Renewed Aspirations for Schools as Community Hubs

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Abstract This book explores the expanded roles of schools, investigating how they may offer more to their communities than formal education. It also discusses what schools can gain from their communities through various forms of partnership and collaboration. We explore this 'more than a school' idea through past examples, in current practice, and as a model for schools into the future. Uniquely, the book investigates these issues from a spatial perspective, adopting the view that school and urban infrastructure, including buildings and landscaped outdoor areas (i.e., space), matters in the context of school-community relations. Indeed, we suggest that it mediates these relations, even though such influence is infrequently mentioned in the existing literature. Aligning our research with the spatial turn in the social sciences, we argue that research into school-community connections has tended to view such relations as fundamentally social, omitting adequate consideration of the role that space plays in enabling and/or constraining connections between school administrators, students, teachers, parents, carers, and members of the wider community. Adopting a spatial approach, a range of new perspectives are offered with respect

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to fostering stronger school-community connections through engaging thoughtfully with the built environment. The recurring themes of partnering, planning, designing, and enabling schools as community hubs are used to structure the 20 chapters that follow the initial scene-settings chapters.

Keywords Schools as community hubs · Mixed-use infrastructure precincts · Social infrastructure · Community facilities · Community schools · Learning environments

Introduction

Since schools proliferated with the rise of mass education in the late 1800s, they have played important roles within their local settings. By their nature, schools are places of significance, influencing the lives of young people, families, and community members through their physical presence and their social networks. While schools are common and well-accepted features of urban, regional, and rural landscapes today, the relations between schools and their surrounding communities have been a topic of debate, research, and development for over a century.

The suggestion that schools should act as community hubs is not new. In 1899 John Dewey promoted the school as a locus of community in the first edition of his book *The School and Society*, suggesting that schools should be considered a "genuine form of active community life, instead of a place set apart in which to learn lessons" (Dewey, 1915, p. 13).

With the advent of the single schoolhouse and later more sophisticated schooling models and facilities (Tanner & Lackney, 2006), schools have drawn people together, fostering social engagement and community cohesion. Yet, schools that actively promote the education, health, and wellbeing of not just students, but also teachers, parents, carers, and members of the wider community have been rare, and such models have not often been scaled. The historical record indicates that developing and sustaining 'more than a school' operations can be complicated and challenging.

This edited collection of chapters from authors in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, South Korea, the United States, and the United Kingdom has been brought together by researchers associated with an Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage project titled Building Connections: Schools as Community Hubs (2019–2022). This research involved a multi-disciplinary team of academics with backgrounds in education, urban planning, architecture, evaluation, human geography, wellbeing sciences, and educational facility planning. The team pursued insights into the opportunities and challenges associated with developing, implementing, and sustaining schools as community hubs—a broadly defined concept encompassing networks of relations between school administrators, students, teachers, parents, carers, and community members, with the buildings, landscapes, services and digital infrastructures of schools and surrounding areas. The project was supported by five state government and industry research partners from four Australian states.

Identifying renewed aspirations from state and territory governments in Australia[1] for schools to play a more influential role in local communities, the Building Connections team and collaborators investigated the socio-spatial operations of schools as community hubs. Acknowledging the spatial turn in the social sciences (Warf & Aria, 2008), the project adopted a spatial approach to gain unique perspectives on the issues that schools and associated stakeholders face when seeking to foster closer ties with local populations.

While the location of the research project in Australia foregrounds a local focus, we argue that analysis of Australia's governance, spatial and educational settings provide transferable insights into developing schools as community hubs in complex multi-sectoral settings in diverse urban and community circumstances. We suggest that readers around the world will find resonances with their school and community settings, while appreciating the particularities of place.

This introductory scene-setting section sets out the context for the book, with this first chapter introducing the main themes discussed, offering high-level insights into the pressing issues currently facing schools and associated stakeholders when developing, implementing, and sustaining schools as community hubs. Recognising the complex policy, design, and operational settings of these schools, the second chapter in this section links research and practice, synthesising and translating research undertaken in the project into a model of practice intended to guide future school planning.

Chapter authors in this book include a mix of academic researchers, government personnel, and industry practitioners. Founded on the notion that space plays a significant role in how schools and communities connect and disconnect, engage and disengage, a range of factors influencing school-community relations are discussed across the chapters, from the vantagepoint of both research and practice. The book is organised around four significant themes: partnering, planning, designing, and enabling. Collectively, these themes highlight important perspectives on how to foster the types of connections and enterprises—both formal and informal—that generate shared benefits for schools, government, industry, community groups, and individuals. These themes are introduced below.

Partnering

Collaborative partnerships are widely regarded as vital for the successful establishment of schools as community hubs (Calfee et al., 1998; Dryfoos, 2002; Hands, 2010; Walsh & Backe, 2013). Partnerships may involve interagency agreements, collaborations, or co-locations, and are commonly developed between stakeholders that may include education authorities, private education providers, service providers (such as health organisations), sporting clubs, universities, private industry, charities, and various agencies from all tiers of government. Some forms of partnership

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[1] Publicly accessible schools in Australia are run by the seven state and territory governments.

are relatively common—such as arrangements between many Australian primary schools and commercial providers of outside hours school care—while others are unusual, such as agreements to share facilities between privately-funded and state-funded schools. A recurrent theme is that strong partnerships take time to develop and require trust and reciprocity between organisations that may be unaccustomed to working together.

Partnering is explored in a variety of ways in this book. Drawing on research conducted in Ontario, Canada and California, USA, Hands' chapter explores how complex social contexts can either facilitate or frustrate efforts to collaborate. Two chapters take a reflective look at attempts to establish innovative partnerships in Australia: one by Lauer et al. shares insights from a recent state government pilot program in Queensland that aimed to broker cross-sector relationships to build high-quality shared infrastructure involving schools and other service providers, while another by Brennan reflects on a period during the 1980s in Melbourne, Victoria when the Princes Hill School Park Centre was the focal point for attempting to radically engage schools, community and local government in participatory decision-making about community development initiatives. Partnerships between schools and nature are also explored in a chapter by Hron which draws on John Dewey's historic ideas about schools and life being intrinsically interrelated.

Collectively, the spatialised partnerships discussed in these chapters highlight place-based collaborations that are rooted in local communities and contexts. The importance of architects brokering partnerships and harnessing inputs from diverse stakeholders to deliver infrastructure that addresses the needs of multiple user groups is also highlighted.

Planning

Planning schools as community hubs engages two distinct planning regimes: educational planning, and social and urban planning. Educational planning focusses on the welfare and academic progress of students within schooling systems. Social and urban planning involves policy and planning decisions relating to the provision of social, environmental, and infrastructural services, as well as urban form and amenity, at neighbourhood, suburban or community level. The histories, institutional settings, and the ethos of these two regimes need to be acknowledged and reconciled for the successful design, operation, and sustainment of schools as integrated educational and community facilities. Notwithstanding the many successful examples of schools as community hubs discussed in this book, structural segregation of these two planning regimes has commonly frustrated ambitions to scale and expand such initiatives.

Further, ineffective governance structures and complicated, multi-agency resourcing arrangements tend to act as barriers to integrated planning. As Miles et al.'s chapter indicates, the assignment of responsibility for school and community facilities at different levels of government, as is the case in Australia, raises questions

about authority and coordination in planning and decision-making. The siloed organisation and operation of administrative units within government jurisdictions may be equally problematic, resulting in a lack of coordinated identification and resolution of objectives. Several chapters in this book cite examples where state-based education departments have not been actively present in local planning processes. Indeed, in some jurisdictions, public education authorities have been specifically exempted from local planning schemes. Furthermore, educational planning is commonly undertaken for communities, not with them, negating the types of participatory decision-making processes that can lead to productive school-community relations and the procurement of aligned infrastructure.

As chapters of this section explore, tensions between infrastructure that seeks to promote community access and social connectedness on the one hand, and infrastructure that prioritises the safety and security of young people on the other, are at the heart of the matter. However, complex multi-purpose and multi-sectoral institutions such as extended-use or 'hub' schools resist simple or singular responses. Both safety and social connection are important, as argued in chapters by Kim and Han, and Jahangiri. Productive dialogue between these rationales is needed if schools are to be equally welcoming and secure. Jahangiri argues that narrow architectural responses towards securitisation represent a failure to understand the importance of community participation in planning and design. As Ergler and Smith, and Miles et al. suggest in their chapters, prioritising a safety discourse can also diminish the agency of young people in their physical and social environments, and de-emphasise the articulation of schools, other community facilities, and the surrounding neighbourhood.

At a wider social and urban planning level, failure to view schools from both whole-of-community perspectives and facility life-cycle perspectives also brings sustainability questions to the fore. Ergler and Smith point to the impact of increasing journeys to school by car, in terms of increasing greenhouse gas emissions and concerns about the safety of active travel by walking or wheeling. Again, sound physical and social planning, in the form of traffic management strategies and investment in programs such as walking to school initiatives, can assist in breaking the negative feedback loop of car commuting.

Boys and Jeffery emphasise the significance of accommodating change and adaptive re-use in school planning and design in their chapter. Schools and other learning facilities, they argue, are key components of local planning and development activities. However, designing to narrow temporal, financial, and service criteria limits their long-term educational, social, and commercial contribution. Boys and Jeffery cite the British architect Alex Gordon's dictum of 'long life, loose fit, low energy' as a planning aspiration for schools.

Throughout this section the school fence has a significant physical and symbolic presence. Jahangiri's example of the spear-topped 'diplomat' fence, which communicates signals about risk and security to students and parents, points to unresolved challenges related to community entry, which may be welcomed, regulated or precluded. Boys and Jeffery neatly summarise the underlying theme of this section by arguing that the wider goal of planning for schools as community hubs should be to build bridges, not fences.

Designing

Educators, social services providers, and community planners focused on delivering education and programs may not immediately see the relevance of physical infrastructure to their work other than as a place to be and do. However, when viewed relationally, the built environment is a significant participant in people's lives and good architectural design informed by collaborative processes can enhance the social relationships at the heart of the school-community interface. Moreover, the architectural briefing process may catalyse a journey of discovery, imagining alternative futures long before a design or building exists, or programs are offered within it. Whether led by architects, educational facility planners, or both, this early process asks big and bold questions of school leaders, community stakeholders and policy makers about how things could be better.

In this section, five chapters highlight the role of participatory processes and good design in supporting school-community relations. Robinson's account of the development of Doveton College and Moeck and Branford's story of Calvary Community Hub illustrate how deeply considered spatial arrangements underpin inclusive and supportive school-community philosophies for positive social impact. Other chapters demonstrate how architectural and pedagogical philosophies can evolve and respond to urban densification (Matthews et al.) and changing community needs (Le Nepveu), and combine historical, cultural, and Indigenous narratives in community placemaking (Tordoff and Atkins). Each of these chapters demonstrate how the built environment, and the processes that create it, may exert significant agency and influence on schools as community hubs.

Enabling

In the final section of this book a range of factors associated with enabling the development, implementation, and sustainability of schools as community hubs are addressed. Extending Cleveland's earlier discussion in chapter two of a framework for planning, designing, governing and managing schools as community hubs, these chapters delve deeply into the application of a range of factors within the framework. Chandler and Backhouse discuss the importance of vision and intentionality, along with matters concerning the emotional labour needed to drive new hub projects from idea to reality. Polglase et al. then explore the challenges to hub projects presented by fragmented policy environments and go on to discuss approaches to policy analysis that may help inform how policy could be better developed and enacted in support of hub projects. Adapting the urban scholar Henri Lefebvre's ideas about the social production of space, Rivera-Yevenes proposes a research framework to investigate how schools as community hubs have been developed, implemented, and sustained, for the purpose of seeking insights into the processes, challenges and lessons that have been learned by those involved. Finally, Clinton, Paproth, and Aston co-author

three related chapters focused on the need for evaluative evidence to support decision-making about school as community hub initiatives and their ongoing operation. They highlight that schools as community hubs often target wicked problems which extend far beyond the realm of student learning, necessitating impact metrics that capture broader outcomes than just students' academic achievement, such as student and community wellbeing. The three chapters offer an evaluation framework for schools as community hubs, explore the role of evaluative thinking and its relationship to the success of hub projects, and interrogate questions about how to determine value for money. Overall, these three chapters promote evaluation as an important support vehicle for the successful implementation, improvement, and scalability of good ideas.

Conclusion

Schools are widely recognised as playing a central role in the lives of young people, families, and carers, perhaps even more so since the COVID-19 pandemic led to temporary school closures in many parts of the world.

As cities and regional areas around the world intensify and societal dynamics change, pressure on schools to become 'more than a school' appears to be increasing. Here, community hub initiatives and activities become entangled with issues associated with educational planning, social, community and urban planning, architectural design, governance, facility management, and of course funding. Exploration of the wide-ranging factors influencing school-community relations in this book highlights the importance of building school facilities to accommodate activities that foster connections and engagement and generate shared benefits for both schools and community-based stakeholders.

Should schools play a more significant role in supporting communities to thrive, exhibit resilience and become more sustainable, both socially and environmentally, by establishing closer connections with early years education, health and well-being services, sports and recreation organisations, plus other community-oriented partners? We believe so, as evidenced by the content of the chapters in this book.

On behalf of the Building Connections: Schools as Community Hubs ARC Linkage project team and partners, we hope all who read this book enjoy the insights and perspectives shared and will take actions to build better connections between schools and communities.

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