across all indicators. The Year 5 and 6 self-assessment of morale, learning motivation, learning confidence, connectedness to school, classroom behaviour, and student safety moved from below, and mostly substantially below, the State mean in 2008 to above, and often well above, the 2010 State mean. Year 5/6 students rated teacher effectiveness at above the 75th percentile in 2010, compared to just over the 10th percentile in 2008.

Indicators for upper middle years’ students show enormous change in school engagement, Year 8 students at YPCC report above the 95th percentile in all attitudinal indicators when ranked with all Victorian government schools. Student absences at Year 7 averaged 23 days per student in 2008; this was reduced to an average of 13.5 days in 2009, almost 2 days less than the State average. The average Year 7 student absence was 6 days in 2009, compared to the State average of 18.8 days. This is astounding considering that prior to the opening of YPCC, there was a very low retention rate for students beyond Year 6.

Staff opinions have changed significantly in three years. In 2008, staff morale was extremely low, staff engagement and learning were low, and perceptions of student motivations and behaviour were poor. Almost all sections of the survey reported low in the 1st quartile. The 2010 Staff Opinion survey, however, shows almost all indicators in the 4th quartile; staff are highly motivated; have strong relationships with other staff and students; have a very clear sense of their role; value professional growth, and perceive high goal congruence and supportive leadership. Staff have a high opinion of the school’s discipline policy and see strong improvements in student behaviour and motivation. The Principal refers to improved staff survey data:

> You can see there where the growth in the staff has been. They still have some issues around, and this is a middle class value of teachers, student motivation, what our idea of what it looks like and what it is. Not [taking into account] how connected these students are and what they’re doing. It’s about our perceptions and that’s important...
Demonstrating the school’s understanding of data as an evaluation tool, the Principal noted that there were:

...some interesting growth patterns, particularly from 2008 to where we are this year. But there was some drop offs in some areas, not a lot, but some areas dropped back in 2009 and what we needed to do was unpack that and... where the students coming from particularly in the year 5s, what do they go through in that time to get to that place that they found that they weren’t as connected... [Years] 3 to 5... shows you the growth and the connections. It shows you those building blocks of what can be achieved... [In] 2008 they were only in there for 6 months, so that’s improvement...the year 5s, they're the ones who only had the 6 months then they became the older ones, now they're our year 6s, and if you look at our year 6 data and see where they’re sitting, that’s quite strong.

As YPCC is part of both neighbourhood renewal and school regeneration, where school and Community Hub facilities are often shared, it received funding from both the Department of Education and Early Childhood (Facilities Funding) and the Department of Human Services (Neighbourhood Renewal, Community Support Fund and Community Facility Fund). Under the Victorian Schools Plan, this school is notably one of the largest investments in school buildings in State history.

**Nature and History of the Innovation**

In 2001, a Neighbourhood Renewal project began in the community. This was a pilot project for the neighbourhood renewal concept, and this community was chosen in particular due to the high level of disadvantage exemplified by third generation unemployment, high levels of child protection notifications, high levels of children not transitioning well between primary and secondary school, and students often leaving school at Year 7 or 8, despite being under the legal school leaving age. When the renewal project first began the community could only identify 2 young people from Wendouree West that had gone on to Year 11 and 12 in the recent past.
The area was also stigmatised and had a bad reputation in Ballarat:

*Wendouree West was a no go zone basically. If people come from Wendouree West they were bad people. People from outside of Wendouree West didn’t come in to the community.*  
(Community and Educational Liaison Officer)

The Renewal project aimed to increase well-being, safety, education, employment, housing, pride and participation. The Community and Educational Liaison Officer, who worked on the project, explains that ‘[t]hings were desperate, something had to happen’.

The School Bursar, who worked at Yuille Primary School prior to the community renewal and school regeneration projects, describes the school situation as she saw it:

*Before our kids were leaving school at the end of grade six and I was so concerned that they would drop out of primary schools and a good proportion of them did. We had a lot of angry parents and we witnessed quite a lot of violent situations with parents. The only time that you would see them is if they felt that their child had been hard done by. I got this feeling that they looked upon their children as possessions rather than children.*

She says that she was really frustrated about what was happening with these kids, ‘but when they got together and started talking about a new model I became really excited about it’. She explained that it was not that the schools were dysfunctional, but that the programs were not working: ‘We were such a close-knit staff and the teachers genuinely cared about these kids but what they were doing didn’t really work with these kids’.

According to the Department of Planning and Community Development (DPCD) ‘A Fairer Victoria’ report,

*This partnership has already resulted in rising kindergarten enrolments and school attendance rates. In 2004 for example, only 22 per cent of children enrolled in Prep had attended kindergarten. By 2010 the figure was 100 per cent. Service integration has increased access because services share the same location. The shopping strip has been revitalised, there is a new train station, sporting facilities have been improved, and major housing upgrades have followed. Unemployment is down with more than 265 jobs created. Smarter urban design has better integrated intersections and footpaths and the community is going from strength to strength.*  
(DPCD, 2010)

**A “bottom-up” model for change: Schools Regeneration**

Yuille Park Community College is the outcome of a schools regeneration project under the Victorian Schools Plan. The two primary schools, Yuille and Grevillea Park, worked through an intensive and extensive consultation process with school councils and staff and put together an education brief about what they envisaged for their learning community. The Bursar explained some of the efforts to engage the school community: ‘We had a lot of meetings with parents - you know we would have sausage sizzles and think of all different ways to get parents along and talk to the parents’. The working party of around 20 people included staff from the Regional Office and leadership team of the local secondary school. This work around visioning and community needs was focused on what the local community wanted and needed. At the time, both primary schools were suffering from low enrolments, so their community recommended to the DEECD that they amalgamate and rebuild on the Yuille site.

When this was approved, the schools moved into the design phase of the new school. Initially a working group was formed of the Principals, Acting Principal of Wendouree Secondary College, the
Regional Director, Assistant Regional Director, and the Student Well-being Manager from the region. They went to Western Australia to look at some models of schooling and facilities and returned with concepts and ideas to prepare an initial brief. After these ideas were discussed at length in the community, the Principal took a team back to Western Australia and to South Australia to look at schools designed around the open learning. That team had teachers from the two schools, renewal staff and DHS staff.

From the sharing of what the group experienced on that trip, principles of design for the new facility were developed in the community. The community focused on incorporating everything that they could think of that would maximise the potentials of an open learning, team teaching model. This led to the development of the concepts that the school facilities are based upon. The Principal explained that the concepts were based upon what they saw at the Kinross School in Western Australia. He describes how they redeveloped the middle years of schooling model for Yuille Park:

We’ve taken it down to the primary and the pre-school as a synergy that flows... a consistent flow-through...We probably did about 3 or 4 drafts of what we wanted. We talked with the staff and we had to take the staff through a journey of saying what is possible...In the model that I wanted in place [were] students working in multi-aged groups.

A teacher at Grevillea Primary at the time and now a teacher in Pod 3 described the process:

There was a lot of change. [The Principal] was fantastic, handled the change really, really well, put in a lot of background and everything went really quite slowly. I would have wanted it...kind of let’s go, let’s go, let’s go. And he never did that once. He was always laid back, slow, let people take their time, and all of that sort of thing. So in the end he just brought people along with him. Then I think a few went oh, doesn’t quite fit me and they’ve moved onto bigger and better things.

Transitioning into the New Site: Developing new pedagogy and new ways of working

When the buildings at Yuille were razed and the schools amalgamated on the Grevillea site while the new YPCC building was in progress, the staff began to form a shared learning community and to try some of the ideas that were could be embedded in their new spaces. There were some areas of the school that could be crudely opened up by, for example, the removal of walls, and these were used to trial different approaches to teaching and learning.

A Pod 1 teacher describes how some of the teachers began to change their practices to get ready for the new spaces:

We started to make it a learning community over there, even though it was still traditional class rooms...The teachers moved their desks all into one room, so that they were all together, similar to what we have here, so that we could plan together and work together, so that was the first step. And we shared; I did a little bit of team teaching back then with another teacher for maths and it started there.

The result of this was that when the teachers moved into the new school buildings, they had already worked with ideas, concepts and models of pedagogy that they had trialled on the old site. The buildings’ handover date of October was ideal, as there were two months to rehearse pedagogy before the end of the year, providing staff with a deeper knowledge and understanding of what working in this way might entail before beginning their planning for the first full year of the College. Parents too were prepared for the move. One parent who is actively involved in the school community stated that the community was kept up to date via the school newsletter. When she found out about the merger, she spoke about it to her children, and kept them informed. When her
children relocated from the Yuille Site to Grevillea while the facilities were built she walked her children to and from the school over the holidays so that they were prepared for the change.

**The Innovative Learning Environment**

The attention to detail in the school design, construction and finish is astounding. It is no surprise that the architects who worked with the school community on the design, Suters Prior Cheney, won the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development 2008 School Design Award for Best Overall School Design. The provision of such an outstanding facility to this community communicates the view they are worth it, that their education is valuable.

This attention to every detail makes the spaces more flexible and the buildings more beautiful. The large gymnasium for instance, has wooden soundproofing, so it can be used as a performance space, assembly hall and gym. The space at one end of the gym can be closed off to become a practice studio, or the gym can be totally opened out into the large open space called The Agora (gathering place) to create a huge open space for large events. There is a monthly community market held in this space, and the space was recently utilised for the Ultranet Professional Development day, which was attended by 150 teachers from Ballarat. The school kitchen is at one end of this space, facilitating its use for catering at large functions. On Ultranet Day, the students fed and served the teachers. The kitchen is also used for Pod 2’s Kitchen Garden Program, and the Wider Workforce students run a breakfast club three mornings a week which is attended by about 40 students. On Fridays all of the students are provided with fresh fruit on big platters.

**Architecture, connectedness and visibility**

The intensive consultation process has meant that the architecture is based on the realities of school life and what is needed and wanted in the community. The close work done by the school teaching teams and broader community enabled the teachers and other educators to get the teaching spaces that they wanted. These spaces could not be described as classrooms - they are open and flexible and have possibilities contained within them for new ways of working and living out school life (See Figure 4, below).

There is an openness and transparency in the spaces and you always have a sense of what is happening in other areas of the school. This is a physical reality that is also part of the school values and culture. The Community and Educational Liaison Officer, who also runs most of the school tours, explains this eloquently:

> that’s why this has also been developed as…very open. So you can see what is happening in the playground from the board room. You can see what’s happening in the classroom from the passage way, from the Agora. There’s nothing to be hidden. All the windows that face onto the road you know they have these blinds but that’s for sun glare. The first couple of weeks we were in we had some of the residents across the road say we can see into the classrooms, we don’t know whether we should be able to do that. We said we’ve got nothing to hide. It’s about bringing learning in and taking it out and making it really visible…
The external playground spaces have also been carefully thought through and are beautifully landscaped. There are covered walkways between the buildings (necessary in the Ballarat winter) and the playground spaces are near each of the Pods. There are plum trees planted throughout the playground and when the plums ripen in Term One, the students enjoy picking and eating them. The school has a large kitchen garden and an animal farmlet where they keep chickens, ducks, and guinea pigs; children care for the animals, collect eggs, and older students monitor visiting time during recess and lunch periods. There is a 100,000 litre water tank for the toilets and gardens.

**Structured Patterns and Characteristics of ILE: layout, sequencing and mix of learning activities**

The school is structured in a multi-aging model in 3 distinct areas called Pods. Each of these Pods is an open plan space, with areas where smaller groups can work. Each of the Pods is slightly different, but they all have open spaces, great usage of natural light and an ability to use these well-fitted spaces flexibly. Each Pod is self-contained with its own toilet facilities and spaces for the children to store their things. They all have gallery spaces for displaying the work that the children do. The self-contained nature of the Pods helps to create a sense of belonging for the children - a home space - and this is such a strong feature that the teachers have had to work at mixing the students and working out of Pod groups as well.

Because the community is still working out how to best use the new facilities, the organisational structures are not stagnant. In 2009, there were learning communities of Years Prep–2, Years 3–5, and Years 6–8. When the staff reviewed the year, they felt it would be more beneficial to have more groupings within the basic multi-aged Pod structure. For example, this year, there are two Year Prep/1 and two Year 1/2 home groups in Pod 1 and Year 3/4 and Year 4/5 groupings in Pod 2. At present there are discussions around how best to organise home group and Pod structures for 2011.
Staff are very engaged in this process, and constantly evaluating aspects of the organisation and programs that were successful or not, and the ways in which things are currently being managed are slightly different in each Pod.

![Figure 6. External Spaces](image)

**Kindergarten**

When the renewal project began in 2001, there were very low kinder attendances (12). There are now 36 children attending kindergarten at the learning hub. There are windows at the back of the kindergarten, so that the kindergarten children can look through the windows and see the older children at school, and vice versa. A focus on increasing kindergarten attendance has lead to both improved participation at primary school and an easier transition into schooling.

This increased kindergarten participation has been achieved through the local government, and the renewal project partnering with Best Start. A sponsorship program was implemented where sponsorship was sought from local groups. The Community and Educational Liaison Officer explains:

> Ballarat Grammar was one. Centrelink. A couple of other organisations. So we got around $5000 in sponsorships. We were able to sponsor about 19 kids to attend kinder over 3 years. We knew that there were some barriers. We thought finances were one of those barriers even though they’re only paying $60 a term... $60 a term is not a lot, but in this community it is. So it means whether you get your car registered, whether you get a new battery, petrol, food, whatever. So just doing that...and we targeted the most vulnerable children, so we didn’t make it a blanket advertisement. We did it quite undercover really; got referrals from agencies and child protection. So those children who are most vulnerable we made sure they were sponsored to attend kinder and they did. So that in fact gave them a really great start into primary school and it’s all around that pattern of attendance...So if you can get the kid to kinder and get them there on a regular basis, that just translates very well into primary.

It is striking that, despite these enormous efforts and huge successes in increasing kindergarten attendance, the school recently enrolled an eight year old child who was ‘found’ by Community Services and had not attended any educational setting previously. This child has been given support to be integrated into school and seems to be happily doing so, but these circumstances are a poignant reminder of the extent of the disadvantage that this community is dealing with, and the importance of the extensive programs run at the Learning Hub.

**Pod 1**

Pod 1 houses students from Prep to Year 2. The day begins with a whole group session (P-2), where the students generally sit together in a circle, go through the daily news, celebrate birthdays and other special occasions, before dividing into their working groups. The working groups are split into different configurations according to planned activities. The program follows the Early Years literacy
and numeracy schedule, and closely follows the Early Years Program with elements such as Shared Reading, Small Group Reading, Writing Focus, etc. They also have an emphasis on oral language development and phonics. After a half an hour break, the students continue with literacy activities from 11:30 to 12:30 followed by numeracy. After lunch, the final hour is inquiry time, where units of work follow the students’ interests. At the time of our visits, the students were studying animals, and had been researching zoos, animals and their habitats and endangered animals. There was a large model of a zoo they had constructed out of Lego and the work displayed showed an investigation into the habits of spider monkeys. Some children had done some research on endangered animals and they had constructed a display about orang-utans. Students were able to articulate their learning to the researchers.

The teachers in this Pod have a strong focus on welcoming the children and making them feel comfortable in the setting. Many of the children who come into the school do not have very strong oral language or pre-literacy skills, so some of the work that the teachers do is work that most schools would not have to do, as the children coming in would already have the skills. One of the P-2 teachers explained:

we felt that our children were coming in, they were so low without any intervention that we really needed to have a needs-based program and that’s what we’ve provided this year for the Prep children and we have had fantastic results, but I suppose what we do and what [my team-teaching colleague] and I do is we really care about our children. So it’s like they’re our own children and we treat them as we would want someone to treat our children even though [the other teacher] hasn’t got any yet...

The level of oral language that the students come in with varies, but when the teachers have visited other schools, they immediately notice how much higher the oral language levels are and how much more skilled the students are at constructing narratives. They run a phonics program, but the emphasis is on what to do with language. Another of the Prep teachers says:

We’ve got kids - like it might have taken them all year to just about learn their alphabet - but now we’re actually teaching them what they do with their alphabet so that they can use it. Whereas a lot of times people say, ‘Well they know their alphabet, OK’. That’s fine they know their alphabet, they know their sounds, but what do they do with it? They don’t know what to do with it. So that’s the sort of focused teaching...you’re trying to get them up and our results are improving.

A Pod 1 teacher explained that oral language is significantly underdeveloped when their students arrive at school:

But we find too with our children - and it’s getting worse every year...language, oral language, receptive, expressive [is] shocking. They are not exposed to a lot of conversation at home and it makes it difficult.

Because the children generally are not from language rich environments, planning for individual needs enables the teachers to fill in the gaps for each child. The teachers keep detailed data, tracking the children individually on a spreadsheet and constantly re-evaluating their program according to the needs of the children.

Developing appropriate social behaviours is also an issue for some of the children. A teacher states that the staff both explicitly and implicitly teach values, resilience and friendship. She explains:

You’re teaching values all the time anyway, through your regular teaching and learning every day, so your values, what’s appropriate behaviour, how do we be good friends, all of that, every day. We come in from play and we always have three happy news: who would like to come and talk
The children really enjoyed the work that they did in the Inquiry Unit and loved the facilities. We interviewed some children who had taken photos of their work, and they described how much they enjoyed learning about the animals and how much they loved coming to school. One boy took a photo into the kindergarten room because he could see his sister there, and another took a photo of the chickens because he said he was looking forward to caring for them when he was in Pod 2. The children seemed very happy in the Pod and wore their uniforms very proudly.

Pod 2

Pod 2 houses Year 3 to 5 students, with 4 classroom teachers and 4 educational assistants. There are home groups that belong to each teacher, but the majority of the program is taught in cross groups of students with teams. Sometimes the home groups are together and sometimes there are other groupings according to the program or the needs of the students. A teacher in this Pod explains:

> Sometimes we do...try especially in maths classes. I've got a group of 4 or 5 students that are quite above the rest of the group and so I'll set a task for them as an independent group...separate from the rest of the class where they go off and work on a task by themselves in a group of 4 sort of speaking. You know, because the space is so flexible you can allow them to go away but still see them working and focus...

The Pod space facilitates the capacity for flexibility with working groups and the school’s collaborative approach. The Pod Leader emphasises that:

> there’s a bit going on. We’re really fortunate I guess to have a flexible staff where we’re able to [work together] and I guess [that’s] the beauty of our open environment across the school.
He adds that team teaching enables Pod staff to:

*bounce ideas off each other and work towards differentiating the curriculum for the kids across the board...it’s the collegial discussions, the team planning, the team teaching. Knowing that I don’t have to know everything, that I’ve got a team member who can jump in and support at the same time rather than me just being in that class and maybe providing information that I believe correct but is actually misunderstanding so you know you can really support each other through that process.*

The Pod encourages the students to develop their teamwork skills, and they explicitly work through issues around teamwork in class. The Pod Leader describes this:

*A lot of the times [they] negotiate and think very carefully about who they’re going to select or who they’re going to work with...kids are going to gravitate to, normally, to their own friends but we’re finding now there’s a bit of a change to that; the kids are actually looking for how is this going to best benefit me and my team.*

The Pod has a focus on reading in the literacy block, and staff have tried to encourage the students to read for longer and longer periods of time. The team has studied their NAPLAN data in detail and identified a need for improvement in reading, so that the students could become ‘solid readers who can interpret and understand questions’. They are trying to establish a love for reading and stamina for reading. Starting with 10 minutes at a time, which was ‘a massive task for our kids. We now have kids reading 20 minutes, half an hour’. There have been increased library book borrowing and increased sales of books at the school’s Book Fair.

In Pod 2 there is an Inquiry unit every term. In Term 4 it is based on gold and economics, so it is strongly related to the history and present of the local community of Ballarat. Pod 2 students also participate in the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Program. The Pod Leader explains how the Pod staff have changed the ways they run the Kitchen Garden scheme to increase the learning outcomes for the children:

*We try to really integrate and align a lot of our teaching to those hands on experiences the kids have in the classroom or in the garden or in the kitchen, so what we’ve actually decided to do now is - we used to have 20 kids in the kitchen and that was just manic, kids everywhere, knives, you know - we thought let’s take a step back and see how we can really support their literacy and numeracy more whilst also having the hands on experience.*

*So what we did was we broke our groups into half. Whilst a group [is] in cooking we’re doing an activity aligned to the activity that’s going on in the kitchen. So it might be a garden exercise so we take kids out; we’re actually measuring the garden. We’re out there using trundle wheels. The hands on stuff. Then they’re getting an idea: okay it says on this packet that I need to place this seed every so many metres, about measuring, doing it, and it’s all very connected and authentic....We’ve done a YPCC Master Chef, so they’ve had to come up with their own, we’ve videoed it, all that sort of stuff. So lots of...connecting it to what they see on TV...*

Several students from Pod 2 were invited by the research team to take photographs of a place that they like and in which they learn well. One child was very quiet but he did chat a little about the pictures he took of the woodwork room, where he likes to ‘build stuff’ and measure things. Another photographed the kitchen and was extremely enthusiastic about the Kitchen Program. She also liked the ‘Quick Smart room’ in which 1-2 students work at a time solving specific (maths) problems. She was very articulate in explaining what she likes about the school and why. In particular, she finds that she learns much better in small groups, as she finds big groups ‘too hard’.
A third student took pictures of the multipurpose room, which is used for indoor sports and activities. It also opens up into the two adjoining music rooms and is used as a performance space. He is a big fan of AFL and plays for the school’s football team but he also loves the variety of sports they play and especially looks forward to the Sports Program held once a week. One student videoed the chooks and the Stephanie Alexander garden and all of the children showed interest and enthusiasm in this area. The boys talked about the vegetables they grow, showed compost they make and the type of pizzas they make in their outdoor pizza oven. Both girls demonstrated their love of the ducks, chooks and roosters at their school and neither of them can wait until they are in Pod 3 and become responsible for them.

The children all clearly distinguished ‘where we learn’ as the areas where they sit together on the floor (around the electronic-white board) and, for the student in Maths intervention, the Quick Smart room, where, clearly, she has learnt that she can learn.

Pod 3

Pod 3 is based on the middle years of schooling model, with a strong emphasis on self-directed learning and what the Pod staff describe as multiple points of entry. The Pod has a huge range of skills and abilities in addition to the age range in the Pod, and so all of the learning activities are designed with entry points at different places, to enable the students who are ahead to be challenged and others to be able to learn and complete some of the work. The Pod 3 Leader explains:

We have kids there who can’t function in the classroom so we have a program for that. We have multi-approaches and we always have multi entry points because if you do not have those multi entry points then kids get lost. And that is why we have [that] range in the first place because kids have just fallen through the cracks. It is not this school it is every single school...

Two Pod 3 teachers interviewed articulated and demonstrated their enthusiasm about the work that they do together. One said that their skills ‘combine really well’. They both appreciate the work of the other three education support staff in their Pod. Going into Pod 3, it is difficult to tell who is support staff and who is a teacher. One of the teachers explains:

I know they’re not teachers but they would make...They are better than a lot of teachers I’ve worked with, as far as the way they interact with the kids and their expectations of work [and] their knowledge of how to discipline kids. You know when to growl and when not to growl. You know how you always see people who are just natural born teachers and you see other teachers who you think go and get a job in the milk bar please. And so we are really lucky. We are a real team in our Pod. You know it’s probably just luck but we’ve ended up with 5 people who are just fantastic.

The Pod Leader concurred with this and explained other leadership activities that the educational support (ES) staff take on:

We designed a workforce program, so we have kids out on work experience - like today there are three kids out. I have an ES staff member that runs that. Educational support team members run the advanced program and the work experience program. They run cafes at the school with the specific focus of getting these kids into the workforce. We identify and pool the resources for the educational support - the educational support staff work across the Pod.

He explains that ‘they are as good as teachers. That is how the school runs because of the brilliance of our support staff’.
The flexibility of the spaces facilitates the inquiry program in Pod 3:

the flexibility of the place...allows you to do so many different other activities. You know when you’re in a normal classroom to cook anything is just...you’ve got to try and get 4 electric frypans...and there’s nowhere to wash the dishes or wash your hands...Whereas now we cook all of the time, and it’s just so easy. We do science experiments that are not using any dangerous chemicals, we just use vinegar and bi-carb soda and all those, but you can do all that stuff really easily without even thinking about it...It’s not this little add on, and it’s not hard to do, and there’s plenty of storage space, and there’s just plenty of space, and it’s not all carpet, there’s the lino so it doesn’t matter that we can stuff spilling on the floor and all of those sorts of things. (Pod 3 Teacher)

For the team in Pod 3, preparing the students for transition to the next phase of their schooling is important, and developing self-directed learning with the students. When the students are out on their work experience, they are required to self-identify skills that they need to develop, then to bring this list of things they need to develop and learn back to school, so that that can be used to shape their program. The Pod Leader stresses that the vision is not finished; it is an evolving process and there are more connections and developments to be made in Pod 3: ‘All these things link up and we have this extended community around this small little school and it turns this school into a big school and powerful school with a fantastic view for kids’ futures’.

Y2

A new facility is being developed on the old Yuille site as part of the new school. While the school is very committed to transitioning children into the regular secondary college, and for most students in the area this is Wendouree Secondary College, there are some students who are either not ready to go to regular secondary school, or regular schools do not meet their needs. This is true of students in schools across Ballarat. This is reflected by the statistics at the beginning of the Neighbourhood Renewal Project (2003) that only 2 children had completed years 11 and 12 that could be identified from this community, and many children were leaving school after year 7 or 8. The Y2 facility is trying to keep these young people in education longer and to help them to transition into work directly or preferably into further training that will lead to work.

The Community and Educational Liaison Officer noted that:

what we needed to do with these kids is to change that attitude that what’s the point of going onto secondary school cause I’m not going to get a job anyway, and I’m useless, and I’ve been told that all along, not only by my parents or my care givers, maybe even some teachers. And we find that in a lot of schools. You won’t achieve anything and look at the people that have achieved, even though they’ve been told that, they’ve had that motivation and desire to prove people wrong. Sometimes our kids don’t have that motivation and desire because it’s a constant...

The leader of the Y2 campus was previously a school principal but was keen to take up this new role. His motivation for that was that:

Flexible learning wasn’t occurring for really difficult primary school kids transitioning into secondary education, and that this was a missing gap in the system. See, after many years of running schools this is why I’m doing what I’m doing now. I just got disillusioned by the system; rather than walk, I just thought I’ll take a different direction, and as I sit back now I can’t help myself. There’s no point fighting with the Regional Directors and fighting with schools, and all of that. It’s about let’s go out and try and structure what we think will work.

My view is that those kids [at risk] are known to the school, the system, the teachers, is that they should be tossing and everyone goes on about bringing the extra teachers in earlier and there
needs to be some form of not intervention but there’s got to be some form of support for these kids at the earlier stage. And I think it should be quite professional support. Leaving it to the poor old teacher who’s got their hand full with that solid class, leaving it the boss that’s running self...

The aim of Y2 is to try to integrate these students back into school - into mainstream school or into a work pathway. The Y2 Leader states that:

Some kids need to be taken away from the mainstream and some kids need the flexible learning processes that have got a linkage with the mainstream. So I felt that was crossing the boxes in terms of the research and everything that people had problems with offsite support [and] kids being transitioned outside the mainstream.

Some schools try to deal with these kids, but other schools don’t want them, and they are moved on. Some of the students in Y2 have been swapped between schools and that has failed. The Y2 campus is developing a curriculum around the students. The Y2 Leader explains:

Instead of the kid coming in at a mainstream and being taught here’s your classroom and here’s your curriculum, we’re grabbing the kid and then we’re designing the curriculum around them.

Some of the students attending Y2 (who are under school leaving age) have already not attended school for two years, so the first task is to physically get them to school. The attendance rate is 80-90%. Y2 structures an Individual Learning Plan for each student (ILP) that is directly related to the students’ needs. The second stage is about the student managing their own ILP. Then the school starts to link them to secondary school, workforce or further study. The students self-select. The Y2 Leader notes that:

we’ve already transitioned 2 kids back into their mainstream and my argument is it’s because of that preparatory work...To put it in simple terms...we’ve received damaged kids at 14 or 15 and with a cohort of really difficult kids our belief is you need some strong models in amongst them. So we think we need the reality of some good kids who just don’t fit mainstream to come in with us who are actually self directed learners.

He is passionate about the need for this model:

So I’ve got some strong views on it because I think some of these schools do these kids a disservice because they keep them in this mainstream construct that doesn’t suit the child.
Transition Programs

The school is extremely attentive to transition, and the idea of transitioning to the next stage of schooling, the next stage of life, is a feature of the everyday practices at the school. We were struck by the extent to which even the Year 1s we spoke with were articulate about moving in from kindergarten, moving up to the next Pod, being able to use the middle Pod’s playground space as part of Year 2 to 3 transition and excitement of what they knew was in store for them (looking after the chickens!) later on in their schooling.

The transition program begins with developing relationships with the Prep parents. Even though the windows at the back of the kindergarten look over the Pod 1, bringing the kids into the school from the kinder is classed as an excursion and the kinder teacher has to get forms signed every time that it is done. Because of this, the P-2 teachers visit the kinder for half an hour each once a week and run a transition program. Later in the year the students come from kinder to visit the school, play on the playground and see the school. The Pod 1 teacher who runs the program and explains:

They play on the playground - they did today, so they're familiar with the playground. [We] line them up where they're going to line up, go and see where they're going to do their art and woodwork and music during class time and we'd go in and read a story to the kids, sing some songs, so that they knew who we were and then they start coming in from July and they'd have numerous visits...over 10 weeks...So they're familiar with the setting.

This program has immediate benefits for both parents and students. One of the parents interviewed cited the Prep orientation as the reason for choosing this school:

I did have a look at a couple (of schools) but I really liked this one and when we did the prep orientation I felt she really connected.

The transition between Pods is also carefully planned to facilitate easy moves for the children. Students who will begin moving to Pod 2 the following year start going to Pod 2 on Monday afternoons to help their transition. Those departing Pod 2 do the same with Pod 3. There is a variety of activities, such as the 3/4s reading to the Pod 1 students, which are done together across the school with the aim of transition.
Impact and Effectiveness of ILE

Leadership: flat structure of community

The school is trying to build a culture of what the Principal describes as a ‘flat structure’. He explains:

…they’re not going to deliver it by me telling them. I can provide and I say to my teachers you are not the font of the knowledge…We’re not teaching a knowledge content, we’re teaching a thinking and developmental learning that’s continual. And I said I’m not going to tell you want to do, but I’ll provide, facilitate and guide, what I think we need to do and where we need to go. So that’s our philosophy.

A Pod 2 teacher explains this further in terms of the ways in which teachers work alongside the Education support staff. As noted previously, in the Pods you cannot immediately tell who is support and who is teaching.

…and that’s what we try and do. That’s something we’re specially trying to do…everyone is treated equally and even within the planning and structures that we have as a far as literacy co-ordinating and maths specialists and things like that, everybody is brought into that planning...

Staff Commitment and Teacher Renewal

The staff were all enthusiastic about the work they did at YPCC. While they noted that the school was not without challenges and difficulties and that people did not always agree, there was a strong sense that staff felt valued and that they had a shared vision about the community. Many of the staff were passionate in the ways they described their work and their feelings of connectedness to the school. The parents also notice this. A parent said, ‘I see the teachers a lot when I come up here and with parent teacher interviews and that they really know where she is, what level she is at and they are not reading it from a piece of paper, they can tell me’.

The Community and Educational Liaison Officer proclaimed:

I love this facility. I just am so passionate about this. It’s given this community an identity, even though they had one, it’s given them a different identity and a positive identity. It’s opened doors of their kids. The kids are proud of it. The community are proud of it. You can tell that by the lack of graffiti or any vandalism in this place. It’s given them a central focus for the community. It’s just opened doors.

The Pod 2 Leader described his own commitment:

I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t have a passion for these kids and an understanding that these kids…These kids can learn I think. In the past people thought no, these kids can’t learn. It’s not because they can’t learn, and it’s not because they don’t want to learn, these kids have to be challenged to learn and we have to give them the opportunities to learn…And it’s not because of the model that it is, it’s just the biggest part about this place is the staff. You know if you’ve got a good staff to work with and you’ve got a community that you can see is on the move, and they’re heading in the right direction, it’s just an easy place to come work. And it doesn’t matter how busy you are, it’s just easier to get out of bed.

One of the teachers talked about her passion for the work and her love for the school. She was also very articulate about the difficulties that teachers face on a personal level when they begin to work in disadvantaged communities which are so different from their own family backgrounds.
When I first started at [another school] it was a real shock because I mean you're sort of middle class, had a family, you know stable family life, no real poverty, no drug issues, no violence, nothing like that in my life, and when I went to [the other school] of course all of those issues came up and I can remember...cause my husband is not a teacher, he's a builder, and I'd go home and go well you'll never guess what happened today. And retell him...never mention names or anything like that but oh this kid come and this happened and this...and after...well it felt like 3 weeks, probably a bit longer, but one day he said, you can't tell me anymore. I don't want to know. He said cause I'll have to go up there and punch somebody on the nose for being so stupid with their kids or whatever cause he loves his kids and you know all those sorts of things, and he's a straight down the line sort of person.

Working closely with a community that is so different from your own background can be difficult for teachers, and so the support networks in the school become even more important to them as often their friends and family do not want to engage with the reality of this experience. YPCC has provided extensive support to teachers in creating their own community of practice, which can help them to share with each other.

Team Teaching

The teachers all work in teams in each Pod. They usually have a partner they work with most of the time, and there are various configurations of teaching teams across the week in each Pod according to the program. We noted that the design of the Pods shaped a team-teaching approach because on a basic level the teachers had to at least work together to arrange quiet times (for example, avoiding planning silent reading in one area while another is doing drama). Because of the visual connections teachers are always aware of how/why people are working in the space.

The Pod 3 Leader appreciated the ways in which the spaces worked:

The spaces here facilitate a team approach. So you will notice that at this school - and I can see that it will continue to evolve because it is a different form of teaching - that you have to teach in partnerships. We have a team of 8 people - we work together - and mainly there are two teachers there at a time. While one delivers the lesson the other is walking around - they pitch in when they have to and they make sure all the kids are on task.

Team teaching is facilitated by team planning. Staff at the school are given four hours of dedicated planning time, 2 hours twice a week. This extra time is given on the condition that each Pod team must spend three of the sessions planning together. This time is highly valued by the Principal, so it has been deliberately placed across the Pods from Tuesday to Thursday, as Mondays and Fridays have the most missed days for public holidays. Organisationally, it is possible because of the timetable. The school works in blocks of 2 hours, 2 hours and 1 hour. The four specialist teachers in Technology, Visual Arts, Performing Arts and Physical Education work with the students during planning time. They take all of the children out of the Pods at any one time and they do a rotation in the 4 hours. During this time the children get one hour of each of those specialist areas, enabling a four hour block of planning. This time is highly valued by the staff, as it gives them opportunities for assessment and planning together that would otherwise be more difficult, and the provision of team working time has meant that the teams have been able to build and consolidate their working relationships more quickly.

A team-teaching pair in Prep/Year 1 is, in some ways, an unlikely pair. One has worked at Grevillea and now Yuille Park for around 35 years, initially as a teacher aide, and then she went to university and trained and came back. The other is a young fourth year out teacher. The older staff member describes team teaching as ‘a fantastic process’. She said, ‘So if you would ask [name], ‘The teaching and learning coach’, the other explained. Then the first finished the sentence: ‘If you spoke to her
and asked her what she thought about our team teaching she would say 'yep best thing. I can start a sentence and [my colleague] can finish it or [she] can start a sentence and I'll finish it, do you know what I mean, like we've just worked really well'.

A second year out teacher who has been a classroom teacher in Pod 2 since she graduated said that she was attracted to the school by the way that the school was set up and the team teaching approach. She explained, ‘I’m a team person so this type of environment was something that I felt best suited me’. In Pod 2 there has been a stronger emphasis on team teaching this year and she feels that:

planning and preparation has been a lot easier because you’ve basically got two minds working together on the one project or four minds in our case because we all have the same inquiry topics, same focus, so we’re all on the same page so you’ve got 4 people constantly working together reflecting, giving feedback, sharing resources, and it’s just that constant...You’re reflecting all the time without even doing it consciously.

Team teaching also has significant benefits for teacher reflection, facilitating immediate reflection on action because of having someone there to provide feedback and work through problems with. The newer Pod 2 teacher explained:

...at uni one of the things was reflect on the lesson, do all this, write up your notes, those kind of things, and when you’re in a classroom by yourself you don’t have a person to say ‘oh that went well, that didn’t go well’. Whereas here you find you’re just doing it naturally. You’ll have a class, you’ll walk into the office which is over in the Pod, and you’ll say ‘oh that was a disaster or that went well’; it’s a natural thing that you do here. The naturalness of this reflection on success and failure [is] an important aspect of the ongoing nature of the change and planning cycle. A notable feature of this school is the level of staff commitment.

The Pod 2 Leader describes the benefits to the students of team teaching:

...the children see us modelling that team work. The open discussion whilst we’re teaching them, the banter sometimes that we have with each other, the laughter we have, and the kids therefore see...people working well together and I think in terms of them when they get to their work they’re able to work well in teams as well and they’re really selective in who they work with. They look for the strengths with their partners that they go to work with also.

A Pod 3 teacher noted that team teaching helped to give everyone in the classroom an opportunity to learn:

...the beauty of the team teaching is that you know what it’s like in a classroom, you know you can have like 24 kids and there’s 22 on task, and doing exactly what you want and it’s those 2 that monopolise your time...so the beauty of it is one of us might go and work with those 2 kids and it might mean that you take them outside. You take them out completely. If that’s what they need at that time...you know it might just mean they need you to sit with them and say write this, now write that, now that write that, see what we’re doing, yeah. Now I know what I’m doing. I’ll get back on task. But you know because no one let’s that go, because it’s my lesson and there’s 2 kids mucking up [the teacher] doesn’t not deal with those kids...we work with those kids so that everyone benefits then.

Parents also appreciate the value of team teaching. A parent said, ‘You might have some students that are falling a bit behind but the teachers are always there to pick them up and help them move on’.
Professional learning and Continuous Improvement

In addition to the team planning time, the school also has regular professional learning sessions and encourages individual teachers to continue learning. Some of this has focused on pedagogy (such as the maths focus this year), some on relevant sociological information (such as understanding the research literature around cycles of poverty, knowledge of which came through in the depth of understanding that the teachers had about the community and the informed ways in which they spoke about it), and some has been around developing technological capabilities. The school has professional learning sessions every Tuesday.

To build up the general capacity in the staff some of the teachers are completing additional intensive training. A team member from each Pod is completing a primary Maths specialist initiative for which 81 teaching staff from across Victoria were selected for several weeks of training in Melbourne. These teachers have taken on a Maths specialist role. One of these teachers notes, ‘Not that we know everything about maths but we specialise in researching strategies and bringing professional development for the staff. We run shared training...’.

The Pod 2 Leader is currently involved in the emerging leaders program through the Bastow Institute with two other team leaders. He explains:

...as a part of [the Bastow program] we’ve got an in-school project. On Friday mornings we do a techie brekkie it’s called and that allows all staff members come in on a Friday morning and we update them on programs...like we do a bit of stuff on Excel, we talk about our web page, how to update it. This week we’re going through ultranet cause we’ve just done some ultranet training during the week.

Teachers talked about the cycle of continuous improvement, and all of them had plans for things that they intended to do differently and changes (both small and big) that they were hoping to make. One teacher noted that the time given to planning and that staff meetings every week and staff working in other Pods as part of the transition programs, led to a valuable ‘cross-pollination of ideas’.

Working in Open Spaces

In an environment like the Pods it can become quite noisy. A Pod 2 teacher explained that:

We encourage the social interactions between the students but when you have 4 classes in one environment or 85 students, it becomes quite noisy so you have to adjust to the noise levels and you have to set routines with the students to make them aware that they’re not the only home group in that environment. There’s other students that might be doing silent reading or something like that, so you need to set those routine from the start.

As a new teacher, she initially found it difficult to fully utilise the open space.

At the beginning I just had my whole group together and that’s just me being a new teacher as well, just had the whole class together, constantly did the whole group and then to the tables, the whole group to the tables, and that was me being safe I guess. And seeing how other teachers do, do it as well. so now I’m... and getting to know your age as well. knowing how they can help the students as well. so now I’m getting use to having small focus groups ...I guess at the beginning, and I think to because id didn’t know that staff that well, so you’re getting to know the staff as well as the environment, but it’s a confidence thing to. You could walk in and be someone who’s really paranoid about everyone else seeing what you’re doing in the classroom but...
Impact of Effectiveness of ILE at the whole school level and community: Living to Learn, Learning to Live

Learning how to be in the world: Building Social capital with students

Teachers are constantly building students’ social capital. The research team witnessed numerous ephemeral student/teacher interactions that exemplify this, several of which shall be described. When we were introduced to a student who was in the staff room because he felt sick, he talked with us, and then the educator with him said, ‘Now, what do we say to people we have met who have spent time with us?’ He smiled and said that he enjoyed meeting us. At the end of the day, a pair of educators from Pod 3 each stood next to a door and farewelled the students calling each one by name and wishing them a nice evening. So, as they left, two people individually spoke to them, and many of the students returned the greetings. Senior students were affirming of other classmates in the school photos they took, promoting the work of others and commenting on what a great job that they had done. A student who was waiting to hear some instructions in a room was complemented for waiting so patiently. Each of these incidents on their own is not remarkable, but throughout the school, all teachers are attending to developing students’ sense of self worth and social skills as a natural part of all of their interactions, so the sum total of this is extremely significant.

This extends even to the ways in which the students see the teachers working together. A Pod 2 teacher explains, ‘I think one of the most important things that we try and model for the students is that the students are seeing the teachers working collaboratively as well. And we often talk about it with the students.’

Her colleague describes the ways in which the students need support to make connections, even with local facilities:

> next Tuesday we’re going on an excursion to the Ballarat BMX Centre. Now you wouldn’t think that would be difficult for a community to do that but they’re really resistant to step out of that environment. This is a Sport Commission run program just trying to encourage kids to get into clubs. It’s a free thing. They wouldn’t go there so we’re just happy to provide a bus, a couple of staff to go down, just to expose them to things that are close in their community. Initially it’s just about making a connection with a familiar face from a club, and then they therefore become comfortable...

The Principal considers that the successful members of the current groups of students will return to the school and help build social capital with their community:

> in 5 years time I want to see a core of...a block of kids that are going through year 11 and 12 and have an opportunity to go to university, if they choose to go to university. But at least...they've expanded their choices. I want them to be coming back and sharing...like one of our students who has gone through university and graduated in accountancy with top marks, can’t get a job now because he hasn’t got...that social emotional IQ that you need and he’s a bright kid, he’s a good kid. But he comes from a family that has lived here for 30 years and in that generational sense, got the noushe but hasn’t got that...And I want that package for these kids. I just don’t want them to be an academic. I just don’t want them to have good relationships. I want them to have that package and if we can do that in most cases we have done great service for this community and the wider Ballarat.

Learning begins at home: Building social capital with parents
The Pod 3 Leader acknowledges the importance of building the strong element of social capital, particularly with the parents:

> What you are talking about there is the social values, and we are trying to get that model so that eventually it catches on at home...We want these kids when they have kids to be modelling those values. It is about changing the cycle...let's show them that there is another option.

The school uses the parents that model positive behaviors to work with other parents. They ran a FAST program in conjunction with Uniting Care where those parents who related really well to their children mentored other parents in parenting. One of the Leading Teachers sees this as, ‘Trying to break the cycle, opening up the doors, showing other options’ and he adds that ‘it is really good to see a small win’.

The Community Hub provides opportunities for parents that increase their social capital. A parent who has been working at the school office for Well-Being for about six months describes her job:

> My best friend...she worked for Well-Being Wendouree, and she said that they were getting volunteers for reception. And I dropped out of school as soon as I turned 15; the day I turned 15 I was out of there, and I thought, 'This will give me another skill'. I have got limited skills. So I started off in reception and [she] taught me...then I started and...she had to show me heaps. She had to piggy back me and do her own work until I picked everything up...I sit at the desk. I mainly do phone calls. I take appointments, gym, new gym memberships, show people around the gym and run the community market that’s on once a month- with [another staff member]. So that’s organising the store holders, food, making sure everything is more or less where they want it to go. So, on a Saturday, I start work once a month at 6 o’clock in the morning with the children and work until it is all done. My oldest girl, she helps, they all help. And then I also help run the youth group Monday and Wednesday nights. That’s where I want to be, I eventually want to be a youth worker.

I have learnt heaps. Seriously when I first started I was just like wow this is really overwhelming and I didn’t have people skills, and within two months I had worked out the computer lab, and if I have got any problems I just go ‘[Friend], I need help’.

**Relationships with Parents**

The school works extremely hard to create and maintain relationships with parents. In the course of our research there, we came across several examples of relationships with parents that had broken down due to parents being angry at the school (for reporting child abuse in one instance) where a bridge had been rebuilt with parents, and the communication lines were left open. The Community and Educational Liaison Officer described the importance of parental relationships:

> We want to have a relationship with parents, whether it’s good or bad or whatever. We need to have that relationship. If we don’t have that trust with them, we can’t protect their children. We’d much rather have the trust of a parent that’s not treating their child very well even though mandated and we stick to the rule of that, but know that the child is coming to school and we keep that child safe for that period of time, than to have a really bad relationship where the parents keeps the children home; we have no idea what’s going on there.

The school begins building this relationship with parents when the children are in kinder. The kindergarten teacher and one of the Prep teachers complete the Transition to School statements together with the parents. These forms have a parent section about how they feel about their child coming to school, and any issues they might have. A Pod 1 teacher explains that:
we usually fill that out for them, because a lot of them are illiterate...We just find that’s easier, they don’t feel threatened...and they get to meet someone from the school if they haven’t already been in on the kinder days and you find out individually about the kids.

We observed the extent of social support throughout the school, and teachers told us of incidents where they were required to offer this kind of support. The Community and Educational Liaison Officer talked about the importance of extensive support:

...and there certainly needs to be in this type of school. And I think we could possibly do better because I mean we’re not eligible for welfare workers and things like that, we have teachers that have got some skills and training in that but I really think that...we need a social worker here.

The Community Hub has offered programs for some of the adults in the community. An extremely successful program was the Certificate 3 in Childcare in 2008. Nineteen women from the community completed the course which was run in the Hub (2 days) in partnership with the University of Ballarat (1day). Nine of those women found employment. They also tried aged care, as some people seemed interest, but only two completed that. The Community and Educational Liaison Officer said that working in the community you have to accept this:

...when I get frustrated and say, I’m offering your program, why aren’t you taking it up, they may not want to take it up. We have to accept it’s not about what we’re doing, it’s about their needs, and they’re not ready for that. So we have to work in a different way and that’s where we work with kids.

We noted other aspects of the school which were specifically designed to build relationships with parents. The Pod 1 teachers stand at the front of the school for 15 to 20 minutes every night and speak to parents. One of the parents described the school:

there is good support, like, they lost their Grandfather in the May, two months after school starting and I think it’s [Education Support staff member], she helps kids with the grieving process and all that and it was just lovely. She went out and bought them a little box and their own little books so they could write their memories of their Grandfather and that in it.

Another parent reflected:

I don’t have anything bad to say. I really like it here and I have connected with the teachers and that really well and touch wood we haven’t had any issues yet but I feel that if there was an issue that the teachers would be willing to sit down and talk to us.

School as a safe Place

The staff make an extra effort to make this school a safe place for children in their community. Prior to the regeneration project, there was a community boundary, an arbitrary separation across a street, by which families determined which school their child would attend. This self-determined partitioning required some adjustment when YPCC was built. Some parents were very concerned that there were no ‘high fences’ around the school. These issues have been dealt with well by both the school and the neighbourhood. The school has become a central and openly accessible area that draws the community together.

Further to this, the school is operates as a ‘safe place’ for students whose home-life may be unstable. A Pod 1 teacher indicates that:
School is working to provide a fabulous facility for the children - but as teachers clearly acknowledge - you cannot change their outside lives - you can hope to help the children change their lives.

She goes on to say that, 'If you don’t have them looked after, if they don’t feel safe, happy, cared for, they're not going to learn'.

This teacher also said,

*we’ve got one little boy who he never goes outside and if you look at his complexion you would know he never goes outside, but it was also he’s not allowed outside in the backyard and he’s not allowed outside in the front yard, so he has to stay inside all the time and mum and dad don’t care about me and so you find all those things out about the children and then you can work on those things to make it that they want to come to school...It’s so unstable at home, that they know when they come to school that Miss [D.] is going to be here and Mrs. S. is going to be here and that if they’ve got a problem they can tell us and it doesn’t go any further and we will deal with it and they know that.*

**Guests**

The school has had over 7,500 people through the buildings looking at it in the past two and a half years. The visitors are both local and international. This high level of interest in the school has resulted in the students having a sense of pride about the school. They are accustomed to these visitors and the Pod 3 students that were interviewed talked at length about how revolutionary their school was and how schools around Ballarat and the rest of the world are being modelled after it. The Community and Educational Liaison Officer (who conducts most of the tours) told of how a group of teachers accused the school of setting it up so the kids were on their best behaviour and working away. She said:

*But why would you want to do that. We want to show this,warts and all. We want to show how the teachers react and relate to the kids... and there might be times we go in there and there is a problem. And you just leave. You’re going to get that in any school. But that’s probably happened once or twice and I’ll just keep an eye on things and I think I know this kid, he’s starting to get a bit...you know. It’s probably best if we leave now. But...the teachers accept the fact that there’ll be groups coming in at different times. Last week I had 4 out of the 5 days I did tours...*

**Measures of success**

While there is a strong ethic of generation change in this community, the experiences of this school demonstrate how quickly change begins. The school community moved into the new facilities the first day of Term 3, 2008 and they remain spotless. The students care for everything, there is no damage to facilities and students have a sense of pride about how they keep things neat and tidy. In the focus group interviews with Pod 3, one of the students photographed the sports store as she loved the variety of equipment that they had to use. When she showed the equipment she was apologetic, as it looked messy on the screen. She said that she and one of the boys in the group would tidy it up. The Pod 3 Leader shared a similar story:

*The connectedness of the community to this Hub - people are very protective of it -and very respectful of it and we have had minimal - and I mean minimal - damage. I haven’t seen anything major at all; kids at this school do not graffitii. I can remember one word drawn on the playground, and you know who came and told me? The kids. And they said, ‘Can we have some remover and we will remove it.’ The kids are the ones who want the place set up.*
The Bursar explains that over half of the school community pay the student levies, enabling the purchase of additional curriculum resources:

> We have 99% of parents on Centrelink; we have got two families who aren’t on welfare. Then we get some parents who will just refuse to pay and believe that everything should be for nothing and we get others who send five dollars in an envelope every single week until they have paid their fees off, which is really good. We charge $100 a year to cover the extras. I think it gives them a sense of pride and ownership if they pay.

The research team interviewed the Chair of the Wendouree West Neighbourhood Alliance and the steering committee (which is co-chaired by the Mayor). He became involved as part of the renewal process. He initially took on the role reluctantly in February, but has become more and more involved over the year. He has lived in Wendouree West for ten years, but said that there are many people who have lived in Wendouree all their lives and ‘can’t see the wood for the trees; they think everything is wonderful here’, but goes on to add:

> there are disadvantaged kids, kids with behavioural problems, kids not going to school, which this school actually has addressed in a very unique way. It is an innovative way of doing it because the drop-out rate for this school was pretty high until they introduced the new paradigm. The kids just love coming here now.

He cites that the school attendance rate was in the 60% and now has shifted to the mid 90s.

The school is already making a big impact of the community. The Pod 3 Leader explains:

> My understanding is that before I got here we used to have angry parents quite often coming through...We don’t get angry parents any more. Fighting in the yard - no more. The data from the well being and engagement, school connectedness is really positive. Over the three year cycle we have seen a massive jump.

Another measure of community success is the elderly lady next door we talked to as she was tending her garden on the edge of the school. She told us that she planted the garden because the school was so beautiful and she wanted to give the students something beautiful to look at while they waited for their parents.

The Community and Educational Liaison Officer believes that:

> The measurement will be in the future. We can measure it now; we can measure it in the number of kids enrolled in kinder and attending. We can be measure by the waiting list for childcare. We can measure by the affect, the difference in the kids, the happiness, the warmth of this place when you walk in, the feel of it.

A Pod 1 teacher explains how the staff focus their attention and concentrate their efforts on the children, contributing to changes the culture of education in the neighbourhood:

> Yes so therefore the key to that is you have to have a team of teachers who are willing to actually share and work just solely for the kids, not for your own self-gratification. It’s how you can improve that child’s learning and that child’s needs and teaching to the point of need, whereas there are some people who just can’t handle that and that doesn’t make them any different or any less a teacher, it’s just that you really need that and we found it easier and we’ve worked hard at it too.

Concluding Comments
While this school is in an atypical community, the model of schooling is applicable to other places. The Principal concurs:

That’s right. And as I said before this model can work anywhere. If it can work at this disadvantaged level it can work at the top...If you hear of Ballarat Grammar coming in and looking at the space and looking at the way it’s happening, they go and build a facility that can facilitate that, I’m not saying you take this. It’s about facilitating the away forward and the mindset...you’ve got to have your local ownership because if we say this model is going to inform education and this is the template, we’re going to put it there, it won’t work. You’re just doing the same old thing.

Unlike many schools where the new learning spaces are built before the staff is ready pedagogically, this school prepared the staff for the new spaces by developing and rehearsing new practices before they moved into the new school. While changes always have to be made during dress rehearsal, and in each performance, this rehearsal process and solid preparation meant that the teachers were emotionally prepared (or on their way to being so) when they moved, in addition to having thought through new strategies and ways of working.

The Principal is clear in his intentions for the school: ‘What I’m on about is providing the foundations and then the mechanisms for generational change’. The aim is for generational change and this is a very long-term project. Like the architects of medieval cathedrals, the principal and staff here will not necessarily see the end product of this. What this aim does however, is to focus staff on putting systems in place that can be developed and modified in the future, and to ensure that the programs and the approach are not overly reliant on particular staff, but there are multiple people who can fill the gaps. This focus on sustainability is an important feature that will enable the ambitious goals of the school to be met. In the Principal’s words:

I’ll say now, I’ll be as rich an anybody when I walk away from this place if I’ve got something that’s embedded and sustainable for generations to come here. But it’s for the next person to come in to still facilitate, but to guide a little bit, put their own bent on it but have that same emotional, intelligent investment.
References


