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Research into Practices to Support a Positive Start to School

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Table of Vignettes

Table of Project Stories

List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

ARM	Action Research Meeting
CALD	Culturally and Linguistically Diverse
CEIEC	The Centre for Equity and Innovation in Early Childhood
DEECD	Department of Education and Early Childhood Development
KEFO	Koorie Educational Field Officers
MACS	Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Services
Transition Initiative	Transition: A Positive Start to School initiative
Transition Statement	Transition Learning and Development Statement
VEYLDF	Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework

Definitions

Kindergarten	The year prior to compulsory school in Victoria, Australia (can also be referred to as preschool).
Prep	The first year of compulsory school in Victoria, Australia.
Services	Ancillary health and psychological services including child and maternal health professionals, speech pathologists, occupational therapists, psychologists.
Setting	The individual participating early childhood and/or kindergarten service or school.
Site	The partnered (for the purposes of this project) early learning/kindergarten and school.
Educators	Participants in the action research project included primary school principals, vice principals, primary school teachers, preschool teachers working in kindergarten[1], MACS and child care settings and early childhood professionals working in MACS. For this report all these participants will be referred to as educators.

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[1] Teachers in the project working in preschool named their setting preschool or kindergarten. Further, some identified themselves as preschool or kindergarten schools. In this project they mean the same thing. These teachers have a 4 year degree in early childhood and work as a teacher with 4 and 5 year old children in a funded preschool program.

Acknowledgements

The project team wishes to thank all the educators and their early childhood settings, schools and specialist services who were prepared to reflect upon and question their transition practices, share their ideas, be open to different possibilities and to act for change that created better outcomes for children, families and teachers. We also wish to thank the children and families who shared their ideas and experiences with us.

Executive Summary

Background

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) is committed to improving transition to primary school for children, families and educators (see VEYLDF (DEECD, 2009b) and Transition to School Initiative (DEECD, 2009a). As part of this commitment, the DEECD funded the University of Melbourne to undertake the *Research into Practices to Support a Positive Start to School* Project.

Research into Practices to Support a Positive Start to School was an action research project that worked with fifteen sites across Victoria from May 2010 to November 2011. Utilising an ecological approach, the project brought together primary schools and early childhood services in geographical proximity (sites). These sites were comprised of teachers from both settings and in some sites, specialists such as speech therapists. Each site focused on one of three promising practices – either buddy programs, reciprocal visits for educators or family involvement. The sites reflected on and questioned their existing transition practices, shared their ideas, were open to different possibilities presented in Action Research Meetings (ARMs) and acted for change to create better outcomes for children, families and teachers.

The ways and extent to which sites engaged with their chosen promising practice varied greatly and were informed by a number of factors including:

- The extent to which they had previous experience and practices that related to their selected promising practice (those with pre-existing programs and practices worked to modify these, where those with no experience worked from scratch).

- The success they had in establishing site relationships.

- The level of support received by principals and centre management in relation to engagement in the project.

This report presents observations and learnings, and challenges arising out of the project.

Key observations and learnings

The sample size for the project was small and the data collection period only covered a single transition cycle. The data relied upon was anecdotal feedback from teachers gained during the ARMs, along with their observations as recorded in reflection sheets and during mentor sessions; focus group sessions with families and individual interviews with children. The observations and learnings from the project provide insight into the possibilities presented when educational settings are given the time and space to engage intensively with promising practices. Vignettes which capture the voices of educators, children and families are used in the body of the report to illustrate these

observations and learnings. While these learnings arise out of this small-scale project and are anecdotal, contextual and localised, they can inform theory and practice for positive transition to school across the state and within a broader national and international context.

The overarching key observations and learnings from the project were that:

- The use of the promising practices enhances the development and deepening of relationships between early childhood educators and primary teachers, and between families and children and educators and this works to promote a positive transition to school.

- Promising practices interrelate and do not sit in isolation.

This key observations and learnings across the promising practices can be summarised according to three themes:

1. Building relationships between children, families and schools supports positive transitions to school.

2. Building relationships between educators in early childhood settings and primary schools broadens and deepens understandings and respect and promotes positive transition practices.

3. Reflecting on existing transition promising practices creates possibilities for change to practices and programs to best suit the needs of communities.

Building relationships between children, families and schools supports the positive transitions to school

The following key observations were made:

- Talking with families enables their needs and perspectives to be reflected in transition practices.

- Talking with children highlights the valuable and informed contributions they have to make in the formulation of transition practices.

- Developing communication links with families creates an increased awareness of the interconnectedness between early childhood settings and schools in supporting children's transition to school.

- Bringing new knowledge around children and families from Indigenous communities, children with diverse abilities, disadvantaged backgrounds and CALD backgrounds enables better understandings of families' experiences and needs and adaptation of transition practices to meet these needs.

- Enhancing communication with families creates an increased sense of confidence and reassurance for the school's ability to support their child's

transition to school due to them having a clearer understanding of the transition processes.

- Increasing children and families early exposure to the school environment, teachers and other children helps to build a sense of safety, greater confidence, a calmer transition and independence for children once at school.

- Engaging with transitioning families creates a greater willingness on the part of families to communicate with the school.

Building relationships between educators in early childhood settings and primary schools enhances communication, deepens understandings and respect and promotes positive transition practices

The following key observations were made:

- Working with all educators within a site enables deeper understandings and connections and the ability to respond in an informed manner to families.

- Reciprocal visits between educators from primary schools and early childhood settings fosters a better understanding of the work undertaken by each group and the development of a deeper respect for each other's work.

- Building strong relationships across sectors supports positive transitions and ongoing connections.

- Enhancing links between educators results in communication about the needs of children and families enables school teachers to tailor their programs and class placements to better meet the needs of transitioning children and families.

Reflecting on existing transition promising practices creates possibilities for change to practices and programs to best suit the needs of communities

The following key observations were made:

- Critically reflecting on transition programs and practices creates opportunities for more targeted evaluations of the effects of practices and a clearer understanding for people developing and implementing practices about how to make schools ready for children and families.

- Reciprocal visiting led some teachers and early childhood educators to incorporate each other's practices into their educational programs, such as more play-based learning into prep classrooms and different skill development activities into kindergarten classrooms in an effort to facilitate a smooth transition to prep for children.

- Evaluating transition programs is essential to ensuring their ongoing relevance to their community.

- A commitment to creating time and space to allow sites to meet, discuss, plan and implement transition programs is required to sustain responsive transition practices.

In continuing the work to consolidate and build on the use of promising practices to support a positive transition to school, a number of challenges became evident during the project:

- Securing the support from early childhood centre management and primary school leadership for developing sustained meaningful relationships between early childhood professionals and primary school teachers.

- Sustaining motivation and the time commitment on the part of all involved in particular where there is a history of independent operation.

- How and with whom to establish collaborative relationships where there are multiple feeder kindergartens for a single school setting or children from a single kindergarten transitioning to multiple schools.

- Engaging all children and families in the formulation of transition programs and practices so that it is responsive to the range of different needs.

- Effectively engaging the voices of early childhood educators and care professionals and communities in the developing transition promising practices and programs.

Section 1: Project Overview

Section 1 will provide an overview of the project, *Research into Practices to Support a Positive Start to School*, the project objectives, context and rationale, and an overview of an ecological approach to transition that underpinned the project.

Project Overview

Transition to the first year of school is a significant milestone in the life of a young child and as such of major importance for families and educators who are part of the transition process. Early childhood educators, schools and researchers have been concerned with what constitutes a smooth transition and what impact the transition to the first year of school has for children, families, schools and the community at large. Einardottir, Perry and Dockett (2008) note that the beginning of school marks a change in 'roles, identities and expectations' (p.48) for children. This transition period can be a challenging time for many children including Indigenous children, children with diverse abilities, children from disadvantaged backgrounds and children from culturally diverse backgrounds (Hirst, Jervis, Visagie, Sojo & Cavanagh, 2011; Dockett, Perry & Kearney, 2010; CEIEC, 2008).

In 2010, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) commissioned the University of Melbourne's Centre for Equity and Innovation in Early Childhood (CEIEC) to design and deliver a project to support early childhood settings and primary schools to work together to promote a positive start to school, specifically to explore how promising practices can support the transition process. This followed on from a DEECD commissioned literature review on transition to school undertaken by the CEIEC 2008/9[2].

Project Objectives

The project had four specific aims:

1. Increase rigour in the evidence base for practices to support effective transition into the preparatory year of primary school;

2. Improve implementation of identified transition strategies and programs;

3. Address the identified knowledge gap concerning the effectiveness characteristics of the identified transition to school programs; and

4. Inform the development of instructional resources for early childhood and outside school hour's settings and schools.

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[2] Literature Review Transition: a positive start to school 2008/9

Further, the project also explored these aims specifically in relation to children from Indigenous communities, children with diverse abilities, disadvantaged backgrounds and CALD backgrounds.

Advisory Group

The project team sought advice from experts in the field of early year's education through an Advisory Group. The Advisory Group comprised of academics with expertise in transition to primary school, and in particular transition for children from Indigenous communities, children with diverse abilities, children from disadvantaged backgrounds or children from CALD backgrounds. The Advisory Group comprised of Professor Field Rickards, Professor Mark Rose, Professor Julie McLeod, Associate Professor Kay Margetts and Ms Margot Trinder.

Context and Rationale

The literature as reviewed in the CEIEC literature review and recent work on transition to school consistently calls for responsive and sustained practices to be developed to support the young child's successful transition. In a project commissioned by DEECD and reported on in June 2009, *Evaluation of Transition: A Positive Start to School Pilots*, the transition practices of 30 pilot schools were evaluated. From this evaluation, along with insights gained for the literature review, ten promising practices to support a positive transition to school for children were identified. The ten promising practices identified were:

1. Reciprocal visits for children;

2. Reciprocal visits for educators;

3. Learning and Development statements and transition meetings;

4. Joint professional learning;

5. Local transition networks;

6. Buddy programs;

7. Family involvement activities;

8. Learning programs responsive to the child;

9. Social story boards; and

10. Community level transition timetable.

A persistent theme running through the literature and the 2010 project is that a positive transition to school is supported by communication and collaboration between early childhood settings and primary schools. For this to occur, it is recognised that a concerted effort is required to ensure that linkages between the two settings are

developed in order to support children in transitioning to school. To create these links effectively it is essential to include the voices of all stakeholders, children, families and educators. This can be realised through the practices that have been identified as 'promising practices'. There is, however, a need for more research to determine which promising practices are the most effective in fostering these links between children, families and educators. Further, the practices that have been used by educators and families and have proven effective on the ground require more formal assessment and evaluation to create a robust, evidence based literature of what best supports all children to succeed in transitioning to school.

What is evident from the review of literature available on the ten promising practices is that there remains much research to be done to validate the claim of 'promising practice'. In pursuit of this, DEECD commissioned the CEIEC to undertake this investigation.

Through discussion between DEECD, the Transition Advisory Group and the CEIEC team it was decided that the following three of the ten promising practices would be selected as the focus of the project:

- Buddy programs;

- Reciprocal visits for educators; and

- Family involvement.

Theoretical base: An Ecological Approach to Transition

The theoretical base that underpinned this project was ecological theory drawing from Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1995; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). This perspective recognises the individual within the context of a series of relationships with people - such as family members; the preschool educator, the primary school educator, and children - and the physical and social environment - such as the preschool, school, home, the community; and cultural rituals, beliefs and practices. Astbury (2009) argues that an ecological approach to transition to school 'highlights the significance of relationships and the way interactions between children, families, educators and the community shape the experience of transition in important ways' (p.4). An ecological approach to transition to school recognises the importance of children's individual personal qualities and skills as well as the importance of relationships and the connections of these relationships for successful transition from preschool to school and future success in moving throughout and within different educational contexts (Perry, Dockett, Whitton, Vickers, Johnston & Sidoti, 2006).

Bronfenbrenner (1995) argues that there are four interconnected structures that support an ecological approach that need to be explored and addressed within any approach to transition – microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems and macrosystems. Microsystems are the interactions and activities within the child's immediate

surroundings. Mesosystems are the supports (people, environments and materials) in the larger world outside the child's immediate surroundings that are requirements for children to develop at their optimum level. Exosystems are the social settings that affect the experiences of the child such as organisational structures and policies. Macrosystems are the values, laws and customs within cultures (Tissington, 2008). These four systems overlap and interconnect influencing children's engagement with and relationships to activities, people and the broader social world. The overlapping and interconnection of these systems is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Bronfenbrenner's ecological approach[3]
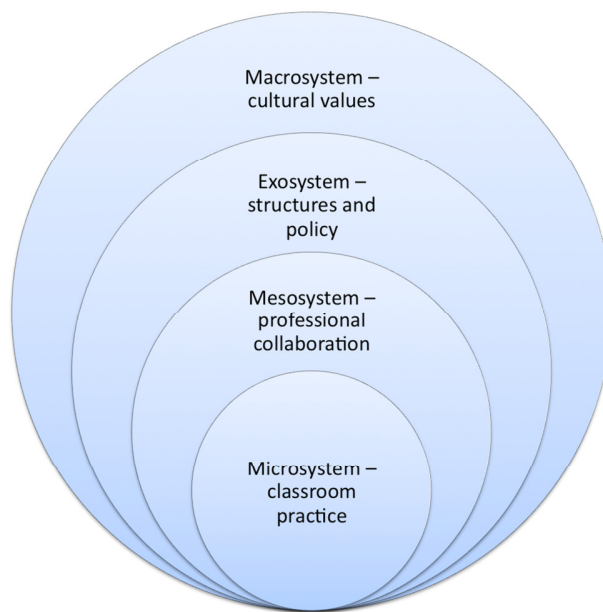
An Ecological Approach to Transition to School in Practice

Many schools and early childhood settings have diverse policies, practices and programs to facilitate the smooth transition to school. A common organisational approach in Victorian schools has been *hierarchical*. In this approach schools and early childhood settings develop transition policies, practices and programs independently with little or no discussion, consultation or collaboration with other services, families or children. It is an approach characterised by isolation. An example of a hierarchical approach is illustrated in Figure 2.

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[3] Adapted from Bronfenbrenner (1995) and Bronfenbrenner & Morris (1998).

Figure 2: Hierarchical Approach to Transition to School

School – develop policies, practices and programs and inform families about these. The school may inform the local preschools and child care services as a way of circulating the information to families.

Preschools– develop policies, practices and programs and inform families about these in isolation. The preschool may inform the schools about the activities.

Families – inform the children about the activities. Families are passive in planning and evaluation of the transition program.

Children – are passive in planning and evaluation of the transition program.

Within this hierarchical approach relationships are contingent on families and children operating within pre-set criteria that has been established by schools or early childhood settings; information is *told* by one group (schools or/and early childhood settings) and *listened to* and *acted on* by the other groups (families and children); questions asked are to seek clarification not challenge or change what exists. The outcomes of this are that people are disconnected and disenfranchised as the opportunities for the sharing of ideas; questions and concerns are limited potentially leaving families and children stressed and anxious.

An ecological approach to transition calls for a collaborative approach to planning, implementing and evaluation of transition policies, practices and programs. Astbury (2009) argues that an ecological approach provides specific outcomes for children, families and educators which all result in better relationships between people and learning environments. These outcomes are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: Outcomes from the use of an ecological approach

	Outcomes
Children	'Better initial adjustment to the school environment Liking school, positive attitudes towards school Less separation anxiety/stress Earlier identification of problems that will affect learning and development Improved relationships with educators' (Astbury, 2009, p.37).
Families	'Improved relationships with early childhood and school staff Better understanding of what is happening at school Increased engagement with the school and involvement in child's education Less separation anxiety and stress' (Astbury, 2009, p.37).
Educators	'Improved levels of inter-agency collaboration Improved trust, respect and understanding of each other's educational practices Greater awareness of transition and the importance of continuity of learning Improved individual planning for children and families Better understanding of family context' (Astbury, 2009, p.37).

This approach has informed and underpinned both the design and implementation of this project.

Section 2: The journey to create change

This section provides an overview of how sites were selected and the methodology used in the project.

Constructing Sites for an Ecological Approach

In 2010, DEECD distributed a call for expressions of interest to participate in this project to primary schools and early childhood settings across Victoria, Australia. This expression of interest asked early childhood settings and schools to be willing to partner with each other so that a *site* could be established. The model of sites supported an ecological approach to the project as it created an opportunity for schools and early childhood settings to establish or strengthen relationships for the facilitation of collaborative planning, implementation and evaluation of the three selected promising practices.

DEECD selected 15 sites based on the diverse demographic areas across Victoria – inner urban and regional. It is important to note that two of the 15 sites had only a primary school through the life of the project as no early childhood settings were willing to partner with the primary schools[4]. Two further sites took two months and required a high level of support from their mentors to begin to work together, with one of these sites needing ongoing extra mentor support throughout the project.

Methodology

Action research was the methodological approach chosen for this project. Action research as a methodology is both a way of researching and a philosophy. It underpins the research process to 'produce(s) practical knowledge that is useful to people in the everyday conduct of their lives' (Reason & Bradbury, 2006, p.2). Action research is participant driven and focused, with participants identifying problems they face in their daily lives and/or work and using the processes of research to provide opportunities to critically reflect on the issues they have identified and work to implement change to support more equitable outcomes for all.

Using this research method enabled the participants in the project to focus on how the promising practices were implemented within their specific settings and how these practices could be enhanced or changed to meet the needs of their children, families and community. The data relied upon throughout this report is based on observations and comments by the participants (teachers, families and children) in the project, and whilst their thoughts provide insight, they cannot be taken to have 'generalised' or 'broad sweeping' application to all children, families and educators. Rather each

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[4] DEECD and the schools tried prior to the commencement of the project and during the 12 month project to facilitate a partnership with an early childhood setting in the area but were unsuccessful

comment/observation should be considered both in its context and from the readers' point of view for relevance to their context.

Participants attended five Action Research Meetings (ARMs) and had mentor[5] support. The role of the mentor was to support communication between participants across the site, facilitate individual critical reflection and continue to motivate and support participant's ongoing actions. Mentoring occurred in the weeks between the ARMs. A combination of an on-site visit with phone calls was used in this project. The schedule is shown in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3: Schedule of project delivery
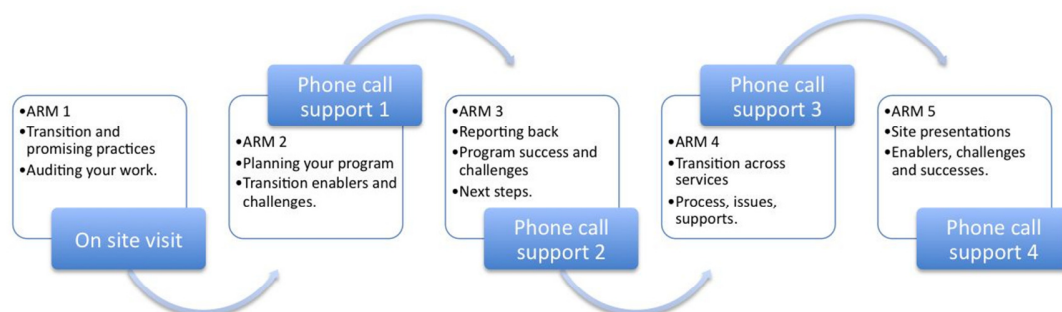
Qualitative data was collected from participants through online surveys, during the ARMs (this included outcomes indicators measures (OIM) worksheets completed by the participants at ARM 4 and a final ARM data sheet) and mentor contacts. There was however variation in data collected from participants and sites as not all members of each site were able to attend all ARMs, participate in all the mentoring sessions or complete the surveys due to varying reasons such as leave and events occurring at the settings and schools that conflicted with the project dates. Further, the quantum of data varies across sites, as the number of people in each of the sites was different.

Data was also collected from family focus groups and child interviews. Post-program, families and children from the prep classes from four of the schools, two regional and two metropolitan, were invited to comment on their experiences of the promising practices. Due to the scale of the project not all schools could participate in this. Children were invited to participate in one-to-one interviews. They were able to verbally express their views and also draw their ideas about the buddy program and reciprocal visits for educators. Children's responses are reported throughout the report. Children chose their own pseudonyms for the reporting of their ideas. Parents were invited to a

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[5] The Mentors had a background in transition to school research, policies and practices and experience in supporting educators to critically reflect on their practice to support change where needed.

focus group held at their school. Twelve parents in total, all female, participated. Parent responses are documented throughout the report. As may be expected, the women who attended these focus groups on a whole were those who were already active and involved in their respective school communities. They therefore do not necessarily provide a representative picture of the demographic of each school.

It should also be noted with regard to data citation, that where possible the individual is identified as the data source. Where this was not possible, due to data coming out of group conversations, the site/school/setting is cited.

Project Content and Processes

Five Action Research Meetings (ARM) took place with two cohorts of 15 participants in each. Three of the ARMs occurred in 2010 and two took place in 2011. The aim of the ARMs was to support and map the participant's engagement with their selected promising practice. In line with project aims 2 and 3, the ARMs were designed to deliver specific content to participants that addressed the examination of existing transition strategies and programs, of the promising practices and of areas of knowledge gap as identified in the CEIEC literature review. Each ARM provided two key elements to support critical engagement – time and space. This time and space created opportunities for participants to critically reflect, talk and listen to partners in their site, engage in content to stimulate new understandings about the promising practices and plan action for change together with their partners. They also afforded participants the chance to report on actions taken throughout the project and gain support, feedback and ideas from their peers.

The topic focus for each ARM is listed in Table 2.

Table 2: ARM topics

ARM	Topic
1	Selection of Promising Practice.
2	Building relationships.
3	Working with Indigenous families, children with disabilities, developmental delays or learning difficulties, disadvantaged backgrounds and CALD backgrounds.
4	Bringing the why into practice – exploring outcomes for children, families and educators.
5	Reporting back and how to sustain changes and continue the journey.

Action Research Meetings Overview

Action Research Meeting 1

ARM1 provided an overview of the project and introduced participants to the program team. 'Promising practices' around transitions and the action research process were discussed. Participants were supported to choose one of the three promising practices. Four sites elected to work on buddy programs, five on reciprocal visits for educators and six on family involvement (Appendix A outlines the action research questions explored around the three promising practices for each site). They were supported to unpack their understandings of the promising practice as a site in order to critically reflect on their current practices, develop their action research question and plan an action. Participants were assisted in reflecting on their current practices through specific questions:

- How does your promising practice currently work?

- Why did you develop this promising practice?

- What are some of the difficulties?

- What are some of the strengths?

In implementing the promising practice how do you consider the needs of:

- children from Indigenous communities

- children with disabilities, developmental delays or learning difficulties

- children from disadvantaged backgrounds

- children from linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds.

Action Research Meeting 2

ARM2 provided an opportunity for participants to reflect on what actions they had undertaken since the last session. The new stimulus knowledge introduced was on relationships and hierarchical and ecological transition models with information on the outcomes of these models for children, families and educators. Participants were supported to reflect on how they currently implemented their promising practice and which model the practice operated within and the implication for outcomes. Participants then explored ways to shift how they undertook the promising practice to sit within an ecological transition model.

Action Research Meeting 3

ARM3 began with a review of the activities of the project so far and gave participants an opportunity to reflect on the work they had done as part of the project. The session brought stimulus knowledge on Indigenous family expectations from early childhood settings and schools; children's views on transition to school; and children with a diverse abilities, disadvantaged backgrounds and CALD backgrounds. Four guest speakers shared their respective expertise with the group – Dr Sue Atkinson (Indigenous perspectives), Associate Professor Kay Margetts (children's voices), Ms Merlyne Cruz and Jacinta Weston (children with diverse abilities). Participants reflected on what the guest speakers had shared and what this information meant for planning the next step for their promising practice.

Action Research Meeting 4

ARM4 provided stimulus information on outcomes for children, families and educators when successful transition practices occur. Participants were asked to reflect on the outcomes that they identified as important to their site and how their promising practice could help to achieve these outcomes. The focus of this meeting was to support participants to identify what outcomes they wanted for children, families and educators and make direct links with these outcomes to the promising practice.

Action Research Meeting 5

ARM5 began with an opportunity for the schools to report back to their site and then the whole group on the effects of their promising practice on the children now they had started school. Participants were asked to reflect and plan with their site partners on how they can continue to develop their promising practice and how to document the *why* and *how* of this practice. Details of the sites engagement with their chosen promising practice will be examined in the following section.

Section 3: Promising Practices in action

This section will report on how each of the sites engaged with the promising practice they chose as their focus. Using the data collected throughout the project from children, families and educators, it will identify:

- pre-existing practices;

- actions and changes undertaken in the course of the project; and

- learnings and outcomes for children, families and educators.

It should be noted that the data sample size was small and the collection period relatively short in duration. The learnings from the project, while providing insight into the possibilities presented when educational settings are given the time and space to engage intensively with promising practices, are contingent on these factors and a more comprehensive, longitudinal study would be needed to validate the findings and broaden their application. That said, although these learnings arise out of a small scale project they have the capacity to inform theory and practice for positive transition to school across the state and within a broader national and international context.

As noted above, with regard to data citation, where possible the individual is identified as the data source. Where this was not possible, due to data coming out of group conversations, the site/school/setting is cited.

Buddy programs

Friendships and being with a friend has been found to be one of the most important factors for successful transition (Fisher, 2009). Peer connections are important for children's positive social adjustment and a smooth transition to school (Ladd & Price, 1987; Margetts, 2009). Buddy programs match children starting school with an older student who is intended to act as a friend as well as a source of information and guidance, particularly in the playground. A small number of studies have been conducted about buddy programs and these show that they can support smooth transitions to the first year of school for children (Dockett & Perry, 2001, 2005, 2008; La Paro, Kraft-Sayre & Pianta, 2003; Yeo & Clarke, 2005).

Buddy programs vary in implementation. These variations can include: the age of the older students, the time when buddies are matched and meet, the types of activities buddies undertake together and the degree to which the buddy is prepared for the support role. The general approach to buddy programs is that older students (from Grades 3-6) are paired with transitioning children in the year prior to their school entry, or in the first week of school.

Existing practices

Of the four sites that chose buddy programs as their promising practice, three were running buddy programs prior to their involvement in this research. An overview of the existing practices is provided in Table 3.

Table 3: Overview of buddy programs at four sites

Site	Wodonga Site	Meadow Glen Site	Park Orchards Site		Wurruk site
Site structure	One preschool and the primary school transition network (5 primary schools)	One preschool and one primary school	Two preschools and two primary schools[6]		One primary school
Age group of older buddy	Grades 3 & 4, Grade 5 or Grade 6.	Grade 5.	Grade 5. Matched in the year prior when they were in Grade 4.	Grade 6.	No buddy program.
Pre-existing activities and timing	One school had older students visiting the early childhood settings to read to preschool children and undertake other activities.	Prep class and Grade 5 class paired together and educators negotiate time and activities in classroom.	Grade 4 students visit preschool in term 3 & 4 for story reading sessions. Year 4 students meet prospective buddy and their parents in final transition session	Preps and Grade 6 students work together once a week all year. Grade 6 children play in Prep playground once a week.	None.

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[6] This was single site however within the site there were two schools. Each of the schools structured their buddy program differently and have therefore been separated out within this table for the purposes of clarity.

Site	Wodonga Site	Meadow Glen Site	Park Orchards Site		Wurruk site
			at the school.		
Activities introduced during projects	Buddy training program (buddy contract, buddy behaviour grid and goals developed). Earlier introduction of buddies to Prep – during transition program. Photos of buddies and letters sent to Preps over summer. Flyer about buddy program sent to parents. Social storybook about buddies sent to preschool.	Work with current Preps and their buddies to make a book about school for preschool children. Preschool educator asked children about their knowledge of school.	Preschool children had discussions, drawings compiled into a book, and dramatic play about school. School surveyed parents. Grade 4s discussed and wrote about the roles and responsibilities of being a buddy.	Preschool children consulted about their knowledge of school. School produced a buddies' big book and sent it out to local preschools.	No buddy program.

As shown in Table 3, some sites consisted of more than one early childhood setting and/or more than one school. Consequently there were buddy programs running in a number of formats within a single site.

Existing practices at schools at all three sites included matching children starting school with older students. However, the age group of the older students differed from school to school from Grade 3 to Grade 6 students. Some schools noted specific reasons for making these choices, for example one school (*Park Orchards PS*) chose Grade 4 and 5 children because having Grade 6 children in small spaces with Preps was problematic in terms of the size of the spaces available.

Timing of when buddies were matched also differed from school to school. At some sites this began when the new children arrived at school for the first time, while in others the buddies were matched during transition to school activities in the year prior to commencement. Matching was the responsibility of school educators and leadership teams[7]. Two schools focusing on buddy programs had older students visiting the preschool periodically and engaging in activities with children throughout the year prior to school, and they were later matched as buddies (see Table 3).

Activities and responsibilities with regard to the buddy programs undertaken from the beginning of the new school year varied. At some schools older students ate and played with their Prep buddies in the yard every day for the first weeks of the year. At other schools, the role of buddies was less intensive, but was longer in duration, for example meeting one day a week in the same area of the playground throughout the year, or occasional classroom activities bringing the older and younger students together.

The fourth site that focused on buddy programs did not have an existing buddy program, and in fact had few consistent transition practices in place at all. This site consisted of a single school that struggled throughout the project to find an early childhood setting to be a site partner. This site did not establish a buddy program during the project, but worked hard within the school and the local community to lay the groundwork to start a transition program, including a buddy program, in the future.

Actions and changes

There were processes and strategies that all participants were supported to use as part of the project's action research method. These included personal and group reflection and the seeking of the perspectives of other stakeholders. The following outlines the range of actions and changes, and thereby improvements, that resulted from the use of these strategies and processes.

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[7] Leadership teams in schools consist of principals, assistant principals, and lead teachers. In this context they may also include transition coordinators.

Reflecting on existing buddy programs

As a means of improving the buddy programs participants began by reflecting on their current programs. Participants reflected by asking themselves:

- Why do we have a buddy program?

- What do we want a buddy program to achieve?

- Is this being achieved by existing practices?

They also reflected upon what the benefits of their existing practices were and whether there were any tensions, challenges, or gaps in their understandings, knowledge and implementation.

Sites discovered that their buddy programs were often inherited from previous transition committees and were run as they always had been, rather than in a purposeful manner with a view to their rationale and relationship to facilitating positive transitions to school for all children. This reflective process enabled participants to appreciate the value of buddy programs and consider more deeply what was required to address current needs and promote better outcomes as is shown in Vignette 1.

Vignette 1: Reflecting on existing buddy programs and the need for questions

> At the beginning of the project in September 2010, the Wodonga site was in the process of framing a question around the need to explore the purpose, rationale and aims of their buddy program and to create a common philosophy and language. They stated:
>
> We need to identify what we all do now. We need to have a common understanding across the schools. What is the rationale/aim/justification for the buddies program?
>
> There was a sense that there were issues and tensions about the way that the buddy programs were operating. Some participants were challenged by aspects of it or had areas they wanted to improve. For example through the process of reflection they highlighted such things as:
>
> Buddies don't turn up because they don't like each other or preps.
>
> How do we train buddies? It should be positive and empower the prep teacher.
>
> Preschool children need to know why they have a buddy.
>
> How to target buddies support – where is it actually needed?
>
> If it is about outcomes it should be about the needs of the child. Sometimes we try to please the parents.
>
> *(Wodonga, mentoring data)*
>
> From that point they went on to plan and implement a range of practices that addressed these concerns including the reformulation of the buddy training process and the creation of supporting materials (see Table 3: Overview of buddy programs at three sites).

Buddy training

On reflection, two sites (*Wodonga and Park Orchards*) felt that the issues and tensions that were occurring in the existing buddy programs may have been caused by a lack of understanding, among the older children, of what were the responsibilities attached to the role of buddy. In response, the sites decided to better prepare the older students. Implementing these changes ranged from preparation through classroom activities to more ongoing processes and training.

For example at the Wodonga site where being a buddy was optional the following processes were undertaken.

Vignette 2: Training buddies

Grade 3 and 4 students were invited to apply for a role as a buddy. This consisted of completing an application form about their motivations and the experience and qualities they would bring to the role, as well as an endorsement from a parent or other adult. After selection, the prospective buddies attended four training sessions with the transition coordinator to learn about the role. Tools used in the training included a Buddy's Behaviour Grid and a Buddy Contract developed by the school.

On successful completion of the training, the transition coordinator allocated some children up to two preps as buddies. Other children were engaged as 'back-up buddies' to support preps if their buddy was away. The site found that training buddies in this way created common expectations of the role of buddies across all parties including teachers and families. In addition the new buddies reportedly enjoyed participating in the training program.

(Wodonga)

Through the creation of a training program for prospective buddies the site had engaged in considering what the responsibilities of a buddy within their program were and recognised the need to inform and train older students in order to create a relevant and meaningful program. In this way, they as educators were involved in critically reflecting on what in a buddy program supported positives transitions. Reflection also led to recognition of the need for materials to be used to inform preschool children about school.

Buddy books

Books about buddies and school made by school students to share with preschool children were a means of engaging buddies and Prep children in joint activity, sharing information between schools and early childhood settings, and providing an opportunity for preschool children to begin understanding and familiarising themselves with school. This effectively acted as the beginning of the transition process. Three sites (*Park Orchards, Meadow Glen and Wodonga*) introduced buddy books. After hearing the voices of the pre-school children in the Meadow Glen site about what they wanted to know about starting school, it was realised the book produced by the school children did not address all the things that the preschoolers wanted to know about school. As a result of this, they planned to invite the preschool children to the school to make their own book in future years, to address this mismatch in the information preschool children want and what they receive.

Observations

Sites that focused on buddy programs reported a number of outcomes as a result of their involvement in the project, some that were directly related to the improvement to the buddy program itself, as well as the effects of exploring transition more broadly (see Section 4 for more information). The outcomes of their focus on buddy programs mentioned below were self-reported by educators and principals involved in the project

from their experience and observations, and by a small number of children and parents involved in interviews at the project's conclusion. There were significant positive outcomes in the eyes of those involved that align with findings in the limited literature available around buddy programs (see Dockett & Perry, 2001, 2005, 2008; La Paro, Kraft-Sayre & Pianta, 2003; Yeo & Clarke, 2005). Additionally many of these outcomes and their indicators were similar to those reported in the project *Outcomes and Indicators of a Positive Start to School* (Nolan, et al., 2009) that used formal measurement instruments.

Observations for children

The key observations for children arising out of sites' focus on buddy programs included the:

- Successful establishment of friendships and connections with buddies and other children earlier than in previous years. This was a result, in part, of the introduction of buddy contact in year prior to commencement.

- Connection with buddies and the materials they created and shared generated a sense of safety, greater confidence and independence for children once at school, due to their familiarity with the school environment and understandings of the expectations of school.

- Older students having a clearer understanding of their role as a buddy and therefore an enhancement of their ability to support their prep buddies through transition.

Other observations reported by these sites that are not directly attributable to buddy programs are explored in Section 4 of the report.

Connectedness with buddies and making friends

In relation to VEYLDF (2009) Learning Outcome 1, prep children's sense of connectedness is fostered when they 'develop a sense of belonging to the school community' (p.21). Having a buddy, and especially meeting that buddy as part of the transition program in the year prior to school, was seen in this research as beneficial for children's sense of belonging and connectedness with the school. At one site educators said the children, 'benefitted from having made connections with the older children who had visited them in kindergarten' (*Park Orchards*) although she was not specific about the nature of these benefits.

She'd met her buddy and over the vacation, we got a postcard, which was just like - she was thought that was just amazing. They're just such tiny little things, but that just made it so much more real for her *(Wodonga, parent focus group).*

These educators' responses were supported by comments from families who felt that the processes buddies were involved in before the prep child

started school were helpful in preparing their child for school.

Families talked about the importance for their children of receiving correspondence from their buddy over the summer, which happened at several sites, as a way of invoking positive feelings in their child about starting school.

Parents described the role of buddies in the orientation and transition days and noted how this was helpful. Familiarity again featured as an important part of being able to transition to school positively. One parent, who was also a kindergarten educator, talked about the worth of buddies visiting the kindergarten during the year and identifying with 'that big person in a school uniform' (*Parent*).

> They had the buddy, the older kids, the kids that would be their buddies and the second time they came back [for transition day] the… buddies were as good as anything at settling down and getting them where they needed to be (***Yarrawonga, parent focus group***).

According to the VEYLDF, building friendships supports children's sense of identity and their ability to interact with others with care, empathy and respect, and contributes to their social, emotional and spiritual wellbeing. The role of buddies as initial friends was also an important one for some children.

Stephanie[8] drew this picture of herself and her buddy and when asked the thing she liked best when she first started school she said, 'Play with my buddy!' (*Child interview, Wodonga*).

One prep teacher commented that as a result of their positive transition, prep children 'established friendships quickly, playing together, making plans and asking to play, and finding playmates independently in the yard at lunchtimes' (*OIM, Wodonga*).

There was also general feeling among children and parents that buddy programs were a transitional tool and had a use-by-date. This may be attributed to schools reflecting upon and making decisions about the role that buddies should play and then communicating this to others. The viewpoint of some parents was that preps no longer needed buddies once they were settled, and that the preps were

> But then it was after the first few weeks and all of a sudden she didn't play with her as much. But I think she just felt comfortable that she didn't need to (***Parent focus group, Wodonga***).

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[8] All the names of children in this report are pseudonyms not children's real names. As part of our ethical engagement with children, children were invited to choose their own pseudonym, which they have done.

quick to outgrow their buddies.

For the older children who clearly understood their role as buddies, having the preps move on from them was seen as having successfully fulfilled their role.

> If you want to be a buddy you have to make sure they have to feel safe and happy and that they don't want to be with you, because the whole process of being a buddy is sometimes making sure that they don't need you at school anymore (*Frankenstein – Grade 3 Buddy, Child interview, Wodonga*).

When asked whether they still play with their buddies prep children said at the time of the interviews, in late Term 3 of 2011, that they were no longer allowed or encouraged to play with their buddy, for example because they were separated into different areas of the school and playground. As previously mentioned, some realised that this was a marker of having transitioned to school successfully.

> I don't play with her anymore… Because we're, I'm used to school now (*Hannah*, *Child interview, Yarrawonga*).
>
> No. Because we can't have them for long, only when we're just started school…Because I think you can be by yourself with just your friends, I think (*Milly, Child interview, Yarrawonga*).
>
> No, because we are not allowed… Because they're in Grade 6… 'cause were not allowed in their area. (*Sweetie Pie, Child interview, Yarrawonga*).

Informed supportive buddies

One site reported that the buddies had a greater understanding of the role and the expectations of them due to their participation in the buddy training program. This assisted in resolving the tensions about non-attendance and lack of responsibility that had been evident in previous years. The perspectives of the students and the site align with research by Dockett and Perry (2005) about the positive outcomes of buddy training programs. That study showed that the Year 5 buddies found the training process 'positive and insightful' (p.27) and that they felt 'special' (p.27) as a result of the training. This is highlighted in Vignette 3.

Vignette 3: Perspective of a 'senior' buddy

Three Grade 3 students, at the Wodonga site, who took part in the buddy-training program, talked at length about their experiences of being a buddy. These Grade 3 girls were positive and insightful as they spoke about their reasons for becoming buddies and demonstrated a clear understanding of their role as a buddy:

Well I wanted to help kids get used to school and I wanted people to feel welcome and not like and no not like our school (*Einstein*).

I wanted to be a buddy because I wanted to help kids learn and get used to school and also I would like to have let them, I'd like to help them make new friends instead of just being attached to me instead of being with friends (*Frankenstein*).

They talked about the way their role as a buddy shifted as time went on and how they would like to continue to support preps even at this later stage of the year, for example Sophie talked about the different kinds of things that she could offer her buddy, in the latter half of the year:

And sometimes I like when I'm not with them and I want to play with my friends and they come and find me in the yard and I ask them "What's the matter?" and they say well there is a group of people and they're not letting me play and I'm like "I'm really sorry I can't play with you but, since I'm older than them, I might be able to stand up for you and help you out."(*Sophie*).

This demonstrates the caring relationship that the older students felt they had built, and that, with training, buddies are more than capable of taking responsibility for, and making sophisticated decisions about how to support their younger peers. In this way they were better able to support transitioning children to develop a sense of confidence in navigating their new learning space. This in turn fostered feelings of familiarity and safety and enabled the development of independence.

Safe, confident, independent preps

Educators at three schools reported that as a result of the transition program and the variety of activities related to their respective buddy programs, the prep children who transitioned to school in 2010-11 showed a greater sense of safety, confidence and independence in the school environment and at an earlier stage than previous groups of preps.

The buddy program is working and children are happy to play outside and move around the playground because they know they have a support system outside. Children haven't needed teachers as often in the playground (*OIM, Meadow Glen*).

Educators attributed this to the information that preps had received about school, and their familiarity with school students and the school space. Educators repeatedly mentioned behaviours that indicated independence from adults and self-confidence, for example the way they

moved around the school playground and built relationships with other students and educators.

Prep children, when asked what kind of help their buddy provided during transition sessions and in the new school year, could describe the means by which their buddy had assisted them to become familiar with the school and feel safe in the school environment, particularly in the playground.

> Um, she helped me to stay in the same [transition] group where I had to stay because I didn't really know where the group was so I stayed with her (*Dakoda, Child interview, Wodonga*).
>
> Um she showed me around the um playground and she helped me find some friends (*Lisa, Child interview, Wodonga*).

Draw the things that were tricky about coming to school when you first started
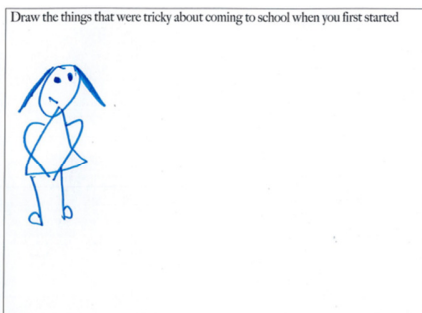
The drawing by Milly demonstrates the importance for her of having someone to help her find her way around the new school environment. When asked what she had drawn that was tricky about starting school Milly said: 'Me, I don't know where to go, where the toilets are' (*Milly*).

Similarly, children in Yeo's and Clarke's (2005) study of buddy programs in Singapore highlighted how helpful having a buddy was in helping them find things, such as the toilets, and how important it had been for their settling in to school.

Parents also appreciated knowing that their prep child had an older student to undertake the role of familiarising them with the school. This was important particularly as parents spoke of worrying about their children being relatively unsupervised in the busy playground when they first start school.

> The buddies, I can't speak highly enough of the buddies, I just think the buddies make all the difference for the little kids. I just think if they are feeling a little bit anxious and they've got that one particular big kid who will come and have morning tea with them and take them out to the playground and make sure they've been to the toilet before the bell goes (*Parent focus group, Wodonga).*
>
> But it's so nice to know that if they're in the playground - because for me as a mum it's the playground that I find scary for the little ones. It's a long lunchtime if they're not having a good time (*Parent focus group, Wodonga*).

Observations for educators and families

Children, educators and families at the sites that focused on buddy programs also spoke about outcomes for educators and families. Whilst these were not directly attributable to buddy programs, the success of the buddy program was felt to contribute to the positive outcomes. Observations that educators noted and reported included:

- Children settled more quickly into classroom routines.

- Development in relationships between school teachers and early childhood educators.

The outcomes for families that were reported by educators included:

- Greater understanding of the role of buddy programs and transition processes.

- Greater sense of calmness for families when their child started school.

- Increased awareness of the interconnectedness between early childhood settings and school in supporting children to transition to school.

There were also a number of other learnings and observations around transition that went beyond those specifically related to the promising practice of buddy programs. These are explored in Section 4.

Reciprocal Visits for Educators

Reciprocal visits for educators involved educators from early childhood settings and primary schools visiting each other's environments both pre- and post-transition to build relationships and support transition processes for the child, family and educators. Research suggests that this practice supports transition processes by enabling dialogue and transfer of information between educators (Brostrom, 2002; Cassidy, 2005; Rous, Meyer & Stricklin, 2007). A key purpose of sharing information is to provide continuity for children and families, including the continuation of successful strategies for individual children and groups. Nolan, et al. (2009) describe the provision of continuity of learning for children as leading to a positive start to school and can be supported by schools and early childhood educators having a 'respectful relationship with each other where knowledge about the children and practice is shared' (p.14). Reciprocal visits for educators can create an opportunity to share knowledge about children and practice in a contextual way. However, research also suggests that the efficacy and sustainability of reciprocal visits for educators requires structural support for educators to overcome barriers to the visits, particularly lack of time (Cassidy, 2005).

Existing practices

Five sites chose reciprocal visits for educators as their promising practice; none had reciprocal visits in place for educators at the outset of the project. Three sites had relationships between settings established which included a range of transition practices including one-way visits, reciprocal visits for children, meetings, joint information sessions for parents and the hand-over of information such as Transition Statements.

One site established a relationship despite the fact that the children from the preschool were not feeding into the school. At the fifth site, the school was unable to find an early childhood setting to partner them, despite their continued efforts.

The existing practices and actions implemented over the course of the project are summarised in Table 4.

Table 4: Overview of reciprocal visits at five sites

Site	Knoxfield site	Clayton site	Cranbourne site	Yarrawonga site	Kensington site
Site structure	One preschool and one primary school (however no children feeding from this preschool to the school)	One early childhood setting (LDC) and one primary school	One primary school	One primary campus and one early childhood setting (preschool and LDC)	One early childhood setting (LDC) and one primary school
Pre-existing practices related to reciprocal visits	No reciprocal visits for educators. One-way visits to the school by a transition group.	No reciprocal visits for educators. Liaison between settings. Offers of shared professional development. Reciprocal visits for children. Some Transition Statements. Parent information nights.	No reciprocal visits for educators. Transition program available at the school and advertised at the local preschools.	No reciprocal visits for educators. Early year's group consisting of school leadership and early year's educators, and early childhood educators met once per term to talk about administrative and organisational issues related to transition. Formal transition timetable. Weekly visits to preschool by vice-principal including testing for children 'at risk'.	No reciprocal visits for educators. Transition program including reciprocal visits for children, buddy program, transition days, etc.
Activities introduced during	Discussed and planned possibilities for educators and students to make	Established regular visits between educators.	Tried to establish relationships with local early childhood settings with limited	Organised release time for prep educators to visit	Established continual communications between prep and preschool educators

Site	Knoxfield site	Clayton site	Cranbourne site	Yarrawonga site	Kensington site
project.	reciprocal visits as part of transition program for the following year (2011-2012) with a focus on inclusion. Pre-school group visited the school with their educator. Provision of a transition program for children at the school outside of preschool session times.	Meeting children in both settings. 'Hand over' of Transition Statements. Newly designed Buddy Program. Resource sharing.	success. Began a relationship outside of the scope of the project with one preschool. Gained support for the idea of reciprocal visits within the school community and with individuals in an early childhood setting. Re-evaluated what the school was offering early childhood settings as an incentive to begin a relationship. Planned for reciprocal visits in the 2011-2012-transition period.	preschool. Created expectations that prep and preschool educators organise meetings rather than relying on management or leadership. Communicating with and informing relevant individuals, committees and settings about the reciprocal visits. Creating a one-page document about reciprocal visits. Promoting and celebrating the program in the school and through local media to sustain growth of program.	through meetings, visits, phone and internet contact. Prep and preschool educators visited each other's classrooms to view the program and to meet prospective students or catch up with children who had transitioned to school. Planning to extend transition processes and discussion with relevant stakeholders about this. Changes to processes such as hand-over of Transition Statements and forming class groups.

Actions and changes

The sites all reported a range of changes and actions as a result of their involvement in the project which have been broadly categorised under the headings of:

- seeking and building relationships;

- the process of establishing reciprocal visits; and

- establishing regular contact and conversations.

Seeking and building relationships

As none of the five sites had reciprocal visits for educators in place prior to the project, they first had to create a relationship in which these could be conducted. At three sites this meant reflecting and expanding on a transition relationship that was already established. For the site with no children transitioning between settings, they began to build a relationship by exploring what each could gain from reciprocal visits.

The school at the Cranbourne site used the concept of reciprocal visits as means to approach early childhood settings and create a relationship, as is shown below:

Vignette 4: Developing relationships

Two teachers at the Cranbourne site spent the duration of the project trying to find an early childhood setting that would be willing to partner with them. Nearing the end of the project they had one kindergarten teacher agree to begin a transition relationship with the school, but she stated she did not want to be part of the research project. After a frustrating time, this was a major achievement. The difficult process was cause in itself for reflection. The school teachers explained:

'The difficulty in developing a relationship with a kindergarten helped us to rethink what we can offer to the kindergarten as a whole rather than only educators visiting one another.'

They recognised that building and maintaining relationships would require an ongoing effort:

'We began this project with no relationship; no site partner and now we have developed a relationship by offering activities that the kinder sees value in, and by linking on a personal and professional level with the kinder. We will continue this relationship by following through with our suggestions of activities for the kinder and school and by drawing on resources to validate the importance of the relationship. To do this we will need a willingness by all parties to continue developing the relationship an allowing time to develop this.'

(Teachers, Cranbourne, ARM 5, reflection sheet)

Establishing reciprocal visits

Visits were established at four sites. The process for this varied depending on the relationships and needs within each site. Planning was required in terms of timelines, agreeing on the purpose of the visits and communicating with other stakeholders. It was important for educators that the visits were purposeful and valuable. Educators therefore visited one another's settings with a range of purposes in mind, including:

- For educators to view one another's programs and have discussions which supported transition by promoting school readiness skills in preschool children and supporting the continuity of learning across settings.

- For prep teachers to meet prospective students and understand their needs, leading to grouping and planning for children more effectively when they entered school.

- For early childhood educators to visit and see the progress of past students.

- To hand-over Transition Statements and have an opportunity to discuss these and other factors that may influence the transition for individual children.

- To share resources.

Despite recognition on the part of those educators involved in the project of the value of establishing reciprocal visits, there were logistical and structural impediments (for example, finding mutually agreeable times to meet given the educator's varied and busy schedules). Advocating for reciprocal visits and creating structured workplace changes to support reciprocal visits, including the allocation of time and funding, was considered necessary to making visits sustainable. At one site the support of a member of the administration in releasing prep teachers enabled visits to the pre-school. This is shown below:

Vignette 5: Supporting reciprocal visits for educators

The Yarrawonga site demonstrated the possibilities that could be created by offering time-release to the prep teachers to conduct their visits to the early childhood setting. The strong backing and involvement of the vice-principal, who invested time and energy communicating the purpose and benefits of reciprocal visits to a wide range of stakeholders in the community, was instrumental in making it possible for teachers to be released from the classroom. He was campaigning for a commitment from the principal to continue to provide the time release for reciprocal visits in the future. Prep teachers at the school also recognised that early childhood educators needed similar support to sustain their input in the process:

'Kindergarten teachers find it hard to get release time as there are not many relief teachers available and funding is an issue.' (**Yarrawonga**, *Final workshop reflection*)

Establishing regular contact and conversations

In addition to physical visits, the relationships and values built through a focus on reciprocal visits continued through phone and email conversations and joint meetings. Sites found that it was easier to fit a phone call or email into their schedule and this complemented the information that was transferred during physical visits.

Observations

Educators involved in the project reported that undertaking reciprocal visits for educators had positive outcomes for themselves, children and their families. Children and families also spoke about educator visits across both settings in a positive way. These are detailed below.

Observations for educators

Of the three promising practices in this project, prep teachers reported reciprocal visits for educators had the most explicit effect on their' thinking and practices. The learnings described by educators from a focus on the promising practice reciprocal visits for educators included:

- The development of shared understandings between educators in different settings.

- Better relationships between educators in different settings and more respect for each other's work.

Change to educational programs as a result of experiencing each other's programs, including:

- Introduction of more play-based learning in prep classrooms early in the school year.

- Incorporation of different skill development activities to promote school success in preschool classrooms.

- Effective sharing of information about children and families between settings.

- Familiarity with children created better class groupings in prep and the ability to tailor prep programs to children's individual needs from the first days of school.

- Improved understandings, relationships and respect.

A key outcome of reciprocal visits was a new understanding and respect between early childhood and school educators about the work that they each do. After a history of separation of the early childhood and school sectors there was a lack of awareness about practices in each setting. Although recently the terminology used across early childhood settings and schools has become more common, many meanings are not necessarily shared. These learnings are illustrated in Vignette 6.

Vignette 6: Bridging the divide between settings

The Clayton site felt that improved and shared understandings were the most significant outcomes of reciprocal visits for educators. The following quotes demonstrate the power of reciprocal visits for educators to learn from one another and bridge the gap:

'It bridged the gap between kindergarten and school. It has had a big impact on how I now view kindergarten teachers. I believe all schools and kindergarten programs should have the same opportunity to engage in the project.' (***Prep teacher***)

'We identified that prep teachers and kindergarten teachers may use the same words, but these words have different contextual meanings. We all saw the opportunity for learning more from each other. The other's meaning of *settled, ready, curriculum, reading/pre-reading skills, play.'* (***Mentor data, Clayton site***)

Changes to programs

'We set up for play and parents stayed with children (during the first week of school).' (***Kensington PS***)

The learnings and new understandings of programs gained from reciprocal visits led to direct changes to classroom programs in both primary schools and early childhood settings. At one site, the prep program was altered at the beginning of the year to include more play-based learning and therefore to create continuity for children through the transition period. At another site, the discussions that resulted from a preschool educator's visit to the prep classroom led her to modify her program to include some skill-building that the prep teachers felt assisted children to start school successfully. The kindergarten educator reported:

"I spoke to prep teachers regarding aspects of learning that I could incorporate into the kindergarten program to enhance children's abilities to fully immerse themselves into school from day one. As a result I have incorporated some new learning activities into my program to develop the skills and confidence that children need when they enter into the school environment". (***Final workshop reflection, Yarrawonga***)

Information, familiarity and tailored programs

Reciprocal visits provided opportunities for the transfer of information about children and their families from early childhood to prep teachers. This involved formal and informal conversations and the physical 'hand-over' of Transition Statements with opportunities to discuss content. This transfer of information was done with consent of families.

Reciprocal visits also allowed prep teachers to meet and observe children in a setting where they were comfortable and to create familiarity between children and educators. As a result, prep teachers felt more informed about the children that were entering school. At three sites this type of information was utilised practically by the prep teachers who were taking responsibility for forming class groups. Better balanced groups in terms of language, gender and behaviour provided a smoother start for everyone.

Knowing about children's backgrounds, needs, interests and abilities enabled prep teachers to tailor their programs to suit children from the first days of the year. A firm understanding of the preschool program enabled educators to provide continuity of learning. Information about individual children's specific needs allowed those to be accommodated more successfully.

> 'In relation to children with diverse abilities, disadvantaged backgrounds and CALD backgrounds the project supported us to get to know these kids earlier, prompted conversations between prep and kindergarten teachers and enabled teachers to accommodate these students from day one.' (*Final workshop reflection, Yarrawonga*)

Observations for families

Reciprocal visits had significant effects for families transitioning to schools, including:

- Increased opportunities for communication due to early childhood educators being able to provide earlier and more comprehensive information to parents about the prep year and facilitate communication between parents and prep teachers.

- Increased confidence in the school because of familiarity with educators.

- Confidence that the prep teacher was aware of their child's early childhood experiences.

- Greater satisfaction with the school as a result of better understandings of the expectations of the school on entry.

The visibility of primary school teachers in the early childhood setting had direct effects on family confidence. Educators and parents reported that the transfer of information about children from the early childhood setting to school also contributed to conversations and relationships between families and school teachers being established more easily at the beginning of the year. These observations from educators and families are illustrative of these observations:

'When they began school they had more confidence in the school and teacher's knowledge of their child and his/her kindergarten history – they benefited from knowing that the school and kindergarten were sharing information.' (*Kensington, final workshop data*)

I know that [transition coordinator] actually visited day care and talked to the girls there. It's good to know that they actually went out to day care so [my daughter] knew a face and also that [transition coordinator] and whoever goes out got to speak to the day care teachers and have a chat to them and see her in that environment where she was. That, to me, I thought would be a good thing. It's nice to know that they actually make that effort.' (*Parent focus group, Wodonga*)

In addition, the knowledge and information that educators were able to share with one another was passed on to families, assisting them to better understand the school. One school in particular attributed the greater satisfaction of transitioning families in 2011 to the access to information that reciprocal visits for educators had provided.

Families had more confidence in the school as a result of knowing they work in a better relationship with the day care setting. (*Final workshop data, Clayton*)

More trusting relationships were built as parents knew what to expect, and so less questions were asked, less complaints made and more positive feedback about the school was given. (*OIM, Clayton*)

Observations for children

Educators, families and children reported on their experiences of reciprocal visits for educators and the following observations for children:

- Experiencing more comfort because of familiarity with educators before their entry to school.

- More positive first experiences in the school classroom due to their needs and interests were being accommodated by tailored programs and continuity.

- Pride and enjoyment in demonstrating their growth and progress as a prep student to their early childhood educator.

A key aspect of reciprocal visits for educators was to build or maintain relationships with children over longer time frames. Educators benefited from these relationships, as can be seen in the sections above, and they felt that children benefited from them also. This was evident both in the wellbeing that children gained from meeting future teachers whilst in the early childhood setting, and from the changes that were made to classroom programs as a result of reciprocal visits. It was reported that:

The outcomes for children were that they knew their teacher's face before they arrived and they were therefore more relaxed. They benefited from their individual needs being catered for more effectively and the teachers ability to plan in a way that accommodated their learning styles earlier than in the past. Teachers had less anxiety in the classroom as they were more able to accommodate student needs and better plan lessons and units for individuals, additionally children were more on task and ready to learn. (*Final workshop reflection, Yarrawonga*)

They had this investigation thing, which allowed the kids to come in the morning, and …they got to choose where they were going to play… So it wasn't as such a big change. Like what we were saying, in preschool it was more play... (*Parent focus group, Wodonga*)

Children and families spoke about the positive experience of having early childhood educators visit the school classroom in the new year:

[Preschool teacher] did a follow up and went into the classroom. [My daughter] was very, very excited by that. That made her day, actually. So I thought that was good. (*Parent focus group, Malvern*)

But some kinder teachers that I had come to this school…They just helped and then they went back to the kinder. It was good. I think we took a photo I can't remember if we did. (*Hannah*, *Child interview, Yarrawonga*)

Well in here, it was a long, long time ago one of my kinder teachers came here but at first it didn't look like the kinder teacher… She just looked at everyone's work. And she also went to some other classes. (*Abi, Child interview, Malvern*)

As with buddy programs, there were broader learnings that came out of sites' focus on reciprocal visits for educators. These are examined in Section 4.

Family involvement

Family involvement strategies are the provision of rich transition experiences for families, which involve them in setting and school programs and activities specific to local community needs within a culturally inclusive and welcoming environment. In an Australian study, Dockett and Perry (2001) reported that parents viewed opportunities in which they were involved in transition programs as being more effective in comparison to passive orientation activities where they were given information. Family involvement opportunities need to be broad ranging and take community and individual family contexts into account.

Existing practices

Six sites chose family involvement as their promising practice for this project. All sites had existing family involvement practices in place, and many had a suite of practices that related to families. Rationale for choosing to focus on family involvement to improve the practices in place included:

- To increase parental understanding of the school and the transition process.

- To assist in the development of positive relationships with the school for Indigenous families.

- To address the lack of actual engagement by families in the transition activities offered to them.

- To increase the involvement of CALD families in transition programs.

- To increase the ability of families to gain information and engage with the school for their child with additional needs.

- To address ongoing anxiety about transition among families in the community.

The existing practices and actions implemented over the course of the project are summarised in Table 5.

Table 5: Family involvement

Site	Malvern site	Yappera site	Sunbury site	Carlton site	Port Phillip site	Geelong site
Site structure	One pre-school setting and one primary school	One support service and one primary school	One pre-school setting and one primary school	Central Carlton Children's Centre and Carlton Primary	One pre-school setting and one specialist primary school	One regional network and one pre-school setting and one primary school
Pre-existing practices to support family involvement	Limited visits by families to each setting. Advertising school open days at kindergarten. Discussions with parents and children at kindergarten. Parent information sessions to share transition information. 'Meet my teacher'	Pre-existing family involvement strategies in place but not specified in the data.	Open door policy. Acknowledgement of parents as the first and most important teachers of children. Parent involvement in the classroom and in committees. Kindergarten newsletters with transition information.	School readiness information session. Hand-outs for kindergarten parents with a list of suggestions about what to ask the school to help them choose a school. Family interviews to discuss each child's readiness for school.	Specialist School social worker talking to Early Education Parents in a group, followed by individual interviews to discuss schooling options. A weekly dance session at the school for preschool children. Morning tea for newly enrolled families during	Parent information nights (combined schools and kindergartens). Kindergartens encouraged parents to visit schools in the area.

Site	Malvern site	Yappera site	Sunbury site	Carlton site	Port Phillip site	Geelong site
	morning.				Term 4.	
Actions taken during the project	Letter to kindergarten parents regarding project, kinder-school partnerships and plans. Transition information in the school newsletter.	Consultation with Indigenous staff to gain ideas about strengthening family involvement. Invitations sent to surrounding schools to attend a meet and greet evening at the Children's Centre.	Surveyed school and kindergarten parents and as a result: Delayed the start of school for preps for one week. Conducted home visits to meet children and families and do prep assessments. Provided families with email addresses for teachers. Sent a welcome letter to parents. Held information sessions about reading to children at home and sent children	Invited school principal to speak at the kindergarten parent information evening. Excursions for children and parents from the kindergarten to the school to participate in activities such as gardening, library and games.	Organising an open day at the school for prospective families. Weekly visit to the dance room at the school by kindergarten group (not children that will necessarily attend the school).	Increased network meetings with a focus on family involvement. Surveyed parents from kindergartens and schools to find out their concerns.

Site	Malvern site	Yappera site	Sunbury site	Carlton site	Port Phillip site	Geelong site
			home with a pack of books. Gave parents a 'parent care pack' on the first day of school.			

Actions and changes

The sites reported a range of changes and actions as a result of their focus on the promising practice, family involvement. These included:

- Increasing the role of the early childhood setting in the transition process for families.
- Providing information to families about the transition process and the school.
- Providing families and children with more access to the school before transition.
- Consulting with families about transition.
- Changing the structure of the prep transition to build relationships with families.

Increasing the role of the early childhood setting in the transition process for families

Sites discovered that whilst families were involved and engaged in early childhood programs, family involvement activities in relation to transition were largely undertaken by the schools. Early childhood settings had passive roles in communicating and advertising school transition activities, but this was the extent of their partnership in this process. A key feature of the actions undertaken to increase family involvement was to partner with early childhood educators to engage with families earlier.

> 'Our relationships with our site partners were strengthened even more. Both parties are more on the same page and have moved from a marketing approach to a transition approach. We will continue these relationships with more meetings between sites and more regular emails. We hope to continue to strengthen the relationships between schools, early childhood setting and families.' (***Final workshop data, Geelong***)

Providing information to families about the transition process and the school

Sites chose to improve or increase the way that they shared information with families about the transition process and the school. This was achieved through information sessions, meetings and events and through the newsletters from both early childhood and school settings. The delivery of information was changed to meet the needs of the community and the expertise of the educators from both settings was shared.

> 'From these actions we learnt that parents respond positively to having an opportunity to ask questions about the school directly to the principal. The small informal parent night worked better than the large group presentations; the small group encouraged discussion and was especially facilitative for CALD families.' (***Final workshop data, Carlton***)

Providing families and children with more access to the school before transition

In addition to providing information, early childhood settings and schools partnered to create opportunities for children and families to access the school earlier and more regularly. This involved the provision of activities that preschool groups and families could attend on excursions to help familiarise themselves with the school. These included dance class, gardening, library story time and games. The Port Phillip site was offering dance classes to the kindergarten children and the wider community and said that they were eager to extend this.

> 'We want to explore how families are introduced to [the school] and how they are made to feel welcome, understood and connected.' (**Final workshop data, Port Phillip**)

Consulting with families about transition

Two sites surveyed families at both the early childhood setting and the school to better understand parental concerns and gain ideas to improve their practices. This led to changing transition activities they provided for children and families, the methods in which they communicated with families and the nature of information they provided. Understanding parents' experiences led to at least one school, Sunbury Heights Primary, marking the occasion in both celebratory and supportive ways.

> 'We learnt from talking to parents that we were already doing a good job. However, by tweaking or adding a few new things the transition process is running really well.' (**Sunbury Heights PS**)

Changing the structure of the prep transition to build relationships with families

At the Sunbury site, consultation with families had significant effects upon how the school year started for preps and their families in 2011. Prep students did not attend in the first week of the school year and prep teachers took this time to conduct home visits. The home visits gave children and families the opportunity to begin to build a relationship with the prep teacher one-on-one. The prep teacher also used the time to undertake the Prep Assessment[9] tasks with the child, which had positive benefits in the classroom as well as on relationships between educators, teachers and families.

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[9] The Prep Entry Assessment Procedure is a framework used to assess student learning needs on entry to school.

Families' perspectives on family involvement

Additional to what was reported by participating educators, parents in the family focus groups also spoke about their own engagement in depth. Their perspectives were not strictly connected to the strategies that the six sites had put in place, yet there were several that are worthy of note and consideration. The four key findings from the family focus group data that relate to family involvement were:

- Recognition that first-time parents need different kinds of support than parents who were already in the school system.

- Schools and early childhood settings need to consider working families when timing family involvement events.

- Transition time is busy and overwhelming for some families and not all information is taken in at the time given – not because families do not care or are not interested but because they are overloaded.

- Email can be a useful tool to engage families.

These perspectives provide support for transition processes, such as the promising practice family involvement, that take the context and community needs into account.

Observations

This promising practice was focused on families, yet there were also a range of positive outcomes for children and educators.

Observations for families

Educators reported that the family involvement activities had the desired outcomes of supporting families to better understand transition and participate more in the school community. Benefits for families included:

- better understandings of the transition process and the school;

- better relationships and a willingness to communicate with the school; and

- less anxiety around their children commencing school.

Better understandings

Many actions implemented during this project were aimed at providing information to families. This had the direct effect of creating better understandings among transitioning families of both the transition process and school culture. Familiarity with the school, improved understandings and realistic expectations enabled families to feel more satisfaction with the school they had chosen. Feedback was more positive regarding the transition process, for example, the Geelong site reported that families accepted composite classroom structures more readily than in previous years.

> Families gained greater understandings of what school-readiness means for their children, and what school transition means and looks like. They benefitted from the opportunity to directly ask questions of the school, to visit and discuss throughout the year prior to school. *(Final workshop data, Carlton)*

Relationships, engagement and communication

Access, information and the changing structure of transition programs enabled families to build relationships with schools and educators successfully. Meeting school staff and beginning communication earlier created confidence and opportunities for parents to ask questions and pass information to educators earlier. For example, the Malvern site reported that the greater understanding of transition processes such as Transition Statements resulted in more families engaging in discussions with educators. At the site that introduced home visits (Sunbury) they not only found better relationships were built, but that families engaged differently with children's schooling after having witnessed the Prep Assessment testing.

> Families met the teacher at school and in their own home and could sit in on the Prep Assessment. They had access to information sessions and the school environment, they engaged differently with the children's schooling and with the teacher and were able to ask more questions. *(OIM, Sunbury)*

Greater calmness

Families reported, and were observed by educators, as having a greater sense of calmness during transition as a result of being informed and having had opportunities to build relationships and communicate more readily with schools prior to their child transitioning to school. According to educators this led to children presenting as calm when they started school. This in turn appeared to have helped the whole family to engage more positively.

> The outcomes for families included: reduced anxiety as a result of more support; greater knowledge about the available options; more confidence in their own decision-making; confidence the knowledge of which staff were looking after the children; relaxed and optimistic parents, which leads to relaxed and optimistic children. These outcomes are indicated by parents happily dropping off and leaving their child at school, and by the parents' verbal and written feedback. (*OIM, Port Phillip*)

Observations for children

Overwhelmingly these sites reported that where families were engaged they observed positive outcomes for children's wellbeing. Sites stated that this led to a sense of connectedness for the children with the school and to learning benefits. Reported anecdotal effects were, that compared to previous cohorts, children beginning school in 2011:

- displayed a greater sense of calmness;

- showed a more positive attitude to starting school and quickly established a sense of belonging to the school; and

- displayed a readiness to engage in formal learning sooner.

The anxious behaviours that educators had previously witnessed and were expecting at the beginning of the school year included separation anxiety, crying and school refusal. These behaviours were reportedly displayed less and therefore enabled, as reported by the teachers, formal classroom programs to begin more smoothly and children to engage enthusiastically with them. Familiarity with teachers and surroundings assisted children to be comfortable, connect with the school.

> The outcomes are more "emotionally healthy children" and we can see this by the fact that children at the beginning to the year are "not crying, clutching at a parent or pointing towards the gate" and can instead focus on joining in on an activity. (**OIM, Port Phillip**)

> 'We estimate that only '10% of children cried during the first week in 2011'. Another indication of children's confidence was that more children would initiate spontaneous conversations with adults other than their classroom teacher, such as the principal and other teachers. The principal felt that he had been engaged in conversations with approximately half of the prep children in the early part of the term which was a significant increase for him.' (**OIM, Geelong**)

Observations for educators

The observations for children and families worked to also benefit educators. Educators reported that they felt they now had:

- Better relationships with children and families.

For teachers, the outcomes of these actions included: feeling more confident and informed; being able to prepare a relevant and valuable program for each child by observing and understanding each child's abilities and extending upon those; working with a happy, settled group of families and children; increased ability to concentrate on implementing the program; positive, thriving relationships with children and parents; and teachers enjoying their work and not feeling stressed. These outcomes are characterised by a thriving classroom and good communication. *(Port Phillip)*

In addition educators described a range of other benefits for themselves and their settings and their partnerships including:

- Better relationships for educators across early childhood settings and greater presence in each other's environment.

For teachers, the connection between the settings had the positive outcomes of enabling teachers to experience each other's settings, including the activities that both parents and children experience. *(Final workshop data)*

Communication increased greatly and these communications could be published within the communities of both sites. (*OIM, Malvern*)

- Improved transition practices and family involvement strategies based on better understandings of family experiences and needs.

For teachers, a major outcome was rethinking how to engage in partnerships with families such as by providing small informal discussion throughout the whole year. (*Final workshop data, Carlton*)

- Increased support for the co-educators in the school as a result of a smooth start to the prep year-rescheduling of Prep Assessment allowed prep teachers to have time to support teachers from other grade levels across the school.

'For teachers the outcomes were that the later start allowed teachers to get to know students and parents better, and were able to get children working faster. There were also knock on effects in other areas of the school as when the prep teachers had Wednesdays off [*no students*] at the beginning of Term 1 they were able to go into Grade 1 and 2 classrooms to support those teachers in getting through their testing. (**Sunbury**)

These reported outcomes from educators demonstrate the worth of creating spaces in which to hear families' perspectives and to use these insights to inform practices. In this way there is benefit to the whole of the learning community.

Section 4: Further impact and lessons learnt

The primary focus of this project was to explore the efficacy of three promising practices used to support children and their families in making a positive transition to school. While each site chose to focus on one specific practice, as reported in Section 3, there were learnings and outcomes for sites that went beyond their chosen promising practice, highlighting that the thinking and practices that go on around transitioning children positively to school do not happen in isolation, but are very much interconnected. It is also necessary to note that most sites had a suite of existing transition processes in place when they came in to the project. These existing processes continued and complemented their promising practice. Additionally, some sites made changes to their transition processes that were outside the scope of their promising practice as a result of content and conversation from the ARMs.

For many of the participants the chance to critically reflect on one area of their site's transition practice led to them looking more broadly, deeply and holistically at how their sites currently 'practice' transition. Indeed it provided the impetus for considering how the sites operate with regard to relationships and communication that went beyond transition. The recognition of this interrelatedness in highlighted below:

Project Story 1: Promising practices are interrelated

Project story: While each site focused on one promising practice throughout the 12 months, other practices connected in to the sites' work. For example, one of the sites that focused on buddy programs when reflecting on their current practices realised that they never discussed the practice with families, which led on to discussions about family involvement.

Project learning: Promising practices interrelate and do not sit in isolation.

Research tells us: The research literature emphasises the importance of multiple transition activities or practices to support sustained engagement of children and families (Giallo, Baschuk & Matthews, 2007; Forest, Horner, Lewis-Palmer & Todd, 2004; Margetts, 2002a).

This section reports on the broader learnings and observations through the following themes:

- moving from a hierarchical to an ecological approach;

- building relationships;

- inclusive practice;

- deepening understandings of practice; and

- sustaining best practice.

Moving from a Hierarchical to an Ecological Approach to transition

At the start of the project, participants in their discussions of the transition promising practices described how these practices and programs were developed and implemented, in most cases, by individual schools or early learning settings with little or no consultation between themselves or with other stakeholders. Many of the participants, who attended network meetings as a part of their role, spoke in the ARMs about the fact that while they would report to the network on what transition practices they were undertaking in their settings, most were developed in isolation rather than collaboratively. Where there was any cross communication it amounted to asking an early learning centre to distribute flyers to advertise an open day or the early learning centre asking a school if a group of children could visit. During the project, there was a significant shift in thinking across sites away from the approach to transition being top-down and habitual (Hierarchical Approach) to being contextual and tailored to the needs of the community and to individuals (Ecological Approach).

Stimulus for change

Information about an ecological approach to transition to school presented at the second ARM provided insight to participants about the complexity of transition and the possibilities for more collaborative approaches. Participants reflected on their current approaches to transition to school when they were asked to consider if their current practices were hierarchical or ecological. Participants were given information on the effects of the different approaches for children, families and educators (see Section 1 for further information). The participants were then asked to reflect on what approach they wanted to draw from and consider how they might do this; how they might work to develop transitional programs and practices in collaboration with all stakeholders and communities.

Project Story 2: Engaging with an ecological approach

Project story: Information about an ecological approach to transition to school provided insight for participants about the complexity of transition and the possibilities for more collaborative approaches.

Project learning: By actively participating in an ecological approach to transition through their sites they were able to experience firsthand that:

Working with all educators within a site enables deeper understandings and connections and the ability to respond in an informed manner to families: "We have a better understanding of what happens in each other's setting so we can answer questions parents have about the environment and expectations of school better. We learnt that we have some similar goals and philosophies."

Talking with families enables their needs and perspectives to be reflected in transition practices: "The things that helped to rethink our transition practices were the discussion we had with each other and with families. Reflecting on the practices that worked and those that didn't was

important."

"We learnt from talking to parents that we were already doing a good job. However, by tweaking or adding a few new things the transition process is running really well. We were supported by the ideas of other people in the ARMs to rethink our practices, and the fact that we are always aiming to improve transition practices helped. We were also able to instigate other sites to further involve themselves in transition."

Children have valuable and informed contributions to make in the formulation of transition practices: As a result of this project, five sites began to talk with children about transition to school; specifically about how they were feeling about what happened for them during this period or what they were thinking about as they were transitioning into school and these discussions led to changes in the practices used:

"The children's comments about school and their misconceptions helped us to rethink the practices we used, and so the misconceptions were addressed in the reciprocal visits."

Services that work with children provide insights into assisting with positive transitions: Engaging with ideas of an ecological approach also provided opportunities for people to reflect on and discuss who was missing at the 'table', for example maternal and child health nurses, outside school hour's educators, and speech therapists. The Yarrawonga site had begun to invite other service providers to take part in their transition processes.

"Developing interest in the program with kindergarten teachers in Yarrawonga, speaking with an occupational therapist and speech pathologist about the program and calling the kinder committee to explain." (*Final workshop data, Yarrawonga*)

Research tells us: Research argues that the development of positive relationships involving a range of stakeholders increases participation in school and creates a greater sense of belonging for children and their families (Hirst, Jervis, Visagie, Sojo &Cavanagh, 2011; Dockett & Perry, 2011).

The participants through the exposure to the ecological approach began to ask critical questions about who was involved in the formulation and implementation of their transition programs and to begin thinking and acting creatively to open spaces for all stakeholders to participate.

Building relationships across the early childhood and primary sectors

Embracing an ecological approach enabled educators within the sites to look at whose voices had been missing in the formulation of their programs and practices. This led onto thinking about and discussing the importance of building relationships to enable all stakeholders to contribute. The value of building cross sector (primary schools and early childhood settings) relationships between educators and with families and children that developed as a result of the sites involvement in the project came out in discussions at the ARMs and in the data.

Stimulus for change

The project model that brought educators from the early childhood and primary sectors together for five meetings facilitated the opportunities for the educators to spend time together and this in itself created the possibilities for forging relationships.

Project Story 3: Building relationships

Project story: The project provided time and space for settings to come together to reflect on and talk about transition to school promising practices which included discussions of curriculum, routines, working conditions and questions about education and the needs of children and families. These broad ranging discussions enabled members of the sites to hear each other's perspectives and to begin developing relationships.

Project learning: Building strong relationships across sectors supports positive transitions and ongoing connections:

The participants consistently noted that gaining a greater understanding of what happens and why activities and programs are undertaken at the different sites fostered stronger relationships within and across the sites:

"The relationship between the sites became more familiar, open and respectful. We now have a more equal view of each other's programs, respect each other's positions and are more open to feedback. We plan to continue this relationship via email and the intranet, verbal communication and by maintaining reciprocal visits at the beginning and end of the year." (***Final workshop data, Kensington***)

"Our site partnership opened up a whole new dialogue relating to supporting children and families' transition to school. We were able to develop a collaborative relationship with colleagues, which we hope to continue by having ongoing conversations to review practice. To support this work we will need motivation and time. We are interested now in thinking about how we might explore the other promising practices and how they might look in our settings and also how preschools can explore promising practices with all schools in their local area. This will necessitate looking at how we can share our investigation in this project with others." (***Final workshop data, Knox***)

"The project definitely strengthened the relationship between educators at the two sites. We have put a lot into practice already and we have a timeline of events to put into place. We will continue our partnership by keeping regular contact, organising events and continue the timeline for the future to keep the relationship going, and continue to share resources and get feedback from one another about programs, initiatives, resources, children and practices." (***Final workshop data, Clayton***)

Research tells us: The research literature highlights the importance of relationship building to develop better understandings of children and families' needs, values and expectations as well as diverse educators' values and expectations. These relationships support respect for diverse values and beliefs and create cohesive social environments with less barriers (Hirst, Jervis, Visagie, Sojo & Cavanagh, 2011; Griebel & Niesel, 2009; Lee & Bowen, 2006; Keyes, 2002). Dockett, et al. (2011) reported that key issues identified by families that caused anxiety around transition to school, were their own experiences of school and a fear that their child may experience the same issues. Research has also shown that the parents' prosocial behaviors can influence those of their child's in preschool and school (Ladd & Hart, 1992), this can affect the child's academic success (Ladd, 1990).

Inclusive practice

In the ARMs participants were encouraged to think about the needs of their own communities and whether the needs of individuals were being catered for. Focusing on what outcomes participants wanted specifically for their children, families and educators helped them to shift their thinking from a big picture general view of transition to school to a targeted gaze on the needs of their site.

Stimulus for change

During ARM 3 the participants heard from a range of experts, as detailed earlier within the report, on how to begin thinking about ensuring their transition program and practices were inclusive.

Project Story 4: Understanding the communities' needs

Project Story: Stimulus knowledge of children's views on transition to school (Associate Professor Kay Margetts); children with diverse abilities (Ms Merlyne Cruz and Jacinta Weston), disadvantaged backgrounds and CALD backgrounds and on Indigenous family expectations from early childhood settings and schools (Dr Sue Atkinson) were shared with the participants. They were supported to reflect on and talk about the nature of their communities and how the needs of all the members could be known, understood and catered for in their transition programs. These broad ranging discussions enabled members of the sites to begin to question how their programs operated and how they could be modified to become more inclusive.

Project learnings: Exploration of the context of the school community – culture, economics, abilities, ethnicity, and language supported a shift in the thinking about transition to consider the context of the school community:

Recognising the diverse backgrounds and experiences of children and families facilitates a more responsive and inclusive approach to transition: Park Orchards focused on buddy programs as their promising practice, but the actions they implemented and their changed attitude enabled them to apply this thinking across all the transition practices and relationships:

"It has supported us to consider that all children come from a variety of backgrounds and experiences and that the schools must consider the needs of individuals within the school environment. The site learnt that every child and family has different transition needs. During parent meetings about the Transition Learning and Development Statements many parents communicated attitudes to starting school that were from their own less positive start to school – this caused us to rethink the need for greater parent engagement." (***Final workshop data, Park Orchards***)

Developing connections and relationships with the broader community supports children's positive transition to school: One site recognised that relationships with the wider community were especially critical for children with additional needs to experience a positive transition to school and have their needs met:

"For children with a disability, developmental delay or learning difficulty the project highlighted for this site the value of meeting with all care-givers involved with the child, to give the school access to prior knowledge about the child, the emphasis should be on opening the lines of communication between families, educators and support settings to develop a positive

transition program and support." (***Final workshop data, Park Orchards***)

"In relation to children with diverse abilities, disadvantaged backgrounds and CALD backgrounds the project supported us to get to know these kids earlier, prompted conversations between prep and kindergarten educators and enabled educators to accommodate these students from day 1. Once again, listening to others' stories in relation to these diverse perspectives was helpful." (***Final workshop data, Yarrawonga***)

Another site recognised the need to respond to their culturally diverse community:

"We are always driven to ensure the opportunities are equal to every child, that they have the right to the best start to school. The project has highlighted the need to continually check in with children and families' needs. We continually ensure that diversity is embedded in our programs." (***Final workshop reflection, Carlton***)

And in responding recognised that their delivery of information needed to be tailored:

"From these actions we learnt that parents respond positively to having an opportunity to ask questions about the school directly to the principal. The small informal parent night worked better than the large group presentations; the small group encouraged discussion and was especially facilitative for CALD families." (***Final workshop reflection, Carlton***)

Research tells us: "Trusting, positive relationships between agencies (including educational settings) and families can ease the stress of the transition" (Rosenkoetter, et al., p. 4, 2009).

Participants were supported to think critically about how their settings incorporated Indigenous perspectives.

Project Story 5: Developing understandings of Indigenous communities

Project story: Dr Sue Atkinson talked with the groups around Indigenous family involvement and the importance of the environment of the early childhood setting and school. Dr Atkinson asked participants to reflect on the question: If you want Indigenous families to engage with your setting how do they know they are welcome? All participants went back to their sites to consider this question.

For some participants they had not considered how their environment included or excluded Indigenous families. For many participants they commented that they did not have Indigenous families in their settings. Dr Atkinson reminded participants that due to our history and peoples' experiences not all Indigenous families might identify their aboriginality. Further, she reminded the groups that they cannot predict which families will enter their setting in the future.

Project learning: Understandings of Indigenous communities allows for the creation of mindful and respectful transition practices.

One participant identified a deeper understanding of Indigenous families as a result of the ARM:

"In terms of the perspectives of children from Indigenous communities we had greater awareness and sensitivity to customs and learning needs - for the kindergarten educator. " It

made a connection for me because I am an indigenous woman in my country."(*Kensington*)

One participant discussed how he has begun to change the school environment and culture to respect Indigenous perspectives:

"In regards to diversity the project has increased my awareness, and the awareness of the school, through a PD session (by the site's mentor), of the need to be aware of culture. We have changed our physical school environments, display the Aboriginal flag and are taking steps to include Indigenous studies. Relationships with all families are very important, building up trust and not just in terms of academic considerations. Information needs to be comprehensive and presented in relevant ways, programs need to be owned and individual." (***ARM 3 Wurruk***)

Respectful transition programs can help to rebuild trust and connections where members of the Indigenous communities have negative experiences of the education system:

The Yappera site highlighted how the format of the transition, educator allocation and the opportunity to meet with educators may provide support for Indigenous families:

"The earlier that families can establish a positive relationship with the school the better as many Indigenous families have had a negative experience of the education system and can feel a sense of alienation from the start…It would be helpful to the transition process if schools finalised staff positions earlier. Sometimes the prep teachers are moved to older grades after the transition program. It is important for families to build trust with the prep teachers as they may be otherwise reluctant to share information about their child. The centre is also aware that in some areas kinder kids have the opportunity to attend school once a week during transition. The centre is interested in this model." (***Mentor 2, Yappera***)

Research tells us: Research on successful transition programs from prior-to-school to school for Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander children emphasises the importance of developing mutual trust and respect and drawing on resources that are contextual to local communities (Dockett, et al., 2008).

Deepening understandings of practice

At the beginning of the project participants recognised that practices to support a positive start to school were something that settings often unquestioningly implemented without reflection or evaluation.

Stimulus for change

Participants were supported in the ARMs to start to question the rationale behind the transition programs and practices that they used within their sites. They were encouraged to engage with the perspectives that argue it is the role of schools to be ready for children rather than the focus being singularly on children being ready for school (Brostrom, 2000).

Project Story 6: Reflecting on transition practices rationale

Project story: Reflecting on current practice highlighted that for many participants they were able to describe how they delivered their promising practice, but few participants were able to

articulate why they were undertaking the promising practices. The descriptions of why were often related to history with explanations that practices happened because they were always done that way or the previous Transition Coordinator just handed the person the transition folder and they followed on with the program. Few people discussed the practices in relation to specific outcomes for children and families. And no one discussed outcomes for educators.

Project learning: There is a need to bring the how and why (practice and outcomes) together.

This bringing together of the how and why could create opportunities for more targeted evaluations of the effects of practices and a clearer understanding for people developing and implementing practices about how to make schools ready for their children and families:

"Being part of the research has definitely provided the opportunity for us to look at our transition processes and evaluate what we are doing. It has also given us the opportunity to talk to other schools and kindergartens and find out what they are doing. The discussion and information provided at the sessions gave us a real insight into developing a positive transition for children." (*Meadow Glen*)

Research tells us: McLaren (1993) argues that critical reflection creates opportunities to create questions about teaching and learning to use as a tool for transforming practices that marginalise or silence teaching and learning processes for better and fairer outcomes.

As a result of involvement in the project one site evaluated all their past practices, beyond just those related to the promising practice, and developed a new transition program.

Project Story 7: Evaluating transition practices

Project Story: One site after reviewing their practices based on the input from the ARMs facilitators and other participants, listening to families and children revised their transition program.

Project Learning: Evaluating transition programs is essential to ensuring their ongoing relevance to their community.

This year we are working on improving our ideas to continually offer the best transition program for our students, educators and parents. The school has made a lot of changes due to the involvement we have had in the project that we will begin to implement in 2011. These include:

- Making the transition sessions longer. The preschool children will now bring playlunch to school.

- The preschool children will meet their educator during the transition session.

- The parents will have an opportunity to meet their child's prep teachers and other prep teachers during the transition session.

- Changing the focus of our parent information sessions to hopefully make them more

hands-on, beneficial and relevant to the parents.

- The preschool children will get a chance to meet their buddy grade, and hopefully their own buddy, for the following year.

- A prep teacher is being released from the classroom one day per week to work on transition. Visits to local kindergartens and childcare centres have already commenced.

In Term 2, 2011 we are organising a kindergarten group to visit us. While they are here we are going to take them on a tour of the school and show them all the different things that happen at the school. We are going to take pictures of the kindergarten children at the school and then we are going to make this into a special book. The kindergarten children will be able to take the book home to share with their parents about their school visit.

The prep teacher will visit the kindergartens and spend time working with the children, and the kindergarten teacher will come to some of the transition sessions with the children.

We are running a story time for pre-schoolers in the community once a month. (**Final workshop data, Meadow Glen**)

Research tells us: "Evaluation of transition activities has become increasingly acknowledged in the literature as an important part of the transition planning process"(Forest, et al., p. 104, 2004).

Participants appreciated the time and space the project provided in the ARMs because it allowed them to undertake meaningful evaluation and assessment of their practices. This led to discussion on how best to sustain the momentum created through the project.

Approaches to supporting and sustaining best practice
The project provided opportunities for people from the early childhood and school sectors to come together to discuss transition practices and develop resources in a focused way. Sharing times were built into the program so people had opportunities to develop a greater understanding of each other's work and in so doing develop respectful relationships. Having time and space gave participants the chance to share their ideas and work and to have this work acknowledged. In these meetings the participants consistently referred to the value in having time and space to reflect and share ideas. They also noted that there was a need to create time within their sites for the connections to be sustained.

Stimulus for change

In ARM4 participants were asked to reflect on how to rethink how they used time to be able to create space for transition practice. This is important because if educators are always undertaking this work in their own time then the practices are not sustainable.

Project Story 8: Sustaining responsive transition practices

Project Story: At the beginning of the project the classroom-based participants reported that they juggled the co-ordination, development and/or implementation of the promising practices around their teaching and in many cases in their own time. In the final ARM three sites reported on how educators had been allocated time release or time was created within working hours to support educators to actively engage with the promising practices and transition to school.

Project learning: A commitment to creating time and space to allow sites to meet, discuss, plan and implement transition programs is required to sustain responsive transition practices:

"Our relationships between sites are now more trusting and positive. A common understanding has been developed and the relationships strengthened as we shared understandings and goals for children and families. We now value everyone's input and experiences and the pooling of ideas helps us to achieve positive progress. The Manningham Early Year's network is becoming stronger. We will continue this relationship by implementing reciprocal visits, especially for school children to visit the kindergartens throughout the year and for preschool educators to be invited to visit their former students in their prep year. A new 4-year-old educator is taking over at one of the kindergartens and she will be informed about the relationships between the sites and the project in the hope that the work can continue. Support that will help the work progress includes a continuation of reciprocal visits, and these beginning earlier in the year; leadership support; continued strengthening of the EY network; and continual updates on the latest research." (*Park Orchards*)

Sites highlighted the challenges and tensions that exist in sustaining the connections facilitated by their involvement in the project:

"The ongoing tensions and issues include time for communication and visits, workload especially in terms of paperwork and being away from the classroom/program. We wonder whether this is sustainable. To continue the work the school would like to handover the transition process so it can be continued when the transition coordinator moves on, and the kinder would like to build relationships like this with other schools." (*Kensington*)

Two sites made commitments to time release for educators and four sites reported that they had formalised or increased their meetings related to transition. This included staff meetings, meetings between site partners and wider network meetings. Adding transition as an agenda item and increasing the frequency of meetings proved beneficial at these sites. One participant reported in the final ARM that she had been allocated one day's time release a week as Transition co-ordinator as a trial for the year to develop stronger partnerships and relationships with the early childhood settings' children and educators.

Re-allocating roles and resources to create time:

One participant who was in a vice-principal at the Yarrawonga site, and whose role it was to spend time in early childhood settings, after reflecting on the importance of children building relationships with their educators created space for the prep teacher to undertake reciprocal visits instead of him.

It is important to note that in two of these sites the principal or vice-principal were part of the project. Support from principals to create change is vital.

Research tells us: There is currently no published research on the quality of transition programs related to time allocation for educators to plan and implement transition practices or specifically the effects of the principal's and vice-principal's leadership on outcomes for transition to school promising practices. However, there is a large body of literature on the importance of leadership and organisational cultures. Drysdale, Goode and Gurr (2009) argues that principal's leadership can influence areas of building trust, creating safe and secure workplaces, structures that encouraged learning and connections and alliances within communities.

Section 5: Key observations and learnings, challenges and future opportunities:

Key observations and learnings

The overarching key observations and learnings from the project were that:

- The use of the promising practices enhances the development and deepening of relationships between early childhood educators and primary teachers, and between families and children and educators and this works to promote a positive transition to school.

- Promising practices interrelate and do not sit in isolation.

This key observations and learnings across the promising practices can be summarised according to three themes:

1. Building relationships between children, families and schools supports positive transitions to school.

2. Building relationships between educators in early childhood settings and primary schools broadens and deepens understandings and respect and promotes positive transition practices.

3. Reflecting on existing transition promising practices creates possibilities for change to practices and programs to best suit the needs of communities.

Please see Table 6 for key observations across the three themes.

Table 6: Key Observations

Building relationships between children, families and schools supports the positive transitions to school	Building relationships between educators in early childhood settings and primary schools enhances communication, deepens understandings and respect and promotes positive transition practices	Reflecting on existing transition promising practices creates possibilities for change to practices and programs to best suit the needs of communities
Talking with families enables their needs and perspectives to be reflected in transition practices. Talking with children highlights the valuable and informed contributions they have to make in the formulation of transition practices. Developing communication links with families creates an increased awareness of the interconnectedness between early childhood settings and schools in supporting children's transition to school. Bringing new knowledge around children and families from Indigenous communities, children with diverse abilities, disadvantaged backgrounds and CALD backgrounds enables better understandings of families' experiences and needs and adaptation of transition practices to meet these needs. Enhancing communication with families creates an increased sense of confidence and reassurance for in the school's ability to support their child's transition to school due to them having a clearer understanding of the transition processes. Increasing children and families early exposure to the school environment, teachers and other children helps to build a sense of safety, greater confidence, a calmer transition and independence for children once at school. Engaging with transitioning families creates a greater willingness on the part of families to communicate with the school.	Working with all educators within a site enables deeper understandings and connections and the ability to respond in an informed manner to families. Reciprocal visits between educators from primary schools and early childhood settings fosters a better understanding of the work undertaken by each group and the development of a deeper respect for each other's work. Building strong relationships across sectors supports positive transitions and ongoing connections. Enhancing links between educators results in communication about the needs of children and families enables school teachers to tailor their programs and class placements to better meet the needs of transitioning children and families.	Critically reflecting on transition programs and practices creates opportunities for more targeted evaluations of the effects of practices and a clearer understanding for people developing and implementing practices about how to make schools ready for children and families. Reciprocal visiting led some teachers and early childhood educators to incorporate each other's practices into their educational programs, such as more play-based learning into prep classrooms and different skill development activities into kindergarten classrooms in an effort to facilitate a smooth transition to prep for children. Evaluating transition programs is essential to ensuring their ongoing relevance to their community. A commitment to creating time and space to allow sites to meet, discuss, plan and implement transition programs is required to sustain responsive transition practices.

Challenges

In continuing the work to consolidate and build on the use of promising practices to support a positive transition to school, a number of challenges became evident during the project:

- Securing the support from early childhood centre management and primary school leadership for developing sustained meaningful relationships between early childhood professional and primary school teachers.

- Sustaining motivation and the time commitment on the part of all involved in particular where there is a history of independent operation.

- How and with whom to establish collaborative relationships where there are multiple feeder kindergartens for a single school setting or children from a single kindergarten transitioning to multiple schools.

- Engaging all children and families in the formulation of transition programs and practices so that it is responsive to the range of different needs.

- Effectively engaging the voices of early childhood educators and care professionals and communities in the developing transition promising practices and programs.

Future Opportunities

Following from this research, there are a range of possibilities to further the work around transition to school:

- Promote the importance of early childhood settings and primary schools come together to establish 'transition communities'[10] for a positive start to school where they are developing, implementing and evaluating transition to school promising practices together.

- Promote the importance of linking outcomes for children, families and educators to the promising practices to support all involved to understand the rationale behind the implementation.

- Develop, refine and promote existing resources for early childhood settings and primary schools around transition promising practices with direct links to the benefits for children, families and educators.

- Promote the important role of leadership in developing, implementing and evaluating promising practices.

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[10] Transition communities could include all stakeholders including early childhood educators and primary school teachers, families, children, service providers and members of the community.

- Publish the findings in a variety of fora within a state, national and international contexts through avenues such as journals, principals' newsletters and conferences.

Conclusion

The project presented three promising practices and asked sites to engage with these. Sites chose to focus on one promising practice based on their desire to explore and rework their practices in these areas in pursuit of practices that responded to the needs of their communities.

While each of the sites gained a greater understanding of how they were operating with regard to their selected promising practices, there were broader learnings and outcomes that came as a result of participating in the project.

Early childhood settings and schools, through the establishment of sites, developed a deeper understating of how each of their settings operates and this had the effect of fostering a greater respect for each other's work. It further enabled them to work collaboratively to elicit the perspectives of children and families and to incorporate these into the way they 'practiced' transition. In doing this, they promoted a smoother, more positive transition to school for children and their families. This also had the flow on effect of benefiting their well being and professional satisfaction as educators.

The project highlighted the possibilities for all stakeholders when the systemic structures are put in place to allow educators to come together to think critically and creatively and to act collaboratively.

What was evident at the beginning of the project was a disconnectedness of outcomes for children, families and educators and the implementation of transition promising practices. The project supported educators to bring the why and how of promising practices together and this opened up possibilities for how educators communicated about transition with children, families and the broader community. It further created an understanding of the link between outcomes and practices and in so doing created a more focused approach to planning and evaluating the effectiveness of transition promising practices. The project supported the journey for educators on how to better meet the needs of children, families and themselves as educators in promoting positive transitions to school.

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Appendix A: Action Research Questions

Site	Question
Promising practice 1: Buddy programs	
1. Wurruk	How do we re-engage as an educational community via a buddy program?
2. Park Orchards	How can we re-think the buddy program to provide more information that is supportive of children's needs in their transition to school?
3. Meadow Glen	How do we re-think the buddy program to provide more information that is supportive of children's needs in their transition to school?
4. Wodonga	How can we develop a common philosophy about the implementation of buddy programs across our network?
Promising practice 2: Reciprocal visits for educators	
1. Clayton	How do we re-develop our relationship between our network to ensure a continuity of our program for our students?
2. Yarrawonga	How can we improve student outcomes through targeted reciprocal visits in the area?
3. Kensington	How do we engage in each program to gain greater understanding of expectations and children's learning styles?
4. Knoxfield	How do we rethink the way that children participate in transition programs with the support of preschool staff?
5. Cranbourne	How do we develop a reciprocal visitation program to enhance the learning and development of children?
Promising practice 3: Family involvement	
1. Carlton	How do we improve current family involvement practices to improve the experiences for students, families and educators?
2. Malvern	How do we work together to share knowledge about education to the families?
3. Geelong	What are the anxieties for parents and children when they begin school?
4. Sunbury	How do we enrich the transition experience for families before school?
5. Yappera	How can the school strengthen family involvement with Indigenous families at the centre in the year prior to school?
6. Port Phillip	How can we support a buddy program for children with additional needs?