



Building Connections: Schools as Community Hubs

Summary of Research Outcomes & Outputs for the ARC Linkage Project (2019-2022)

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Partner Organisations



BUILDING CONNECTIONS: SCHOOLS AS COMMUNITY HUBS
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Acknowledgements

Building Connections: Schools as Community Hubs (Building Connections) was a three-year Australian Research Council Linkage project investigating how best to plan, design, govern and manage schools to operate successfully as 'more than a school', encouraging the development of resilient and connected communities.

The *Building Connections* project was administered by the University of Melbourne and conducted by the Learning Environments Applied Research Network (LEaRN) in collaboration with the Faculty of Architecture, Building & Planning, Melbourne Graduate School of Education, and RMIT University's Centre for Urban Research.

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- Associate Professor Benjamin Cleveland, Lead Chief Investigator
- Professor Janet Clinton, Chief Investigator
- Associate Professor Ian McShane, Chief Investigator (RMIT University)
- Associate Professor Clare Newton, Chief Investigator (retired)
- Dr Ruth Aston, Research Fellow
- Dr Philippa Chandler, Research Fellow
- Natalie Miles, PhD Candidate
- Hayley Paproth, PhD Candidate
- Carolina Rivera Yevenes, PhD Candidate
- Robert Polglase, PhD Candidate (RMIT University)
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Preamble

This document

This report briefly **summarises the key findings** of the *Building Connections* project and **lists its research outputs**, both traditional and non-traditional.

Context

In the next decade, Australia will build hundreds of new schools, and refurbish many times more. Yet schools remain some of our most under-utilised assets. Outside school hours, **school facilities have the capacity to accommodate a wide range of functions**, including family and community-oriented education, recreation, health, and wellbeing programs and services. With additional funds, **school facilities could also be further developed to accommodate more programs and services needed by local communities** during school hours. However, these opportunities remain generally unrealised.

Could schools be better planned, designed, governed, and managed to operate successfully as 'more than a school' to encourage the development of resilient and connected communities? This ARC Linkage project investigated and reported on what could be achieved in future years towards positively impacting Australian society.

Impact

The Building Connections project makes three important contributions to the field. Firstly, our **edited book** offers a national and international perspective on policy, practice, and design considerations, tackling the issue of schools as community hubs through a spatial and infrastructure lens for the first time. Secondly, the results of our **Connecting Schools + Communities Survey** addresses a lack of empirical data about the operation of schools as community hubs in Australia, providing detailed insights into what's working and what's not working in schools that are playing expanded roles in their communities. It also highlights areas for policy development. Thirdly, our **How-to-Hub Australia** resource offers an ecological perspective on the factors essential to the development, implementation, and long-term success of schools as community hubs, informing policy makers, school leaders, and designers about how to take projects of this type forward with confidence.

These outcomes have been informed by an innovative interdisciplinary approach that presents opportunities to develop school facilities as community resources, aiming to empower government, industry, and community stakeholders to **improve schooling and community education, recreation, health, and wellbeing concurrently**.

Project Overview

Introduction

The *Building Connections: Schools as Community Hubs* ARC Linkage project examined the expanded roles of schools, including how they may offer more to their communities than formal schooling, plus what they can gain from their communities through partnerships and collaboration.

The concept of schools as community hubs is not new. In 1899 John Dewey advocated for schools to be placed at the centre of community life, proposing that they should embody a "genuine form of active community life, instead of a place set apart in which to learn lessons" (Dewey, 1915, p. 13). **Throughout history, schools have brought people together, nurtured social engagement, fostered community cohesion, and aided the development of social capital. However, schools that have intentionally prioritised the education, recreation, health, and wellbeing of students, teachers, parents, caregivers, and the members of the broader community have been relatively uncommon and such models have rarely been scaled.** History indicates that establishing and maintaining school-based operations that extend beyond traditional schooling can be challenged by a lack of opportunity, know-how, and support.

Yet, renewed aspirations in Australia for the development of 'schools as community hubs' is evident, as indicated by the work of organisations such as the [Queensland Government's Community Hubs and Partnerships \(CHaPs\) initiative](#), [Government of South Australia, Our Place](#), and [Community Hubs Australia](#).

Interest in how to effectively develop schools as community hubs informed this project's overarching research question and related objectives.

Key research question:

How can research, policy and practice be coherently linked to inform the planning, design, governance, and use of school infrastructure to meet the emerging needs of Australian communities?

Objectives:

- To determine the occurrence and nature of community programs and services offered from school sites, including details of the facilities being used.
- To assess the effectiveness of community programs and services offered from school sites.
- To develop strategies for the cost-effective delivery and management of the infrastructure required to deliver community programs and services (found to be effective) from school sites.

Project approach

The *Building Connections* project employed a **mixed methods approach**, designed to accommodate its broad research agenda and multi-disciplinary team. The approach enabled the project's academics, PhD candidates, industry partners, and collaborators to contribute in varied ways based on their disciplinary perspectives and expertise in education, urban planning, architecture, evaluation, human geography, wellbeing sciences, and educational facility planning.

The methodologies and methods applied across all aspects of the project are too numerous and varied to detail here, however, the following offers an overview of the research activities undertaken.

Literature Scoping Study

The project began with a **literature scoping study**. Boolean keyword searches were employed, covering a range of synonyms associated with three key terms: 'school,' 'infrastructure,' and 'community.' This process yielded a library of 302 relevant publications. An annotated bibliography was created and served as a valuable resource to guide and inform subsequent phases of the research.

International Conference

The **2020 Schools as Community Hubs International Conference** gathered an international audience to delve into important issues within the field. The event attracted 130 delegates from Australia, North America, Asia, and Europe, fostering discussions on current and historical initiatives and research related to schools as community hubs. Notably, it established a community of both academic and industry practitioners actively involved in complementary research efforts. A comprehensive [proceedings publication](#) featured 14 peer-reviewed papers (180 pages) authored by 25 contributors from Australia and the United States.

Expert Focus Groups

Three focus groups brought together **71 international experts from industry, government, and academia**. The objective was to identify opportunities and constraints associated with schools operating as community hubs. These online facilitated sessions engaged participants from Australia (33) and overseas (38). Public-facing summary reports were published to disseminate the emergent themes and insights from [Australia; Canada and the United States](#); and the [United Kingdom and Europe](#).

Four Ph.D. Projects

The ***Building Connections* project funded four PhD projects**. Although these projects are ongoing, the literature reviews, interviews, focus groups, workshops, impact models, and other fieldwork activities conducted by Carolina Rivera (exploring lived experiences of schools as community hubs), Hayley Paproth (investigating evaluative thinking and schools as community hubs), Rob Polglase (examining policy settings for schools as community hubs), and Natalie Miles (studying schools and social infrastructure networks) and their supervisors, have generated new insights and understandings. We look forward to the completion of these important projects and the publication of each dissertation and related papers.

Connecting Schools + Communities Survey

The *Building Connections* research team designed and implemented the [Connecting Schools + Communities Survey](#) to better understand the motivations behind schools sharing their facilities with local communities and to gain insights into school and hub leaders' perspectives on associated opportunities and challenges. The survey delved into three primary areas: a) the characteristics of schools self-identifying as community hubs, b) the role of infrastructure in supporting school-community relations, partnerships, and hub operations, and c) the impacts of schools as community hubs.

Value-focused Thinking Process

The project established six guiding principles through a value-focused thinking process: a structured decision-making methodology suitable for complex settings that require the consideration of diverse stakeholder needs. This approach was instrumental in **synthesising initial findings from varied research activities**. Dr Ruby Lipson-Smith led three workshops engaging the entire *Building Connections* research team. The value-focused thinking methodology enabled the team to identify fundamental priorities when developing, implementing, and sustaining schools as community hubs. The process also delineated a comprehensive set of means objectives: elements crucial for achieving the fundamental objectives of the project.

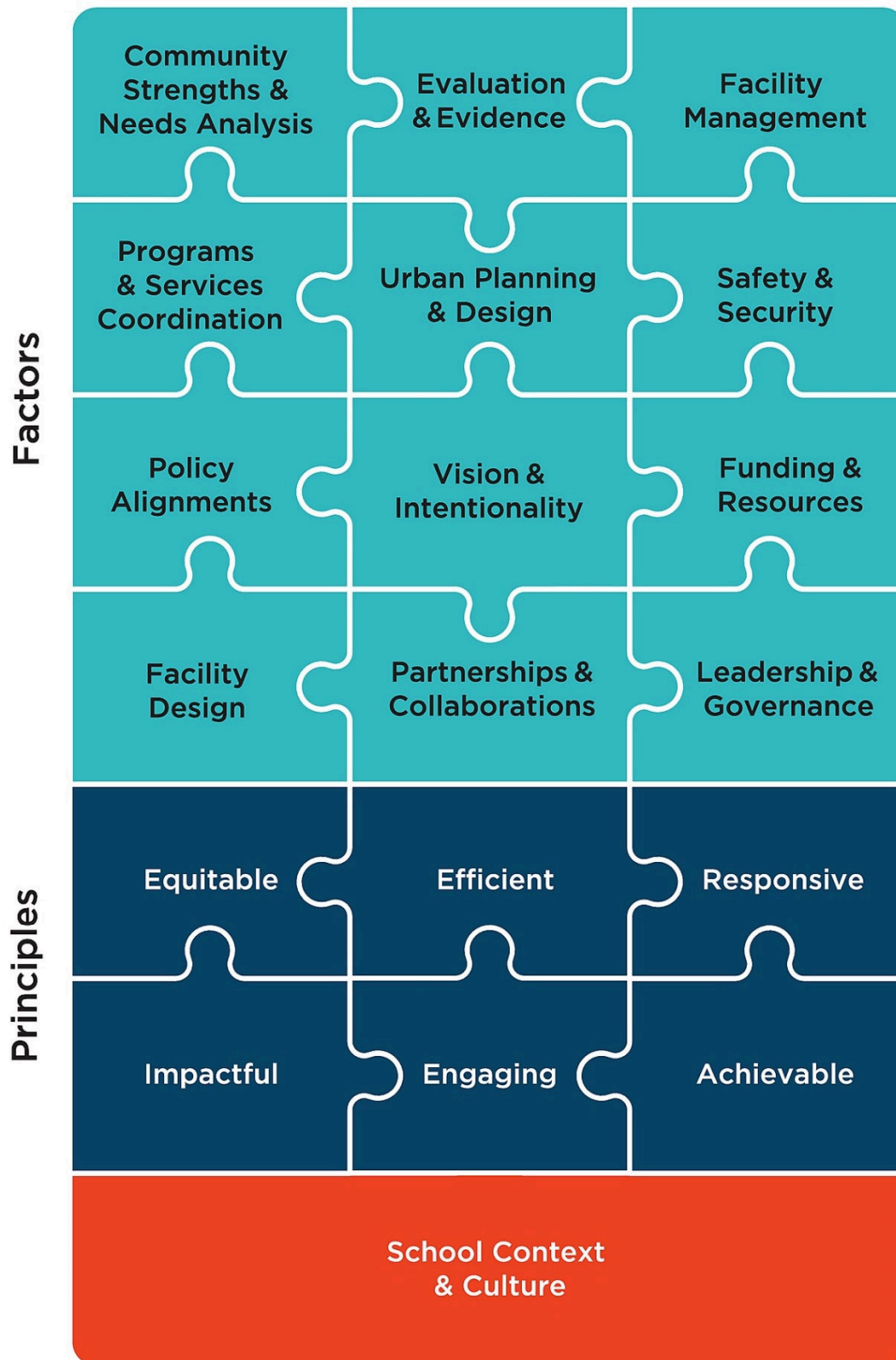
Edited Book

The production of an edited book, titled [Schools as Community hubs: Building more than a School for Community Benefit](#), expanded the international reach of the project, adding important **insights from research conducted in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, South Korea, United Kingdom, and the United States**.

How to Hub Australia Framework

To draw the multiple research strands together, a process of meta-synthesis was adopted to generate a **development framework for developing, implementing, and sustaining schools as community hubs**. The framework built on six guiding principles, then identified 12 factors essential to the development, implementation, and sustainability of schools as community hubs. Figure 1 (below) illustrates the resulting framework, which was the basis for creating the expanded [How to Hub Australia toolkit](#).

Figure 1 How to Hub Australia Framework



Project outcomes

Importance of the Research Conducted

With significant population growth anticipated in Australia in coming decades, it is imperative to deliver and upgrade infrastructure with substantial social value. This approach will be critical for maintaining and elevating standards of living and fostering community health, wellbeing, and resilience. To achieve this, a fundamental shift appears necessary whereby **schools become envisaged as widely distributed multi-service delivery platforms** that can support the education, recreation, health, and wellbeing of diverse community members.

Increasingly, schools recognise that achieving their educational objectives involves providing health and wellbeing support to students and their families and carers, to ensure their active participation and engagement in learning. This necessitates ready **access to integrated services on or near school sites to meet growing demand for supports**. Essential components, often delivered through partnerships with external organisations, may include community education programs, recreational opportunities, formal and informal sports, health and wellbeing services, and referral systems to outside program and service providers.

This research outlines important **strategies for forging partnerships and (re)developing schools as community hubs, as opposed to operating as standalone educational institutions**. It demonstrates how leveraging existing social networks and trusted relationships around schools can help foster community wellbeing and resilience when likeminded organisations can work together, gain access to shared facilities, and collectively make a difference to the lives of children, teenagers, and adults alike.

The project's **findings underscore the vital role of engaging local communities in the development and sustainability of school as community hubs**. Community engagement is viewed as essential, not only during initial planning but as an ongoing process to foster long-term success.

Contributions to the Field

The project outcomes make three important contributions to the field. Firstly, by providing a **national and international overview of policies and design considerations**, the project tackles the issue of schools as community hubs through a spatial and infrastructure lens for the first time. Secondly, the Connecting Schools + Communities Survey addresses a lack of empirical evidence in Australia about the operation of schools as community hubs and provides **key insights into what's working and what's not in schools that are seeking to align themselves more closely with local communities**. It also identifies areas for policy development. Thirdly, the How-to-Hub Australia resource offers an **ecological perspective on the factors essential for the successful development, implementation, and sustenance of school as community hubs**, helping to inform the work of policy makers, school leaders, and designers. These outcomes and contributions have been informed by an interdisciplinary approach that presents new opportunities to view and develop school facilities as integral community resources/social infrastructure.

Discoveries Made

The Connecting Schools + Communities Survey was a significant initiative of the project. The survey was distributed in every state school jurisdiction except Tasmania, where ethics was not approved, and over 20 Catholic school dioceses. This **comprehensive survey delved into three primary areas: a) the characteristics of schools self-identifying as community hubs, b) the role of infrastructure in supporting school-community relations, partnerships, and hub operations, and c) data on the impacts of schools identifying as community hubs**. Offering a distinctive dataset, the findings provide detailed insights into the locations, reasons, and extents to which schools share facilities with other users.

Key findings indicated that:

- Combined schools (P-12) engaged in more facility sharing and offered a broader range of programs and services compared to other school types.
- Schools in major cities frequently formed partnerships with external organizations for cultural and sporting events on school sites.
- Remote and very remote schools reported extensive facility sharing, serving diverse purposes, including the delivery of essential health and social services.
- Funding was identified by most respondents as inadequate to sustain support and maintenance of facilities for sharing purposes. Schools with older buildings find this particularly challenging, due to the associated costs of maintenance. School budgets are providing most of the funds required for maintaining and supporting facility sharing but are strained by such demands.
- Most schools, irrespective of location and type, tend not to have specific goals or a specific vision for facility sharing. However, those that do often include reference to 'community engagement', 'community wellbeing' and 'community connection' in their goal and vision statements.

A technical report, disseminated to all participating school jurisdictions and made publicly available, is anticipated to prompt further inquiries from policymakers regarding the roles of schools and school infrastructure, opening **avenues for deeper exploration and understanding in this vital area, and subsequent development.**

Innovations

The project explored the notion of **schools as integral components of broader social infrastructure networks**, departing from viewing them as isolated entities. One PhD candidate focused on this issue, developing methodologies for mapping these networks both in terms of physical infrastructure and social connections. In this approach, social connections become the links between infrastructure nodes, forming a network where the interplay between these elements can be analysed using network theory. **This innovative perspective sheds light on how social infrastructure performs for different community user groups.**

Additionally, a key innovation within the project is the creation of a **robust, evidence-based evaluation framework for schools as community hubs**. This framework, shaped by the evolving concept of evaluative thinking, is a focal point for another PhD candidate. This research offers **fresh insights into how to support schools as community hubs to set objectives and evaluate their impact.**

What next?

New Research Directions Identified

The project identified a **critical need for ongoing field-based research** to understand how policies for schools as community hubs are interpreted and implemented at the school level, particularly with respect to operational and design aspects. Ongoing research is needed to inform the **development of policy settings that facilitate effective, place-based responses**. A key insight gained is the importance of allocating administrative resources separate from the school's educational staffing to manage hub operations successfully.

Building on these insights, the research team is actively collaborating with government and education sector leaders to advance strategic thinking about the evolving roles of schools and related infrastructure. **Research translation and impact development aims to generate further research into on-the-ground development of schools as community hubs**. The team is developing replicable participatory action research (PAR) projects to document and evaluate the successes of hub projects, providing valuable insights for decision-makers in specific school/community contexts.

Aligned with this research agenda, **a newly funded ARC Linkage project titled, *Designing Learning Spaces for Diversity, Inclusion, and Participation*, will focus on designing mainstream schools for students with disabilities**. This project will extend understandings about how schools can contribute more to the lives of students, families, and local community members through partnering with support organizations, including allied health and other service providers.

We welcome further enquiry.

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Research Outputs

The *Building Connections* project produced traditional research outputs including, journal articles, conference proceedings/papers, and book chapters – including an edited book by the research team.

The project also produced a range of non-traditional research outputs including, technical reports, presentations, a public exhibition, and the *How-to-Hub Australia* toolkit.

These research outputs are listed below.

Traditional research outputs

Publications: Edited book

Cleveland, B., Backhouse, S., Chandler, P., McShane, I., Clinton, J.M., Newton, C. (2023) (eds) *Schools as Community Hubs: Building 'More than a School' for Community Benefit*. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-9972-7>

Publications: Book chapters

Aston, R., Clinton, J.M., Paproth, H. (2023). Are Schools as Community Hubs Worth It? In: Cleveland, B., Backhouse, S., Chandler, P., McShane, I., Clinton, J.M., Newton, C. (eds) *Schools as Community Hubs: Building 'More than a School' for Community Benefit*. Springer, Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-9972-7_22

Chandler, P. & Backhouse, S. (2023). Emotional Labour and Developing Schools as Community Hubs. In: Cleveland, B., Backhouse, S., Chandler, P., McShane, I., Clinton, J.M., Newton, C. (eds) *Schools as Community Hubs: Building 'More than a School' for Community Benefit*. Springer, Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-9972-7_17

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Matthews, T., Newton, C., Mayere, S., Guaralda, M. (2023). Vertical Schools as Community Hubs. In: Cleveland, B., Backhouse, S., Chandler, P., McShane, I., Clinton, J.M., Newton, C. (eds) *Schools as Community Hubs: Building 'More than a School' for Community Benefit*. Springer, Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-9972-7_15

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(eds) *Schools as Community Hubs: Building 'More than a School' for Community Benefit*. Springer, Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-9972-7_19

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Publications: Journal articles

McShane, I., Coffey, B. (2022). Rethinking community hubs: Community facilities as critical infrastructure. *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability*, 54. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cosust.2022.101149>

Publications: Editorship of peer-reviewed conference proceedings

Cleveland, B., Chandler, P., Backhouse, S., Clinton, J.M., McShane, I., Newton, C. (2020). *Building Connections for Community Benefit*. Proceedings of the Schools as Community Hubs International Conference 2020. University of Melbourne. <https://doi.org/10.26188/13146527.v2>

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Cleveland, B. (2024). Links between school buildings and the wellbeing of students and education professionals. What's happening in the Australian context? *Proceedings of the International Comparison Conference of CNESEO (French Centre for Education Studies) - 2023*. November 2023, Paris. <https://doi.org/10.26188/25476535>

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Non-traditional research outputs

Publications: Technical reports

- Aston, R., Paproth, H., Clinton, J., Cleveland, B., McShane, I., Chandler, P. & Backhouse, S. (2023). *National Patterns of School Facility Sharing: Report from the Connecting Schools + Communities Survey*. The University of Melbourne. <https://doi.org/10.26188/22758386>
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Publications: Industry resources

- Building Connections (2023). *How to Hub Australia: Evidence and advice for policy makers, school leaders and designers involved in schools as community hubs*. The University of Melbourne. <https://doi.org/10.26188/21692492.v5>
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- Building Connections (2023). *How to Hub Australia Advice Sheets: Urban Planning & Design*. The University of Melbourne. <https://doi.org/10.26188/21692792.v3>
- Building Connections (2023). *How to Hub Australia Advice Sheets: Safety & Security*. The University of Melbourne. <https://doi.org/10.26188/21692795.v2>
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- Building Connections (2023). *How to Hub Australia Advice Sheets: Facility Management*. The University of Melbourne. <https://doi.org/10.26188/21692786.v2>
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Publications: General articles

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- Paproth, H. (2021). Wasted spaces? Evaluating the success of schools as community hubs. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/wasted-spaces-evaluating-success-schools->
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- Rivera-Yevenes, C. (2021). Wasted spaces. How can we better use schools as community hubs? <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/wasted-spaces-how-can-we-better-use->

Publications: Research higher degree theses

- Miles, N. R. (In progress). *School and Community Infrastructure: A network analysis*. The University of Melbourne.
- Rivera-Yevenes, C. (In progress). *Schools as Community Hubs: A Case Study Approach to Planning, Designing, Governing and Managing Social Infrastructure*. The University of Melbourne.
- Paproth, H. (In progress). *Evaluative thinking, impact, and the success of Schools as Community Hubs*. The University of Melbourne.
- Polglase, R. (In progress). *More than a School: Policy for Schools as Community Hubs*. RMIT University.

Presentations: Keynotes and Invited Addresses

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Building Connections

Schools as Community Hubs

ARC LINKAGE PROJECT

2019 – 2022

Building Connections: Schools as Community Hubs was a four-year Australian Research Council Linkage Project investigating how best to plan, design, govern and manage schools to operate successfully as 'more than a school', encouraging the development of resilient, connected communities.

Building Connections Project Team:

Associate Professor Benjamin Cleveland | [Lead Investigator](#)

Professor Janet Clinton | [Chief Investigator](#)

Associate Professor Clare Newton (retired) | [Chief Investigator](#)

Associate Professor Ian McShane | [Chief Investigator](#)

Dr Philippa Chandler | [Research Fellow](#)

Dr Ruth Aston | [Research Fellow](#)

Natalie Miles | [PhD Candidate](#)

Carolina Rivera Yevenes | [PhD Candidate](#)

Hayley Paproth | [PhD Candidate](#)

Robert Polglase | [PhD Candidate](#)

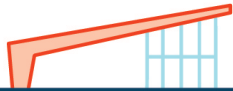
Dr Sianan Healy (2019) | [Project Manager](#)

Sarah Backhouse (2020-23) | [Project Manager](#)

Phuong Nguyen (2020) | [Research Communications Coordinator](#)

Rebecca Colless (2021-22) | [Research Communications Coordinator](#)

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