

Experimenting with education: spaces of freedom and alternative schooling in the 1970s

Introduction

'Ours is an age when all structures and institutions are in question, as are the faiths and values that underlie them', reflected Australian educational commentator Henry Schoenheimer in his depiction of the problems facing schools in the 1970s (Schoenheimer, 1973, p. 1). The modern world, he believed, confronted major political, moral and ecological crises to which the conventional forms of schooling were ill-equipped to respond: their practices were instead exacerbating such problems. Along with international advocates of 'deschooling' and radical education such as Ivan Illich (1973[1971]), Paul Goodman (1964) and Paulo Freire (1972 [1970]), Schoenheimer saw schools as oppressive, socializing young people into the habits of institutionalized thought and conduct, undermining individuality and dulling the creative spirit: he believed that it was imperative to destroy "the school as it now is' (Schoenheimer, 1973, p. 3). As a regular contributor to the national press, Schoenheimer was a prolific and influential critic of schooling.¹ His frustrations with traditional schooling and concerns about modernity were shared by many educators, as was his desire to create new educational communities. Ideas conventionally associated with progressive education going back to the early twentieth century, such as child-centredness, freedom and the role of schools as places to foster self-discovery were gaining renewed attention in the late 1960s, alongside a radical critique of schools that looked to their potential to disrupt entrenched power inequalities (Maslen 1993). By the early 1970s, a small but nevertheless significant and influential number of government schools with alternative forms of curriculum, school design and organisational structures were established in Victoria, offering new ways of imagining schooling, of being students and teachers (*The Educational Magazine* 1973, 1974).

This article explores philosophies of progressive and radical education circulating in Australia in the period immediately following the expansion of secondary schooling in the 1960s. It explores the rise of the alternative and community school movement in the government school sector during the 1970s, addressing the ideas of teachers and educators predominantly working in the state of Victoria. Canvassing a range of debates and educational initiatives, it examines two schools in Melbourne – Huntingdale Technical School and Swinburne Community School. While 1970s progressive schools held certain radical ideas in common and shared a repudiation of conventional school structures, there were important differences in philosophy and setting. The zeitgeist of the 1970s might seem familiar enough, and it would be easy to simply read these schools off the 'It's time' feeling for change and modernization. But there remain more challenging and more important questions about how to write the history of that mood and time in education once we move from generalization to specific cases. How were radical ideas realised and translated in the set-up and design of schools? What material form did they take in the organisation of schooling within a mass state

schooling system? Contrasting the spaces, material arrangements and aspirations of two schools – against a wider backdrop of innovation – helps illuminate some of the complexity and paradoxes in the history of progressive thought and its manifestations in state schooling.

This discussion is part of a larger history of progressive thinking and educational experiment in Australia across the mid-twentieth century; the larger project examines ideas and feelings about what ‘progressive education’ was and should be, its visions and disappointments, and the shifting conceptions of the imagined pupil to whom its efforts were directed. Looking to the 1960s and 70s, calls for greater freedom and openness accompanied a reconsideration of the pedagogies and places of schooling. Questions about the role of schooling in relation to democracy, community, and the challenges of modernity were in play, bringing into sharp relief the social purposes of public education. This article offers a first exploration of these ideas, by considering the physical, imagined and symbolic spaces of alternative schools. It draws on published writings and reports from teachers and commentators at the time, publications from the Victorian Department of Education, media discussions, internal and published documentation on specific schools and oral history interviews with former teachers and principals who worked at alternative schools. The buildings and architecture of schools, Burke and Grosvenor argue, ‘should not be viewed merely as capsules in which education is located and teachers and pupils perform, but also as designed spaces that, in their materiality, project a system of values. In turn, the ways in which buildings are used and experienced give them meaning’ (Burke and Grosvenor, 2008, p.8.). In the following discussion, I focus not on the actual experience of alternative school spaces and buildings but on their imagined effects and the deliberate reconfiguring of relations between schools and communities that their design and settings aspired to both represent and enable.

Three inter-related arguments are developed. First, school design and spatial setting were integral to the promise of alternative schools. It is argued, however, that there were significant differences in how this was imagined and mobilised within a state school system, notably the ways in which radical ambitions could be institutionalised or even normalised into the fabric of everyday schooling, as the contrast between Huntingdale and Swinburne reveals. Second, reconfiguring relations between the school and community was a central plank of the alternative school movement. Openness was the catch-cry of the day but it was always about more than a type of classroom space. It was a gesture to open-mindedness, to freeing the mind of old habits and ways of being a teacher and student, and it was a metaphor for more open, egalitarian social relations, to be realised in the new places and spaces of the school in the community and the community in the school. The space of the progressive school enacted its ideals as self-consciously, assertively and normatively as the rows of desks and platformed teacher of the ‘traditional’ school. The contrast between Huntingdale and Swinburne shows differences in how those community relations – and the various possibilities and futures they heralded – were embedded in the organisation and positioning of the school.

Third, claims that space shapes subjectivity have been well-rehearsed (e.g Massey 1994), as have arguments that educational discourses shape subjectivity and construct normative identities. Complementing these debates, an emerging body of scholarship is looking at how the design and aspirations of school spaces shape, make possible and regulate particular teacher and student identities (Paechter 2004; Kozlovsky 2010; Leander *et al* 2011). This is accompanied by growing interest among historians of education in exploring the emotional and sensory registers of the materiality and spaces of schooling (Grosvenor 2012; Sobe 2012). On the one hand, radical and socially critical schools challenged normative identities and encouraged an overhaul of established ideas about being a teacher or a student. On the other hand, it is argued, alternative schools operated with their own norms and anticipated certain types of children and students, imagining how they would best learn, be happy and socially engaged, and become free, critical and responsible future citizens. Such students were variously characterized as choice making and self-starting, “actively enquiring, flexible, tolerant” (Wilkins 1972, 18), their capacities and creativity held back by the factory like drudgery of regular schooling. New school environments and pedagogies responsive to student interests were imagined as setting free such immanent or emergent student subjectivities. In order to understand these identity norms and aspirations, I re-orient focus from the more familiar targets of enquiry such as curriculum, informal interaction or school cultures to look at how alternative school spaces, and the imagination, arrangement and design of the physical and material environment expressed particular understandings of the inner worlds and capacities of new types of students.

Alternative schools promised to liberate students from the confines of the classroom and the constraints of institutionalized learning. They variously occupied community buildings, recreated familial and intimate environments in older houses, or embraced innovative open-plan and purpose-built classrooms that reflected flexibility and utility, creating new opportunities for social and educational interactions. And alternative schools were to be different in highly visible ways, not only in philosophy, curriculum or classroom interactions. The very ‘look’, feel, set-up and design of these schools was to be obvious, to be recognised and intelligible as not-like-school. The Foucauldian concept of heterotopia captures this dual positioning and ambivalent relation to the mainstream, in which alternative spaces were both like school but not school, something more, and something else. In a brief but much-cited essay Foucault gives an account of spaces and spatial arrangements ‘that have the curious property of being connected to all other emplacements, but in such a way that they suspend, neutralize, or reverse the set of relations that are designated, reflected, or represented [réflechis] by them’ (1998, p. 178). These spaces are of two types: utopias and heterotopias.

For Foucault, utopias have no real place, and are 'essentially unreal': 'They are society perfected or the reverse of society'. In contrast, heterotopias are real places 'designed into the very institution of society', yet they are 'utterly different from all the emplacements that they reflect or refer to' (*ibid*). They represent, contest and reverse dominant emplacements'. According to Tamboukou: 'In being different, heterotopias interrogate discourses and practices of the hegemonic space within which they are localizable' (Tamboukou, 2004, p. 188); they present 'a kind of contestation, both mythical and real, of the space in which we live' (Foucault, 1998, p. 179). I consider the potential of analysing alternative schools as heterotopic spaces, but more importantly note the different forms and ways in which as counter-sites they stand in 'an ambivalent, though mostly oppositional, relation to a society's mainstream' (Saldanha, 2008, p. 2081). To help contextualise 1970s community schools, I now turn to questions regarding the longer history of progressivism and examine some of the distinctive elements of 70s progressivism within a system of state schooling. I then consider the context of state schooling at the time, highlighting issues criticised by alternative school advocates and the influence of the open-plan ethos among educators and bureaucrats.

Old and new progressives

An extensive body of historical research exists on progressive education in the early twentieth century, much of it dominated by the study of key individuals, as Cunningham (2001) notes, alongside a burgeoning strand on the international congresses and associations which spread and sustained their work (Brehony, 2004; Campbell and Sherrington, 2006). Scholarship is patchier, however, from the post-war period onwards. Drawing on his study of progressive education in the post-war UK, Cunningham suggests that research is also needed on the 'networks and structures through which individual progressives operated' (2001, p. 433). The most important questions for histories of progressivism, he argues, 'have less to do with the origins of ideas and practices in the writings and experiments of a well-documented few, than with the dissemination of these ideas and practices and their implementation or adaptation on a wider scale' (2001, pp. 436–7). Fielding and Moss' study of radical and democratic education (2011) gives an historical and philosophical account of post-war progressive schooling, mainly in the UK, but looking also to Europe and the USA. It encompasses the ideas of leading proponents as well as the work of teachers and head teachers and also, interestingly, the perspectives of students. They turn to past examples of democratic practices in schools as a way of finding directions for the present, (Fielding and Moss, 2011, p. 2; *passim*). In many respects, their book is itself part of a tradition of progressive thought, grappling with ways to 'search for a radical education' and of 'not to despair of the school as a place to help realise human potentialities and a democratic way of life' (2011, p. 72).

Such work points to an emerging interest in understanding the form and legacies of progressive and radical thinking in education in the latter half of the twentieth century; to date, however, it represents a relatively small body of scholarship. In the case of progressive

and alternative education in Australia in the 1960s and 70s, there remains little work on either the key figures or the national, school-sector, teacher and community networks that advocated and put such ideas into practice. Potts' (2007) assessment of key progressive writers is an exception, but even then it addresses only two examples of Australian progressive advocates in the 'counter cultural' era. Proponents of alternative schooling could be found in curriculum associations and teacher unions, alongside individuals and groups of teachers in particular schools and bureaucrats and curriculum personnel within state education departments (Noyce, 1985; interview with G. Tickell, 2012; interview with T. Delves, 2012). The progressive impulse also spread beyond specific community schools, influencing practices and structures in regular state schools—evident in, for example, the emergence of sub-schools or mini-school communities, student government, and curriculum experimentation (interview with D. Stark 2012; interview with M. Vickers, 2012).

Transnational debates and exchanges were central to this period of reform, as they were to the earlier waves of progressivism, with the visits to Australia in the early 1970s of leading figures and the wide dissemination of their texts and ideas (AUS, 1972; The Open Book 1972a, 1972b)—Friere's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972 [1970]) and Illich's *De-schooling* (1973 [1971]). Australian activists and educators were, however, not simply in the thrall of international experts and, as part of building an intellectual and cultural history of progressivism in Australia, more needs to be known about the re-contextualisation and local inventions and engagements with these mobile ideas and their variants of child-centred, humanist, libertarian, and socially critical alternative education. A detailed consideration of the 'travelling ideas' (Popkewitz, 2005) of progressive educational ideas in Australia is beyond the scope of this article, but engagements with such debates form an important backdrop to the rise of community schooling in Victoria in the 1970s.

Importantly, the growing interest in alternative schools during the early 1970s was not confined to a niche group of education activists or philosophers. A 'Dictionary of key terms for parents' in the Education Supplement of the *Melbourne Age* included a definition of community schools as 'progressive schools which aim to break down the old stuffy barriers between home and school' (Hill and Matthews, 1973, p. 10). As part of this, 'kids go on lots of excursions, and adults come into the school—mums, dads, skilled or unskilled, potters, artists, anyone who can interest kids and make the "community" a real part of school life. Community schools open their libraries, sports facilities, craft rooms to the neighbourhood'. A sense of definite change was in the air, with the article concluding: 'For a long time educationists have talked about it. Now it seems to be happening'. More widely the 1960s and 70s was self-consciously a new time—of social movements, of feminism, of the rights and freedoms of the individual (Noyce, 1985, p. 2). The Australian federal Labor Government came to power in December 1972 on the winning slogan of 'It's time'—time for a change of political party, and time for comprehensive social change, with educational reform a central part of its platform.

The Educational Magazine (a publication of the Victorian Department of Education) ran several special issues in the early 1970s on open plan schools and the need for new types of school buildings. It reported on the philosophy of community schooling as well as the workings of individual schools such as Swinburne Community School, Huntingdale Technical School and alternative annexes or settings, connected to high schools such as Moreland, Collingwood and Sydney Road (e.g. *The Educational Magazine*, 1972, no 4; 1973, no.4; 1974, no.1). Within two to three years there was a remarkable flowering of interest in alternative education across the state, with several signature schools established within the state system across metropolitan Melbourne (*Farrago* 1972; *The Open Book* 1972b; *The Educational Magazine* 1973).

Accompanying these developments were debates about how to distinguish 1970s alternative schools from earlier forms of progressive education—did they represent a continuation of or a break with the progressivism of the earlier twentieth century? Progressive education in the earlier twentieth century emphasized ‘experience that is meaningful for the child, self-directed activity, and freedom coupled with shared responsibility’ (Lawson and Peterson cited in Saha 1972, p.13). It was questioned whether such formulations remained appropriate in the modern era. An ‘interested parent’ reporting in *The Australian Humanist* on her study of ‘Free schools in Victoria’ reflected that while “‘Progressive’ used to mean “child-centred” when all other schools were traditional and subject-centred’, she had been told that nowadays ‘educationalists only speak of progressive schools as an historical movement. The new term is “life-oriented”, and this outgoing attitude, together with an emphasis on warm two-way relationships between students and their teachers, are perhaps the main trends in forward-looking schools today’ (South, 1972, p. 6). Pupils were not to be cut off from the world around them, summarizing that ‘society must come into the school and the school into society’, (*ibid*). Other commentators noted a continuation with the spirit of earlier progressivism, objecting to views that progressive education had declined if not died by the 1940s, citing as examples the establishment of schools such as Swinburne Community School in Melbourne or the Association of Modern Education (AME) in Canberra, and the spread of the open plan classrooms in primary schools (Saha 1972, p.13). Schoenheimer observed that while the term ‘progressive’ went out of favour in the 1960s, by the mid-1970s it was being revived and used ‘to indicate a kind of schooling that is being offered as an alternative to the traditional style’ (1975, p.14). The current ‘progressive package’ was likely to include, he proposed, a focus on the child learning ‘at his own pace’, exercising ‘guided choice’ on ‘what he is to learn, and when and how and where’, the teacher as a helper, promoting self-discovery and creativity, with pupils free to move around classrooms and the school, motivated by self-discipline and happy relationships between pupils and teachers (*ibid*).

While there were some continuities in broad educational philosophy, significant differences existed between the earlier progressive schools and the flourishing of alternative education during the 1970s. The earlier schools were typically private and small-scale, imbued with abstract ideals of individuality, freedom and equality, guided by a romantic view of the power of the natural environment to stimulate the child's learning and, as expressed famously in the words of A.S. Neil of Summerhill, saw that 'the aim of education is to find happiness' (Punch, 1969, p. 123). Examples of such schools in Australia include Koornong and Preshil in Melbourne (Koornong focus group, 2012; Goad, 2010; Smyth 1973a), and Quest Haven in Sydney (Goad, 2013), all established in the interwar period, with Preshil the only one surviving beyond the 1940s and continuing into the present day. A number of small-scale private progressive schools were established in Australia during the 1970s (Connors, 1971), such as ERA (Education Reform Association) established in Melbourne in 1971 (Smyth, 1973b; ERA 1971/1972) and AME (Association for Modern Education) established in Canberra in 1972 (The AME School 2014). In terms of the history of progressive education, however, one of the most striking aspects was the establishment of alternative schools within state school systems. Like the earlier progressives, these government schools were also underpinned, in varying degrees and shades, by humanist conceptions of the freedom of individuals, psychological understandings of the inner world of the child and the therapeutic potential of education; but for the most part this converged with a politically radical stance towards the cultural authority of traditional curriculum and social structures and a determination to engage with communities beyond the school walls and gardens. While not eschewing the freedom and choice-making capacities of the individual child, there was a strong and vocal commitment to democratic education and egalitarianism and a focus on the importance of community and school relations. This gave them a quite different feel from the liberal, libertarian, middle-class forms of much earlier progressive education, commonly lampooned for indulging the children of the well-to-do and arty (Punch, 1969; Lambert, 1969), or criticized as exclusive domains entrenching social privilege.

Critics of independent (non-government) progressive schools in the 1970s saw them as elitist institutions, tending to the educational needs of those able to afford their fees. Lyndsay Connors (1971), an advocate for state schooling, observed that it was not surprising that children flourished in such schools. They had the benefit of small class sizes, attentive teachers and often came from middle-class homes with parents 'vitaly interested in education, socially competent and culturally privileged' (Connors, 1971, p. 14). For Connors, the real work of progressive education should have been a more democratic impulse towards equality of opportunity, to enrich education for all students, not only those who could afford to pay for it, and to spread the principles of alternative schooling across mainstream education:

Fortunately for those many children who don't live near a 'progressive' school, many parents and very many educators have committed themselves to a much wider and more challenging task—to develop intellectual curiosity, systematic thinking, resourcefulness, social participation and cultural awareness in every child. They have not deserted the many; they are prepared to tackle the inertia of a large system, to infiltrate a bureaucracy and to participate forcibly in a fairly uninviting context. (*ibid*)

This was arguably the situation in Victoria, where the Department of Education provided financial and administrative support to establish alternative schools linked to mainstream schools, as 'annexes,' such as Swinburne Community School or as stand-alone, purpose-built schools, such as Huntingdale Technical School, both taking in students from their school zone. This represented a shift from progressive schools catering to self-selecting, fee-paying, niche populations to becoming part of a public education system, potentially accessible to a wider population. Moreover, the state community schools of the 1970s were less a bucolic and protective retreat from the real world and more a determined engagement with local communities. There were, however, instances of the 'Summerhill' type philosophy: Brinsley Road School (1973–75), an annexe of Camberwell High School funded by the Department of Education, was based in a former grand house with extensive gardens, and had an arty, self-discovery ethos—presenting as somewhat of a retreat from the world and a community unto itself (interview with R. Irving, 2012; Gill 1992).

I turn now to consider aspects of the educational climate in Victoria during the late 1960s and 70s, which provides a local context for the critique of conventional education and the countervailing mood of possibility represented by the alternative school movement.

Alternatives to what?

Criticisms of state schooling abounded during the 1960s and 70s, and galvanized the attention of many educational actors and stakeholders. In Victoria, the expansion of secondary schools was well underway, with significant building programs across the state and an influx of young graduate teachers, many fresh from the new universities of Monash and La Trobe or part of overseas recruitment programs, were beginning to make their mark in staffrooms and classrooms (Victoria, Department of Education, 1973/74). A recurring challenge was to make secondary schooling more responsive and appropriate for the growing student population, and for the increasing number of students either actually staying on or being encouraged to stay on beyond the compulsory years (Campbell and Proctor, 2014, pp. 178–91). Questions about the purposes and organization of school were posed with a heightened urgency.

I note here three educational issues debated extensively at the time and which are directly relevant to the up-swell of interest in alternative schools: the authority and impact of external

examinations; the hierarchical and perceived anti-democratic culture and practices of schools; and the design and physical set-up of standard-issue secondary schools. A former chief inspector and director of Victorian secondary education during this period, Ron Reed, reflecting on his time in office recalls that 'I did have two firm convictions. One was that the pressure of external examinations on the secondary school system must be relieved; and the second was that there must be an earnest search for the true purpose of secondary education, as a phase in its own right and not merely as preparation for tertiary education' (Reed, 1975, p. 217). Reed's own philosophy and leadership during this period was vital to sustaining the mood and structural opportunities for change (White, 1985, pp. 7–8).

The impact of external examinations in dictating school curriculum and infiltrating everyday school practices had long been a source of controversy, connected to the influential role of universities and their requirements for selective entrance. By the end of the 1960s there was a strong push in Victoria to establish school-based assessment in the context of calls for curriculum reform (Hannan, 1985, pp. 45–6; *The Educational Magazine* 1972). Not all states followed the same pathway. In NSW, for example, the authority of the external examination remained and there was considerably less enthusiasm for alternative schooling (interview with Vickers, 2012). Indeed the NSW Director-General of Education during the early 1970s, Mr J. Buggie, rejected a proposal for an alternative school annexe in inner-city Leichardt, Sydney, one that was to be modelled on Swinburne Community School in Melbourne. Buggie declared, 'There appears to be little, if anything, which could be achieved at the proposed community school which is not capable of achievement within existing high schools. It would also appear that the community school could fall short of achieving much of what is regularly achieved within existing schools' (*The Age*, 1974, p. 23).

In Victoria, however, the combination of supportive senior bureaucrats and networks of committed teachers and advocates helped propel the alternative school agenda and its critiques of regular schooling into the public domain. There had been more in-roads with school-based assessment among the technical schools because they were not preparing students for university entrance, and in some respects these schools were simply beyond the purview of the elite institutions. Indeed, as Gerry Tickell, former technical school English teacher and founding principal of Swinburne Community School, observed, the absence of external examinations was an important reason why technical schools were able to lead curriculum experimentation at that time (interview with G. Tickell, 2012) and also part of the reason why such schools were freer to create alternative purposes and spaces—physically and imaginatively—for schooling (Interview with T. Delves 2012). This combined with technical schools having what Tickell described as strong communities of practice among the humanities teaching departments, a bond that was particularly close because they were somewhat on the margins of the regular technical teaching departments, and this he argued,

helped to foster the conditions for concentrated innovation and experimentation. Tickell recalled that

The humanities department was very quick on experimenting in all sorts of ways...We came from a university background...no other department in a tech school had university graduates...so our links were with high schools and in the subject association we mixed very closely with them. So there was a lot of experimentation that went on with the English, creative writing, drama, film. (interview with Tickell, 2012)

The hierarchical structures governing student–teacher interactions were seen to work against a warm and fair school environment, and more participatory and egalitarian relationships were advocated. This required fostering a sense of democratic community instead of institutional obedience and social conformity, giving voice to students’ views and preferences, and bridging closer links between schools, communities and parents. The Victorian-based newsletter, *The Open Book: For a Free Educative Society*, was first issued in 1972, prepared by teachers Bill and Lorna Hannan and Tim and Sue Maher. It distributed information on community schooling and related projects and was concerned ‘with both ideas and action. The destructive elements of existing institutions have to be reformed, and workable alternatives developed’ (*The Open Book* 1972a). Contributions included accounts of community schools and innovative practices and ideas across the Australian states and internationally and calls to respect the choices and interests of students.

The physical environment of schools was also subject to critique amid a growing feeling that ‘school buildings of the future’ were needed (Morton 1973). For many, the standard classroom, designed with the teacher out front and students sitting passively, represented the antithesis of engaged learning and democratic schooling. As Schoenheimer advised parents: ‘The old-time standard arrangement of classroom desks or tables in rows and files is authoritarian and teacher-dominated. It inhibits inter-pupil communication... and is thoroughly discredited among educationists as an outward symbol of uniformity and regimentation’ (Schoenheimer in Allwood, 1980, p. 156). The community school movement promised a break with such traditions through its creation of alternative spaces—physically, imaginatively and symbolically. There were, however, significant differences in how these ambitions for counter and radical spaces of education were understood and realised. Two main strands are discussed here: the orchestrated environment of the ‘open plan’ and purpose-built spaces that would institutionalise experimentation; and the more haphazardly local and make-do spirit of schools occupying community buildings, blatantly repudiating any residual appearance of being like a regular school.

‘Openness is an attitude of mind’²

Interest in designing schools differently was not confined to community school activities. An Educational Facilities Research Laboratory [EFRL] was established in 1968, under the advice of the Director of Secondary Education, Ron Reed. A branch of the Victorian Education Department, the EFRL comprised architects and advisors from the secondary school division, and its remit was to ensure that school design was 'closely related to modern curriculum and teaching techniques' (*The Educational Magazine*, 1970, p. 286). In the 1970s, the modern educational way was encapsulated in the open plan ethos. A 1974 issue of *The Education Magazine* featured several articles on open education, with most highlighting the opportunities it afforded to treat students as individuals, to have 'movement out of the classroom to resources beyond it' and learning programs that were 'child-centred and often open-ended' (*The Educational Magazine*, 1974). A regional director of education in Victoria, Ron Ginger, endorsed the spread of open plan schooling as an overall philosophy for schools, one that equipped 'children to cope not only with the present environment but also with the unknown future' (Ginger, 1974, p. 40). He believed that it fostered a 'more active and dynamic school society with immediate and natural interaction between pupil and teacher', and, echoing the progressive focus on the happiness of the child, Ginger reflected that 'involvement and enjoyment are the keys to progress and play need not be distinguished from work' (*ibid*). While the new classrooms were praised, a common view, announced in the article headline, was that 'Space is desirable but it is what happen within the space that matters' (Ginger 1974, p.40).'

Openness signified much more than simply open classroom spaces or experimenting with walls and the built environment: as Ginger summarised, 'The open approach is more than creating space' (*ibid*). It signalled openness to the child's interests, to freedom and choice, and towards others – teachers, students, the community – and to the future. For community school advocates, openness also denoted a break with the rigidities of the past, and with the hierarchical orderings of the classroom, curriculum knowledge and social organisation. Both the metaphor and practice of openness were a response to the authority and strictures of tradition and their influence on the present, promising a more participatory and democratic education.

Teachers attending a National Open Space conference in Adelaide in 1974 found that while open education could mean different things, it was generally agreed that it was a 'desirable state towards which schools could move' on a broad scale (*The Educational Magazine*, 1974, p. 39). The ideal form of open education valued a wide range of choices for students—in curriculum, topics, learning methods—fostered warm relations between teachers and pupils and, through working alongside parents and administrators, conveyed a willingness to engage with the local community, and importantly a 'maintenance of learning skills in order that students might not be shut off from the choices they could make' (*ibid*).

The procedure for creating a purpose built open-school environment was elaborated: 'The school should grow initially in flexible temporary accommodation; the design of the permanent buildings will be based on the emerging organizational pattern; the permanent buildings should be erected at one time—not in stages—and the architects' brief should be prepared in co-operation with staff, community, and students'. Co-operation and consultation was to characterize the entire process, reflecting the participatory and democratic principles attached to the open plan agenda. One of the Victorian delegates to the Adelaide conference was Tony Delves, founding principal of Huntingdale Technical School, and the procedure outlined above was precisely the one followed in the development of that school.

Designing openness

Two year old Huntingdale Tech is an "open", rule and timetable-free maverick within the State system which from its origins has set out to involve its students (now 520) and staff with the surrounding community, and the community in turn with the school', (McDonald 1974, p.29)

Huntingdale Technical School began in February 1972 with a collection of temporary portables and makeshift buildings on a former golf links site in a lower-middle class southern suburb of Melbourne. This was an area which in the post-war period had experienced significant population growth due to affordable land and housing and immigration (Huntingdale Technical School 1978, p.1.16-1.20) Most of the student population came from the locally zoned community, with some students coming from outside the area attracted by its experimental reputation, and by its second year, the school had 320 students (Maslen 1973, p.14). Its establishment was underpinned by three principles: 'learning can only take place in the individual; the school is a community and operates as such; and the school is part of a wider community' (*The Educational Magazine*, 1975, p.5; see too Huntingdale Technical School 1978, pp. 1.1-1.3). Even in its early days, 'the buildings were specifically designed as portables to be flexible and to meet the particular needs of the school' (Wilkins 1972, p.18). Qualities of 'self-direction and self-discipline' in students were valued and cultivated at the school: they were in a sense 'necessary entrance behaviours for an unstructured, open learning situation' (Wilkins 1972, p.18). A wide range of subjects was offered, with project-based learning and students expected to negotiate with their teachers on the nature of their work. Determined to break with the conventional organisation of school knowledge, there was 'virtually no set curriculum as such' and 'we started with basically constructing the whole series of what we'd call subjects, and kids could move in and out of those, pick the ones they wanted and not wanted' (Interview with T. Delves 2012). For students, the school day was intended to be characterised by interest-based decisions, negotiation, freedom to choose and feeling part of a community.

As the school grew (by 1975 it had more than 500 students), it devised 'mini-schools' so as to retain the 'atmosphere of warmth, trust, and tolerance' a smaller school community allows, and to avoid 'the individual losing his identity in the crowd' (Maslen 1973, p.15; *The Educational Magazine* 1975, p.5). Once established, the school staff worked with architects attached to the Department of Education to design a new open plan secondary school (interview with T. Delves 2012) and formalise the experimentation. Tony Delves, principal at the school from its planning stages until he left at the end of 1979 (*The Age*, 1979, p.14), recalls:

In the end I got the buildings I wanted, we designed the school from nothing and so I was only part of the planning committee and the architectural grouping to develop that, and we built a school that was very different from anything else that was around in the state system. (Interview December 2012).

While the schools was still operating from a cluster of temporary buildings, it was noted that the 'open plan system of teaching is being tried, and the only problem so far seems to be one of acoustics ... there is a need for smaller, self-contained areas where students can withdraw for specific individual activities and tutorial studies' (Wilkins 1972, p.18). The design of the new school incorporated this mix of rooms, and was able to accommodate the growing school population.

The new purpose-built Huntingdale comprised four large open spaces for general teaching and workshops, next to a series of smaller dedicated classrooms for textiles, art, science, music, film and tv, for example, and included a 'community cottage' for use by members of the local community, integrated within the school design. The classrooms were arranged in two parallel rows that bordered a corridor of mixed common spaces – resource centres, general office, and a dedicated outside quadrangle smoking space for use by staff and students (Huntingdale Technical School 1978, 1.13)³. The 'smoking space' symbolised an aspiration for more equal relations among students⁴ and staff, and the idea of it now evokes the mood of the 1970s, with students smoking at school signalling mild social transgression, open-mindedness and a certain radical coolness. The community cottage, located in the midst of the classrooms, next to the Engineering workshop and opposite the art room, aimed to provide 'a pleasant venue to meet people, tea-making facilities, some magazines, easy chair, etc. as well as open work space with telephone and typewriter, and a counselling room'. Any one attending adult classes, their families, and 'parents of our students and all other members of the community are invited' (Huntingdale Technical School, 1978, p.1.28). And the school's resources and facilities were available to the community after hours and weekends. The message was unambiguous – the community was welcome into the school: as Tony Delves reflected: 'We worked very hard at that. We opened the doors to people in the community, we ran classes for community people; we also allowed them to come into our ordinary classes with the kids' (Interview with T. Delves 2012).

The alternative school movement was not all of one piece. Gerry Tickell, founding principle of Swinburne Community School, thought that each one had a slightly different 'individual feel', and he characterized this difference along the axis of community.

Huntingdale was based on the model of the English community college...Huntingdale's model was to bring the community in...Swinburne's model was to go out into the community, and Brinsley Road [an annexe of Camberwell High School] was to shut itself off from the community. So Brinsley Road was the nearest thing to Summerhill ...

These different approaches to forging school-community relations were reflected in the type of alternative school setting and the process for creating an environment that was simultaneously school but not like school – a counter site.

We [Swinburne] had just really a church hall basically and we tried to go out and find things in the community and so on and that was a bit doctrinaire really. [influenced by the principles of Parkway School in Philadelphia]... whereas Huntingdale had the lot, you know they had a gymnasium and a hall and everything and they invited the community in. They saw their role as being a community hub and they were big too. (interview with Tickell, 2012)

'And now a school without buildings'⁵

Other conceptions of open schools involved a less explicitly planned and institutional environment than Huntingdale. For some advocates, an open school was envisaged as 'a school of fewer than 100 of fewer pupils, operating with a minimum of formal buildings, but making use of community facilities, the children's own homes and parent participation' (*The Age*, 1971, p. 15). English teachers Bill and Lorna Hannan (who were also editors of the *The Open Book* and activists for alternative education) saw that 'The school building, perhaps a converted church hall, office block or group of houses, would provide space for the permanent staff and more formal teaching of such things as mathematics and languages. Children would go to the libraries, galleries, community centres, and people's workplaces for some lessons and extra teaching might come from local artists, tradesmen and parents' (Ibid).

Swinburne Community School was established in February 1972 with 100 students as an annexe of Swinburne Technical School, with Gerry Tickell as principal and, like Huntingdale, the school was funded and administered through the Victorian Department of Education. Swinburne is located in Hawthorn, in a leafy middle-class belt of Melbourne, but as the Community school non-selective and s attached to a technical its school population was socio-economically mixed, with most students living locally. The community school was based in a

church hall which 'comprised an open hall, a kitchen, three small offices (one of which used as a student study), two rooms of classroom size and a shed which has been fitted out as a home workshop' (Farrago, 1972, p. 11). There were no specialist facilities, laboratories, workrooms or resource centres: rather, the school drew on community facilities and resources, such as local libraries, museums, and sports ovals, going to films, theatre and galleries as part of their everyday curriculum (South 1972).

The focus at Swinburne was on adapting existing community resources, and to visibly and practically placing the school in the community, rather than designing a new purpose-built environment, to architecturally imposing openness: other community schools such as Sydney Road, followed a similar approach (South 1972). There is an intimacy and informality in occupying found everyday space, compared to the design of deliberate spaces to organize and direct learning. Schooling was visibly de-schooled. Questions of scale and size are important here, with Huntingdale having a larger school population and operating as a local technical school as well as attracting students from outside the zone drawn to its philosophy (Huntingdale Technical School 1978). On a smaller scale, Swinburne was able to be visibly embedded within the community and to foster direct engagements in the happenstance of the everyday. This was intended to allow for porous and reciprocal relations between the school and community, fostering curriculum experimentation – organic, connected to the real world – and egalitarian and warm relations among students and staff: the desire was to 'see the school as a smaller, simpler, more personal institution and to take it back into the community both metaphorically and physically' (Farrago 1972, p.13).

Classes 'were not compulsory' and, as at Huntingdale, students had to be self-starters, propelled by their own interests: "The students organize themselves into their own courses of study and if necessary they get advice from a teacher. The important decision-making is as much the students' responsibility as the teachers'" (Farrago 1972, p.14). The two schools were similar in other ways:

Both are attempting to de-emphasise the role of the school and of the teacher as the authoritarian director of each child's educational program; they are doing this by shifting the responsibility back to the learner to decide where his interests lie...

Both are demonstrating that the major elements of a child's life – school, home, and the community – can be integrated effectively. (Maslen, 1973, p.16)

Understood as heterotopic spaces, both schools were simultaneously part of and self-consciously separated from regular schooling, operating as places of sameness and difference. They contested dominant forms of school organization and spatial relations, yet such challenges remained intelligible within and in reference to mainstream schooling, and were enacted differently.

While sharing a commitment to community schooling, there were important differences in how Huntingdale and Swinburne registered their difference and envisaged alternative environments. The former, a purpose-built and open plan setting with a distinctive appearance, was nevertheless recognizable as a school, and its forms were arguably repeatable and sustainable within a state bureaucracy, having models and procedures to follow. The latter, located in community buildings, was less immediately intelligible as a school, and while its philosophy had wider implications, its actual form and setting could not be readily imitated because it was so context, personnel and community specific. These differences point to a marked philosophical tension in the spread and uptake of alternative schooling; would it remain oppositional or be a forerunner of mainstream change? On the one hand, there is a paradox of sorts in the deliberately open-plan building, a strategy based on designing freedom and imposing experimentation, representing the formalisation and institutionalisation of a radical idea. On the other hand, the community-based school, in its explicit departure from the semblance of institutionalised space and not being tethered to a recognizable school site was more provisional, less amenable to being scaled up for a mass schooling system, even though elements of its philosophy, such as student led-learning, infiltrated parts of mainstream schooling.

Both schools were sites for social and educational experimentation, creating new types of spaces for student learning, for cultivating choice-making, interest-driven and reflective student identities, and for reconfiguring relations between school and the world around. Community was an over-determined concept in many respects, valorised as the site of local authenticity, of organic social relations against the institutionalised, de-personalised, hierarchical arrangements of conventional schooling. Embracing community offered an enrichment of schooling and signalled the possibility of egalitarian and democratic alliances within and beyond the school walls.

Concluding remarks

The radical ambitions of 1970s alternative schools are a long way from contemporary policy debates about, for example, standards and accountabilities, or testing and ranking students and schools against international benchmarks. The descriptor 'alternative schooling' usually means something quite different in the present from its use in the 1970s, – it now most commonly designates second-chance schools or alternative educational settings for at-risk students. Alternative schools have thus become residual spaces, a last refuge for the troubled and disengaged. The vibrant alternative and community school movement of the 1970s, while having its own redemptive elements, began from a different set of principles, with a critique of the status quo and demands for schools to change to accommodate transforming social circumstances and create richer possibilities for students: the school was less a clinic to cure social ills than a laboratory for social experimentation.

There is much more to be said about the 1970s eruption of progressive and community schools, especially in regard to their legacies for both mainstream and alternative schooling, and the forms of curriculum and knowledge-building accompanying their re-imaginings of school spaces and educational purposes. A related dimension is the memory of alternative education in the present, echoing in institutional and policy discourses and in the life histories and personal narratives of former teachers and students. Yet another is the history of radical ideas and exchanges among networks of international and local experts and practitioners. As a reference point for a larger historical study, however, this article has focussed on debates about alternative and open plan settings within a state education system, attempting to understand the mood of the times and the convergence of interest in these innovations. It has explored aspirations for community schools, looking specifically at the imagined effects of re-arranging the physical and symbolic space of schooling. This was prompted, initially, by a growing interest within the history of education in the spatial, material and affective dimensions of schooling (Burke and Grosvenor 2008; Kozlovsky 2010; Sobe, 2012), sparking questions about the importance of space and design for the new progressive schools. These were central to the ambitions of community schools, leading to experimentation in building forms, pedagogy and curriculum, and as the contrast with Huntingdale and Swinburne suggests, simultaneously formalising and keeping provisional the radical visions of their agenda.

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Oral History Interviews

Roy Irvine, 7 December 2012

Gerry Tickell, 20 May 2012

Doug Stark, 27 July 2012

Tony Delves, 14 December 2012

Margaret Vickers, 4 June 2012

¹ Schoenheimer's views had an impressive reach, through his role as a teacher educator at Monash and La Trobe Universities, his regular columns in a national broadsheet (he wrote almost 400 articles for *The Australian*) and through dissemination among parent and teacher organizations (White 2002; Allwood, 1980).

² Subheading (p.38) from 'Open Education', *The Educational Magazine* (1974, pp.38-39).

³ An extensive evaluation and documentation of Huntingdale was undertaken in 1978, six years after it was established. According to Delves, 'When Huntingdale began in February 1972, the Education Department asked the school to examine alternatives for curriculum facilities and the development of community relationships. In return for this chance to innovate across a broad spectrum, the school was also asked to conduct an assessment of its work after the first five or six year operation' (Delves and Watts 1979, p.28)

⁴ In focus group interviews with former students, the smoking space was a site of fond memory

⁵ Title of an article in *The Age*, (1971), p.15