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TO CITE:

Fraser, A. & Rutherford, M. (2020). Our Place: Opening the School Gates to the Community. In B. Cleveland, P. Chandler, S. Backhouse, J. Clinton, I. McShane, & C. Newton (Eds.), *Building Connections for Community Benefit. Proceedings of Schools as Community Hubs International Conference 2020*. <https://doi.org/10.26188/13291229>

SCHOOLS AS COMMUNITY HUBS INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE 2020

Building Connections for Community Benefit Conference organized by Building Connections: Schools as Community Hubs ARC Linkage project (2019-2022). This research is supported under Australian Research Council's Linkage Projects funding scheme (LP170101050).



Australian Government

Australian Research Council

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OUR PLACE: OPENING THE SCHOOL GATES TO THE COMMUNITY

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Author Note : Our Place is an initiative of the Colman Education Foundation working in partnership with the Victorian Government, led by the Department of Education and Training.

Abstract

The built environment plays an important role in the *Our Place* approach to improving outcomes for children, families and communities. Our Place is a holistic place-based approach to supporting the education, health and development of all children and families in disadvantaged communities. It utilises the universal platform of a school. Single, shared entrances in Our Place sites are a key feature of the approach. This entails a deliberate attempt to change the way schools are used by communities and the way services and supports are offered to vulnerable families. The expansion of the Our Place approach from one site to ten schools across the state has brought about many barriers to implementing the ideal entrance concept. This is due to the diverse nature of the communities and the differences in the level of influence over building design and construction. In the absence of a formal evaluation of the single, shared entrance concept, this paper will explore emerging themes around scaling up the Our Place outcomes focused, place-based initiative utilising schools as a universal platform.

Keywords: place-based, outcomes focused, scaling up, schools as hubs, community approach

Our Place: Opening the School Gates to the Community

Our Place is a holistic place-based approach to supporting the education, health and development of all children and families in disadvantaged communities by utilising the universal platform of a school. An initiative of the Colman Foundation, *Our Place* works in partnership with the Victorian Government led by the Department of Education and Training (DET). The approach is being employed in ten schools across the state to improve outcomes for children and families in disadvantaged communities. The *Our Place* initiative has philanthropic funding for ten years in each of its sites. *Our Place* evolved over eight years from the experiences at Doveton College, located in the outer south-east Melbourne suburb of Doveton. Having opened in 2012, Doveton College operates as a family-centred universal platform providing an integrated model of education and community support for families in an area experiencing significant disadvantage.

The *Our Place* approach includes five elements or evidence-based strategies that contribute to achieving desired outcomes: high-quality early learning, health and development; high-quality schooling; wrap-around health and wellbeing services; engagement and enrichment activities for children; and adult engagement, volunteering, learning and employment.

The role of schools in *Our Place*

Our Place schools not only support children to achieve their education potential, they also have partnerships in place to provide families access to a range of onsite resources and services offering additional support to ensure children are ready and able to learn effectively. Research suggests that children experiencing social and economic disadvantage may require greater levels of support. With parents and guardians more engaged and involved at the school, including through learning opportunities of their own, the school becomes a community learning centre rather than a place that separates children from the world of adults and the wider community (Edgar, 2001).

Utilising schools as a universal platform to support disadvantaged communities can result in powerful change. When implemented with strong engagement of local community leaders and service providers, schools can offer services and support at the place where children and families come every day. They use a highly accessible, non-stigmatising universal platform to build relationships, identify needs and aspirations, and reduce barriers to accessing support, and they build on the aspirations all families have for their children to learn and succeed (Moore et al., 2017; Sanjeevan, McDonald & Moore, 2012).

The single, shared entrance as a key feature of *Our Place*

A key feature of the *Our Place* approach is having a single, shared entrance to a combined, purpose-built school, early learning centre and family support space, with community spaces and a welcoming reception (Figures 1). The single, shared entrance physically opens up the school and early years' centre to the local community allowing stigma-free access to additional services and opportunities (Figure 2). This is particularly important for vulnerable families who consistently report barriers to

Figure 1

Example of an Our Place single, single shared entrance shown in architectural plans



Source: Our Place

Figure 2

Example of an Our Place welcoming environment



Source: Our Place

accessing and engaging with services (Moore et al., 2014; Valentine and Hilferty, 2012; Yule, 2015).

The Our Place approach is based on learnings from a range of international and Australian models, including Toronto First Duty in Canada, the Elizabeth Centre in the United States and Sure Start in the United Kingdom. While not an entirely new concept, having as a key feature a single, shared entrance to a range of supports and services located on a school site is unique.

Our Place works with the Victorian Schools Building Authority (VSBA) and their appointed architects in the design phase to ensure the entrance is welcoming for families, while providing a clear entry point to the range of services and supports on offer on site. Our Place sites typically offer the provision of early learning from birth, as well as playgroups, child health care and parenting support, health and wellbeing support services, including allied health and general practitioners. A single entrance means that families can be easily directed to the supports they need in a seamless and transparent manner, where agencies work as one to deliver support in a coordinated approach.

The single, shared entrance provides opportunities for families and service providers to meet informally and casually interact. Staff located at entrances aim to be non-judgmental and welcoming so that families have seamless access to education and support. The aim is for a 'no wrong door' policy and a single storytelling experience with the school at the centre of the community. Our Place entrances aim to be safe, family-friendly, appealing spaces designed for adults to establish friendships, develop informal support networks and a sense of belonging. They are also where adults can access practical supports, including internet connectivity, brochures and job boards.

Doveton College – the *Our Place* demonstration site

As a greenfield site, Doveton College's single, shared entrance was specifically designed to support the community from the minute they walked in the door. After eight years of operation, Doveton College is now a fully operational community-focused site with many activities for children and their families. Programs for engaging adults are working particularly well, with on average more than 250 adults engaged and participating in community programs, education and volunteering each year.

While the effect of having a single, shared entrance at Doveton College has not been formally evaluated, a parent survey conducted by the Our Place Research and Evaluation team in 2018 (n=68) indicated that most felt welcome on school grounds, including the entrance. Over half (52 per cent) reported feeling 'very welcome' at the entrance, and 29 per cent 'extremely welcome'. Parent feedback highlighted the entrance provided a warm welcome underpinned by supportive staff: 'Staff always greet me and always seem willing and available to discuss my children.'

Most parents said they now felt more welcome at the school compared to when they first came (63 per cent), while 31 per cent felt about the same.

Interviews with parents involved in Doveton College since it opened highlighted how comfortable parents felt on site:

From everything else that had been in Doveton it was brand new and looked a bit out of place.

But when you walk through the doors and everyone was welcoming it was great. Right from the beginning. Within a couple of weeks, you'd walk through the door and you'd be greeted from the staff all the way through. It became like a second home.

Implementing the approach beyond Doveton

Unlike Doveton, which is a site operating under a single entity (the school), in other locations, Our Place and DET are working to create integrated facilities in both build and mindset. Building on the experiences of Doveton College, the approach is being implemented in ten communities throughout Victoria. Sites are selected based on a need to improve educational outcomes, quantifiable disadvantage, planned infrastructure works and local interest in integrated infrastructure and service delivery.

Our Place sites reflect a mix of metropolitan (Doveton, Bridgewood, Carlton, Frankston North, Westall) and regional (Robinvale, Northern Bay, Morwell, Seymour, Mooroopna) communities. Within the 10 communities there are 11 building sites (Frankston North includes two separate buildings). Most have a single, shared entrance built into their design, however, several are not in use yet for various reasons (Table 1). Three sites, including Doveton, are new buildings, while four are refurbished existing buildings, and two are a combination of both.

Table 1

Our Place sites

Our Place site	Build Year	Single, shared entrance	Site type
Doveton	2012	Yes	New build
Bridgewood	2018	Yes - but not in use yet	New build
Carlton	2018	Yes - but not in use yet	Refurbishment
Robinvale	2018	No	Refurbishment
Northern Bay (Corio)	2019	Yes	Combination
Morwell	2019	Yes	Refurbishment
Seymour	2019	No	Refurbishment
Frankston North - Mahogany Rise & Aldercourt	2020	Yes - but not in use yet	Combination
Mooroopna	2020	Yes - but not in use yet	New build
Westall	tbc	tbc	tbc

Note: Frankston North includes two separate site buildings but make up one Our Place 'community site'. Westall's build year, entrance and site type is yet to be confirmed.

Emerging themes

Involvement of Our Place in the design phase

In some cases, Our Place joined the partnership overseeing site design after the appointment of architects and design development. Ideally Our Place would be involved in the design and build phase of all its sites, contributing to ideas and discussions to ensure evidence-based elements are incorporated. At sites where Our Place has joined after the commencement of the design phase, emphasis is placed on exploring how a virtual single, shared entrance approach can operate in principle. In more recent builds the process of considering design features that enable activation of a single entrance and shared usage has been smoother. All parties involved, including Our Place, VSBA and DET, are familiar with undertaking such a consultative process.

The first site established after Doveton College, while not experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage, is within a new suburb facing significant growth with limited services. It was conceptualised by state and local government prior to Our Place involvement and designed to have one main entrance with a shared reception area for school, early years and health and wellbeing services; however, there are four entry points in total. Since opening in 2018, the main entrance has not been widely used because the front car park is incomplete, leaving it less prominent than other entrances. However, all entrances are clearly signed, and visitors can find their way to reception via a 'yellow brick road'.

Working within existing school structures

Adapting existing school sites for broader community use is challenging. The design of several sites is constrained by existing school structures, mostly due to a combination of cost and space. One is a vertical school located within a pocket of significant disadvantage in inner-city Melbourne. As an 'infill' site, the school is made of the same materials and built, similarly to the neighbouring government housing flats, with lots of imperfections. The existing external structure was kept and the interior refurbished, raising the primary school and converting the ground floor into sessional kindergarten and long day care spaces. The creation of two reception areas has hampered the desired level of integration. Ground floor services were activated in early 2020 and partners are working to address this.

Another site requiring a restructure of an existing building is located within a regional community. The build is a refit of an existing school that has experienced multiple restructures, namely the addition of an early years and administrative space and a community library. Given the existing infrastructure, a shared, single entrance was not possible. However, effort has been made to ensure the library is accessible to the broader community, and plans are underway to enhance the prominence of the new early years space and connect it physically through an 'alfresco' style external walkway.

Perceptions of safety and security

Perceptions of safety and security have arisen in some sites in response to the idea of opening up schools to adults, with some resistance to an open and shared entrance. Concern also emerged around non-school staff and community members being on site outside school opening hours. This was particularly the case for areas with low levels of perceived safety. In these sites, Our Place works with stakeholders to explore real and perceived risks and explore processes to ensure children, family and staff safety are a priority. This often involves exploring ways to address the perceived risks without needing to put in place a physical barrier that could prevent families from freely entering school grounds.

Resources to enable the shared, single entrance to work

The presence of a single, shared entrance alone does not guarantee the Our Place approach will work. Instead, the facilities and infrastructure, including the entrance, can encourage staff from different agencies to work together in welcoming and supporting families into a community focused school. Placing skilled and dedicated Our Place staff on the ground at each site forges connections between families, schools and the wider community, helping to support all partners.

At some sites, issues have arisen when deciding which partner agency would take responsibility for the main reception area. This important function includes being the 'front face' of the site, navigating services and ensuring families find the support they need. To address this, significant work to develop an understanding of the Our Place approach and build a strong partnership has been undertaken so that staff can compensate for the physical environment. By engaging in co-design supports such as playgroups, kindergarten to school transition strategies, and a strong focus on building awareness of each other's offerings and processes, families are able to receive appropriate connection and support regardless of the contact point.

Planning a single site with multiple partners

While Doveton was established as a single entity covering the early years, school and health and wellbeing services, subsequent Our Place sites require negotiation with a range of partners, all of whom work within different systems, layers of government and organisational requirements. The Our Place approach looks at the 'system' through the eyes of families and children and seeks to change approaches in place that are not working for families. This is challenging within a single organisation but takes on a new dimension when multiple players are involved (Dart, 2018). To assist with this, Our Place employs staff experienced in community engagement at each site whose primary responsibility is trust and relationship-building amongst partners and supporting them to work together towards a common goal.

A need for further evaluation

Research and evaluation are core components of the Our Place approach, aiming to document and examine both process and impact throughout the implementation process. Further evaluation of the

impact of the approach, including sites' designs, is needed. In order to promote the concept of schools as community centres and the benefit of single, shared entrances, evidence of the approach's benefits is required. Our Place intends to utilise the learnings captured from its ten sites to build evidence and understanding of the specific impact of the single, shared entrance concept.

Conclusions

In scaling up the Our Place approach to ten sites across Victoria, the importance of building design that enables a shared and welcoming entrance is key. While building design alone does not create a welcoming and safe entry space for families, it is made easier if it is there in a physical sense. The role of a family-centred mindset and practices to make the best use of the available physical environment come to the fore when the ideal built environment is unavailable.

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