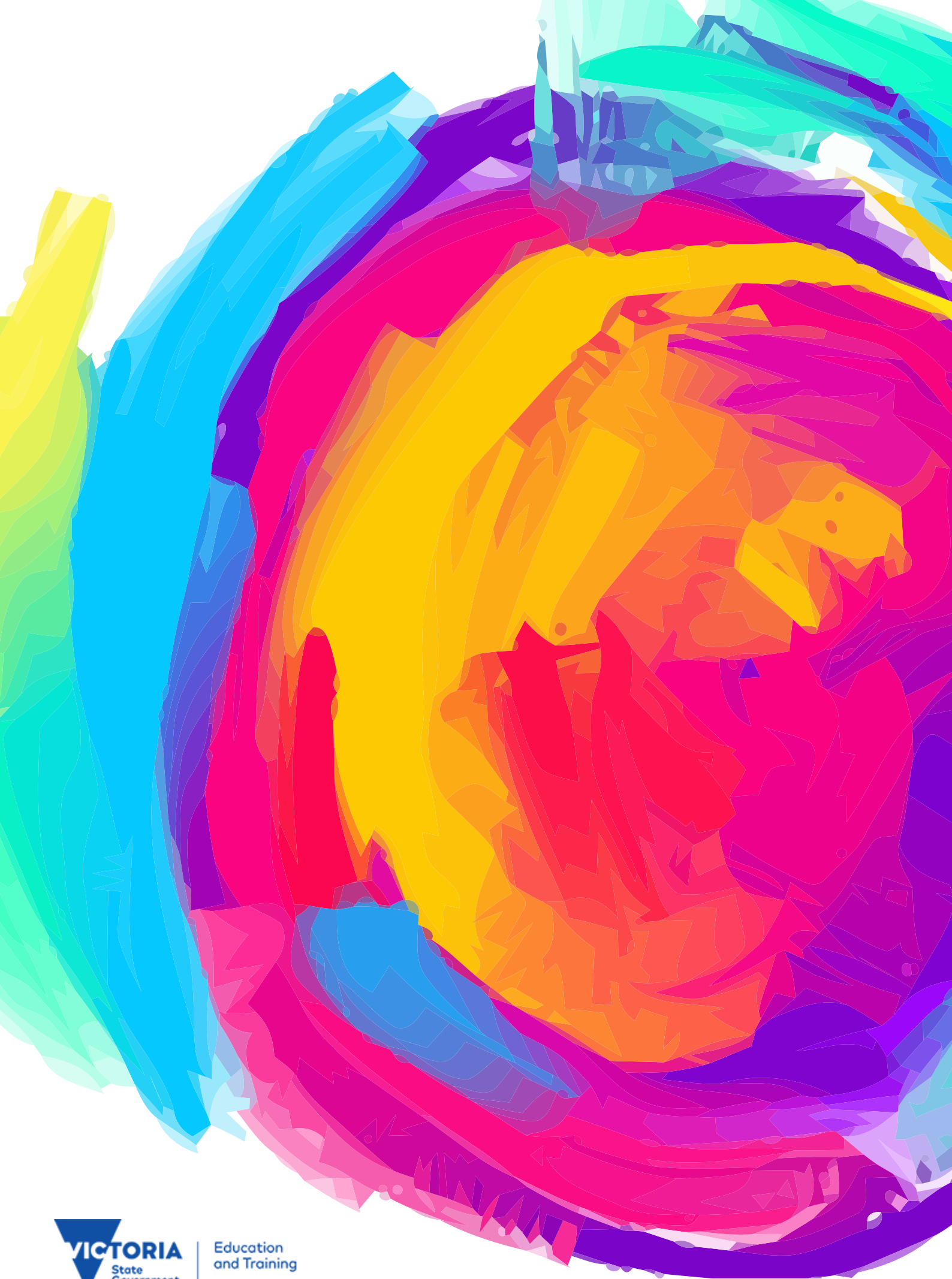


# TRANSITION:

A POSITIVE START  
TO SCHOOL



SUPPORTING  
RECIPROCAL VISITS





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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Starting school is a significant moment in the lives of children and families. Past research projects undertaken by the Victorian Department of Education and Training (in 2009 and 2012) have identified a number of factors supporting positive transition to school approaches. One such factor was reciprocal visits between prior to school and school settings. This project, *Transition: A Positive Start to School. Supporting Reciprocal Visits* aimed to build on this research in Tarneit, Carrum Downs, Bendigo, and Puckapunyal. This report details work undertaken by Semann & Slattery and the Institute of Early Childhood, Macquarie University in Tarneit and Bendigo between October 2014 to May 2015 as part of this initiative.

In Tarneit the project was hosted by Tarneit College P-9 (n=6). Two kindergartens, Tarneit Central Kindergarten (n=3) and Penrose Kindergarten (n=2) also participated. In Bendigo the project was hosted by Lightning Reef Primary School (n=4). One school, Violet Street Bendigo Primary School (n=2) and three prior to school settings, Lightning Reef Early Learning Centre (n=2), Havilah Road Preschool (n=1) and Eaglehawk Preschool (n=1) also participated.

This study employed a case study approach to research to gain a deeper understanding of relationships between teachers in schools and prior to school settings through reciprocal visits. A qualitative methodology was used for data collection, incorporating reflection sheets completed by participants, and reflective journals maintained by the research team. Data was analysed manually to identify changes in thinking and practice and to highlight themes and patterns across sites over time. The project used a relational agency framework (Edwards, 2012; Edwards & Apostolov, 2007) to better understand the relationships developed by participants over time and as a tool to gauge educational change.

Key findings identified from an analysis of the data are as follows:

**Finding 1 - Leadership and management** - leadership and management played a critical role in initiating and maintaining transition across educational sites.

**Finding 2 - Perspectives and practices** - reciprocal visits and subsequent discussions assisted to dispel misunderstandings and assumptions, and to enhance greater understanding and respect across educational sites including curriculum, frameworks, pedagogy, documentation of learning and associated structural elements across sites e.g. planning time and the

**Finding 3 - Transition statements and information sharing** - professional conversations across the duration of the project resulted in greater understanding and valuing of transition statements.


**Finding 4 - Relationships** - the establishment of positive relationships was a key outcome of the reciprocal visits project and identified as a critical component of successful transition practices.

**Finding 5 - Families** - the project increased participant's understanding of the perspectives of those who may have previously been silenced in the transition process, i.e. parents and children. It also highlighted the critical role of families in ensuring a successful transition across educational sites.


**Finding 6 - Resourcing** - appropriate resourcing supported and sustained reciprocal visits and associated gatherings across educational sites. The provision of external facilitators also provided content, direction and structure to reciprocal visits and professional conversations and enhanced opportunities for critical reflection.

**Finding 7 - Children with additional needs** - positive partnerships and professional conversations are key to promoting better outcomes for children with additional needs. This includes the provision of information, including transition statements, in a timely manner.





This project contributed to the enhancement of positive relationships between teachers in schools and prior to school settings in Tarneit and Bendigo. This resulted in a stronger understanding of the continuity of learning across educational settings. As an outcome of the project, a number of recommendations can be made, including that:

1. The Victorian Department of Education and Training undertake a scoping study to identify additional sites interested in trialing reciprocal visits and an evaluation framework be developed and implemented across these sites in order to identify the outcomes of these reciprocal visits. Identification of such sites can be undertaken as part of the Bastow Institute of Educational Leaderships course Continuity of Early Learning.
  2. Children and families would benefit from a resourced and coordinated approach to facilitating and delivering reciprocal visits across educational sites. This includes providing an external facilitator to coordinate and facilitate post reciprocal visit gatherings to support reflective thinking.
  3. There is a dedicated onsite contact person at each educational setting who is responsible for transition practices, including the coordination of reciprocal visits and joint professional development opportunities.
  4. Reciprocal visits have a clear outcome and intent to ensure that all related activities are in the best interests of children and lead to better outcomes for children and their families during the transition process.
  5. Schools and prior to school settings prioritise the sustainability of reciprocal visits through existing budgets and systems, e.g. strategic plans and/or quality improvement plans.
  6. Reciprocal visits are ongoing throughout the year and structured in such a way as to build and sustain mutual relationships.
  7. Reciprocal visits include opportunities for reflection and discussion post each of the onsite visits or gatherings.
  8. There is targeted communication with employers regarding the importance of resourcing reciprocal visits in order to ensure such initiatives are established and suitably resourced.
  9. Transition statement structures and processes are reviewed to ensure they meet their intended purpose and rationale, that is, to support transition to school for children and families, through timely sharing of information across sectors.
  10. Transition practices, including reciprocal visits, are documented at a local level to ensure practice is sustained if/when people overseeing transition leave the educational site.
  11. Services and schools review and evaluate transition practices with regard to what's working well, and areas for improvement.
  12. Opportunities for more targeted reciprocal visits project, incorporating schools and outside school hours care programs, are considered in the future.
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# INTRODUCTION

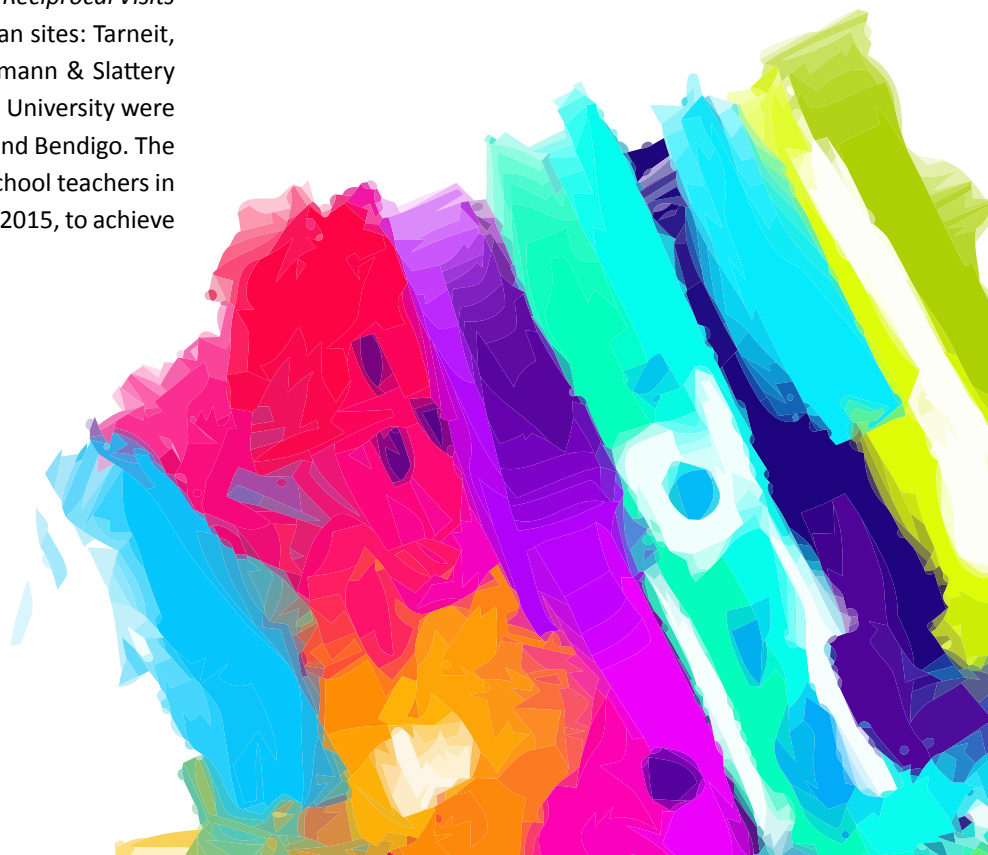
Starting school is a significant moment in the lives of children and families. Research has shown that a strong cohesion between prior to school and school settings, and reciprocal relationships between children, families and these educational settings can promote positive outcomes for children in their transition to school experience (Dockett & Perry, 2007; Dunlop & Fabian, 2007; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2006). Building on this evidence base, two action research projects undertaken by the Victorian Department of Education and Training (DET) in 2009 and 2012 highlighted a number of factors supporting a positive transition to school; one highlight called for a reciprocal visits project involving schools and prior to school settings.

Previous projects established that reciprocal visits resulted in stronger relationships and ongoing communication between teachers in prior to school settings and school teachers. This led to a deeper understanding of and greater respect for pedagogy and curricula across educational sites, thus supporting continuity of children's learning. Reciprocal visits also resulted in a more informed and responsive approach to meeting the needs of children and families starting school (Smith, Kotsanas, Farrelly & Alexander, 2010).

*Transition: A Positive Start to School. Supporting Reciprocal Visits* aimed to build on these findings in four Victorian sites: Tarneit, Carrum Downs, Bendigo, and Puckapunyal. Semann & Slattery and the Institute of Early Childhood, Macquarie University were the successful tenderer for the sites of Tarneit and Bendigo. The project team worked with prior to school and school teachers in Tarneit and Bendigo from October 2014 to May 2015, to achieve the project aim and key deliverables.

The project aim was to increase understanding of curriculum design, planning and implementation including content, pedagogy, assessment, feedback and reporting through shared professional learning as part of reciprocal visits. An additional outcome was to support stronger relationships around children's transitioning to school between teachers, children and their families.

This report provides an overview of the reciprocal visit programs developed and implemented in Tarneit and Bendigo. It describes the methodological approach implemented by the project team across both sites. It highlights key findings and outcomes, including changes to practice implemented during the project and planned for the future. It identifies key recommendations based on these findings to support continued successful transition to school processes, most notably reciprocal visits.





# METHODOLOGY

## METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This study employed a case study approach to research design in two sites including Bendigo and Tarneit. A case study design has been defined as a research method 'built on empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used' (Yin, 2009, p.23). Case study design was employed to gain a detailed understanding of the relationship between schools and prior to school settings through reciprocal visits. The identified suburb was deemed to be the case study site with multiple units within each site existing (Cresswell, 2013). These multiple units included the schools and prior to school settings, teachers and educators within each site.

Qualitative approaches to data gathering were implemented. A qualitative research approach involves the use of a variety of methods to collect information, including: focus groups, interviews and observations. Contrastingly, a quantitative approach is used to describe information that can be counted or expressed numerically (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Open-ended questionnaires (also deemed reflection sheets) were provided to the participants at the following times:

1. Commencement of the project (see Appendix 1)
2. During reciprocal visits (See Appendix 2)
3. Completion of each gathering (See Appendix 3)
4. Completion of project (See Appendices 4 & 5).

The aims of these open-ended questionnaires were to enable the research team to capture qualitative data related to the learning and experiences of research participants. As reflective tools, they allowed the researchers to track and capture changes in both thinking and practices that resulted from participation in the project. Finally, videoing was also used as a tool for participants to share their journey through the project and to reflect on the changes that resulted from reciprocal visits and gatherings.

The investigators also kept reflective journals to detail conversations throughout gatherings and debriefing notes following conversations with participants throughout the project (Yin, 2011). Data collected throughout the project were analysed manually by the research team. Each piece of data was read to locate common themes and patterns. Discourse analysis,

identifies these themes and patterns raised by participants, so that similarities and differences can be captured across and within group experiences and perspectives. Anomalies were also identified and made a note of for further clarification and discussion amongst the project team. Thus, as is standard in qualitative research, the 'outliers' (examples differing from the most common replies/perceptions) were able to promote divergent thinking and analysis rather than being dismissed.

## PARTICIPANTS

### Bendigo

The Bendigo component of the project was hosted by Lightning Reef Primary School (LRPS) (n=4), which has affiliated playgroups. This school was formed through an amalgamation between two former schools, and is co-located with the Lightning Reef Early Learning Centre (LRELC), which incorporates childcare and a Kindergarten program managed by the YMCA, and is associated with Out of School Hours Care and other community support services. The school provides education for approximately 200 children in 9 homerooms, with 47 preparatory children in two classes. Staff changes and periods of leave at the school and ELC impacted on the development of the project in so far as changes in the participants of the project.

The assistant principal had key carriage of the project. A number of other schools and 'feeder' kindergartens were invited to participate in the project. In addition to the co-located Lightning Reef Early Learning Centre (n=2), two kindergartens accepted the invitation to be involved in the project, both being single unit sites managed by the YMCA. Both early childhood teachers held job-share positions and had to negotiate availability for participation, but welcomed visits to their sites. They were:

1. Havilah Road Preschool (n=1); and
2. Eaglehawk Preschool (n=1).

Violet Street Bendigo Primary School (n=2) had some engagement in the project, hosting a visit and including the Principal who was previously the Assistant Principal at Lightning Reef Primary School as well as a teacher. Restrictions from an 'agreed' local transitions protocol inhibited some project development as did a tentative beginning due to some initial misunderstandings regarding the shape and potential of the project, and the responsibilities of the host school.

## Session Outline

DATE	FOCUS	ACTIVITY
Session 1	Setting the scene Relationship building Research background	Signing ethics forms; Collection of baseline data re transition processes Preparing for reciprocal visits
Session 2	What do we know about transition to school?	Repeat intro for new participants Dockett video and discussion Sharing transition practices
Session 3	Understanding the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF), National Quality Standards (NQS) and the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF)	First filming session Discussion re key documents
Session 4	Field visit with a focus on curriculum practices	Joint visits Debriefing curriculum practices
Session 5	Field visit with a focus on Play based pedagogies	Joint visits Debriefing play based pedagogies
Session 6	Field visit with a focus on Partnerships with families	Joint visits Debriefing partnerships with families
Session 7	Discussion of Transition statements Continuity of learning Action planning Project evaluation	Discussion re resource article and Continuity of Learning Final filming session
Session 8	Celebration	Coming together of Bendigo and Tarneit participants to share and celebrate key achievements and highlights of the project

## Tarneit

The Tarneit component of the project was hosted by Tarneit College P-9 (n=6). Tarneit is deemed one of the fastest growing areas in Australia. The area has a high proportion of families from immigrant and refugee backgrounds. The school currently accommodates over 800 students (up to year 8). In 2015, there are 12 preparatory classes, each with 20 children.

The assistant principal identified two kindergartens to be involved in the project:

1. Tarneit Central Kindergarten (n=3) is co-located with the school and has been established for the same length of time as the school. It is managed through ECMS, and;
2. Penrose Kindergarten (n=2) is located a 5 minute drive from the school and has been operating for approximately two years. It is managed through Wyndham City Council. Both services are growing in capacity and will accommodate additional children for 2106 beyond current full sessions. Both service co-ordinators identified that the project was timely for their services moving forward.

A local long day care setting was also invited to be a part of the project however, due to recent staff changes, it was not seen as an optimal time for involvement.

## Session Outline

DATE	FOCUS	ACTIVITY
Session 1	Setting the scene Research background	Signing forms Preparing for reciprocal visits
Session 2	Curriculum and language Kindergarten teachers explain kindergarten requirements	Visits to Kindergarten classes prior to next gathering
Session 3	Feedback from reciprocal visits. Implications for practice	Development of first stage of action plan for 2015/2016
Session 4	Curriculum and language; Prep teachers explain school requirements	Visits to Prep classrooms prior to next visit
Session 5	Feedback from reciprocal visits Implications for practice	Revisit and revise action plan Collect data from interviews with children and families prior to next visit
Session 6	Silenced voices; what about families and children?	Preparing a 5 minute presentation on what has been the highlight for them throughout the project to present next meeting
Session 7	Bringing it altogether; sustaining the momentum	Presentation of project highlights Finalisation of the action plan
Session 8	Celebration	Coming together of Bendigo and Tarneit participants to share and celebrate key achievements and highlights of the project

## EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

This research reconceptualises approaches to evaluating and reporting educational change. Responding to the Victorian State Government's recognition that aspects of the transition process would benefit from enhanced dialogue between educators in prior to school settings and the school sector, the research team facilitated an eight months multi-site exploration of core concepts, philosophies and practices, particularly those related to transition to school processes.

Analysing this professional learning initiative designed to improve continuity of learning through a facilitated Reciprocal Visit program enabled the development of a contextualised model of change practices. Approved University and Departmental ethical protocols were followed throughout the collaborative project.

Experience in this cross-sector initiative suggests that the intersections of relationship, facilitative infrastructure and "spirals of engagement" (Fleet & Patterson, 2001) are key in educational change. Recognising Fullan's (2000, 2001) theories of change leadership in the context of Edwards' construct of 'relational agency', an innovative approach to evaluation of educational change processes has been developed. This approach embeds Edward's Levels of Development within this project's methodological framework, thereby incorporating the Fleet & Patterson (2001) key elements as well as components of Fullan's conceptualisations of educational change. Note, for example, Fullan's recognition that:

'Both local school development and the quality of the surrounding infrastructure are critical for lasting success... research can give us promising lines of thinking but never a complete answer. To some extent, each group must build its own model and develop local ownership through its own process' (2000, p.581).

Similarly, in reflecting another process valued through this project, Fullan goes on to emphasise that in pursuing educational change:

'What does make a difference is reculturing: the process of developing professional learning communities in the school. Reculturing involves going from a situation of limited attention to assessment and pedagogy to a situation in which teachers and others routinely focus on these matters and make associated improvements' (2000, p.581).

Noting this foundation, the explanation of the evaluative framework used in this project turns to a consideration of 'relational agency'.

### Relational Agency

We know from the longstanding research of Edwards and Apostolov (2007) and Edwards (2012) that when multidisciplinary teams work together, that successful partnerships build 'relational agency' giving rise to new narratives about professional practice.

Professionals have relational agency when:

- They attune themselves to the others
- Build common knowledge across the partnership or network
- Set agreed goals
- Clearly understand strategies for effective implementation.

Members of the multidisciplinary teams are:

- Able to take the standpoint of the other
- Are able to be explicit about what matters, as well as recognise what matters to others
- Can attune ones actions with those of others.

Edwards (2005) also refers to the importance, in developing collaborative partnerships, of developing "a propensity for working with others" (p.169). In this project, participants were able to develop successful partnerships built on 'relational agency' through the project methodology. The broad outcomes are encapsulated in the following table, while the detailed findings are presented below.

PHASES	METHODOLOGY	OUTCOME
<b>PHASE 0</b> - Building a sense of belonging	Developing learning communities	Participants expressed pleasure in shared events & contributed to community activities
<b>PHASE 1</b> - Finding out about each others' services	Facilitating cycles of meetings with cross-sector participants	Participants shared knowledge of their own environments and situations
<b>PHASE 2</b> - Engaging in a common experience or process	Sharing reciprocal visits followed by debriefing and/or workshops sessions	Participants engaged in processes offered
<b>PHASE 3</b> - Building a common focus for the group	Identification by Facilitators of focus areas such as Curriculum, Environments & Family engagement for consideration during group sessions	Participants accepted invitations to participate in shared focus and contributed throughout visits and workshops
<b>PHASE 4</b> - Building common language	Highlighting of potentially problematic terms for discussion	Participants developed greater awareness of the interpretation of language through visits and facilitated discussions
<b>PHASE 5</b> - Aligning one's own interpretations with that of others	Differing interpretations of focus topics were made explicit for group consideration	Participants became more aware of differing interpretations of pedagogy
<b>PHASE 6</b> - Thinking about one's own professional expertise and contribution in relation to what others with different disciplinary/ community knowledge and practices bring	Developing of trusting relationships were fostered to enable open consideration of diverse approaches & practices	Strengths and differences across sector affiliations were clearly identified by participants through processes to extend collaborations
<b>PHASE 7</b> - Enhanced professional practice where own contributions are viewed as part of the collectively identified inquiry or need	Foregrounding of common approaches and concerns with children, families and pedagogy across sectors and sites	Production of action plans supported each groups' reappraisal of current practices in the context of shared priorities, particularly with regard to transitions to school

These approaches reflect clearly Fullan's premise that, "working through the complexities of change until we get shared meaning and commitment is the only way to get substantial improvement" (2001, p272). They also reflect a larger premise. Margonis (2012, p.7) wrote that, "The development of respectful relationships is a prerequisite to powerful educational events". Given this foundation, and "Believing that it is the teacher's role to discern patterns at play in educational events which are already in operation, and adapt educational interventions to those patterns" (p.7), he reflected back to his earlier suggestion of "a relational rewriting of Rousseau's position": "Instead of asking after the child's nature and its place in the providential order, the teacher - from this perspective- should ask, 'What can the students and myself be, given who we are?'" (Margonis, 1999, p.249). These perspectives resonate with the relationships-based approach applicable to this initiative.

# FINDINGS

## LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

Both the absence and presence of leadership and management plays a critical role in initiating and maintaining transitions and relationships across educational sites. Effective leadership enables individuals to deliver against organisational outcomes; this is achieved in part through the allocation of necessary resources to achieve such outcomes. Through this project a number of key findings emerged in the leadership domain.

One critical finding pertinent to leadership is the important role of leadership and leadership teams in the development and cross-site relationships as well as the dissemination of transition statements and therefore, the subsequent impact on the success of transition statements. At one site, transition statements were received by the school based leadership teams in late October and not handed over to the preparatory teachers until after orientation visits. Preparatory teachers expressed the need to have access to these transition statements earlier. This became more critical to preparatory teachers after discussions with prior to school teachers which increased their understanding of the strength-based approach to writing the statements, and their value supporting positive transition experiences for children.

Site specific leadership is also critical to ensuring individuals have the resourcing, time and management support required to ensure successful transition of children. Participants in the project identified that one of the enabling factors that supported success was the allocation and prioritising of resources to provide release time for staff. Without prioritisation of resources there was concern regarding the commitment required to sustain this approach. In order to allocate resources and funding against such activities, it was noted that site leaders must place value on supporting reciprocal visits and gatherings.

One preparatory teacher noted the importance of “more communication and visitations” to build strong connections and improve outcomes. She also noted the importance of leadership to drive this process. She said, “It needs to be clearly communicated to leadership of the importance of building these relationships...”

Recognising and accommodating opportunities to engage teachers with transition processes was also seen to require effective leadership and the collaborative efforts of teachers and leaders to find innovative solutions to making the most of available resources. Participants at one site noted that it was difficult to establish relationships with other sites given the challenges of different work requirements, including work hours and limited opportunities to be released from their teaching duties. These challenges were particularly noted in long day care programs, where centre directors were often called upon to fulfill teaching and other duties when faced with staffing shortages, and were therefore unavailable to host or be engaged in reciprocal visits. This challenge was articulated by an experienced director/kindergarten teacher, who in responding to a question about what she knew about the other educational setting said, “Not a great deal - we have very little time available to make visits to schools as we work with children from 8.30am - 4.30pm”.

In the Bendigo region a pre-existing policy limiting contact between schools and prior to school settings was a perceived barrier to the successful transition of children. In the early stages of the project, participants raised concerns about the *‘Enrolment and Advertising Protocols’*, which appeared to inhibit communication across educational sites. For example, the one section of the protocol stated that ‘transition activities will NOT take place in term three’. As a result, participants withheld a range of processes that they believed would benefit children in order to comply with the protocol. It was noted that there was minimal understanding amongst participants about why the protocol was developed and by whom. Despite this, compliance with the protocol remained strong for much of the visit project. Towards the end of the project, it was agreed that the protocol had a negative impact on children’s successful transition and that there was a need to revisit it.



## PERSPECTIVES AND PRACTICES

A central aim of reciprocal visits is to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the pedagogical practices across educational sites. A culture of isolation appeared to exist between sectors along with systemic and historic barriers that inhibiting effective school transition and the transfer of information about children to support a successful start to school.

At the beginning of the project there were assumptions held by individuals about the ways in which pedagogy and practices operated in other sites. For example, prior to school teachers assumed that school based pedagogy was formal and instructional. Furthermore, school teachers thought that the kindergarten teachers “just played all day with children”, and that children were “eating and playing anything whenever they want”. During reciprocal visits school teachers commented on the unexpected level of agency and choices children’s demonstrated in prior to school settings, with children serving their own lunches as having access to a range of resources not available in schools, for example, using butter knives for cutting playdough. Conversely, prior to school educators were surprised with the integration of play-based pedagogies in a number of preparatory classrooms.

There was limited knowledge amongst school teachers about the *Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF)* and the *Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF)*. Similarly, there was little knowledge amongst the early childhood teachers about AusVELs and school based curriculum. While common language was used across sites (such as assessment, curriculum, learning, readiness, partnerships and so on), definitions and understandings of these words varied greatly. As one kindergarten teacher commented early in the project, “I think that to be able to work together better and develop effective transitions, we all need to know more about each others’ curriculum and planning. I realised today I know very little about the primary school curriculum”.

As a result of the reciprocal visits and the pursuing conversations about what was observed, it was noted that there were significant shifts in understanding and perspectives, which led to changes in practices. This included a greater focus on indoor/outdoor teaching, play based pedagogies, the incorporation of children’s interests in school based curriculum, and the influences from the schools of Reggio Emilia. It also included a shift in understanding of the purpose of educational sites; with an acknowledgement of the role of the prior to school setting in underpinning the foundation skills for school, and the potential of the preparatory class to consider play based pedagogy as part of their classroom practices.

One preparatory teacher reporting on the major achievements of the project for her, said she had a greater “understanding [of] the setting the students have come from to better support them”. In recognition of the approach to teaching and learning in the prior to school settings, she also commented that she would be “changing [her] classroom so that it has more hands-on experiences for the students”. In response to the learning from the project another school teacher noted, “I will continue to build on our school plans to develop our outdoor learning area and to engage students in more indoor and outdoor learning”.

Another preparatory teacher, after a visit to the kindergarten and opportunities to discuss the visit noted:

“I have been able to see a lot more and understand why certain things are being done in the kinder and take little bits and pieces and put that into my classroom, so for example, when I went to visit the kinder I saw a lot of the [children] were able to choose the things they wanted to do [...] where as in the classroom setting everything is more structured and organised. [...].

We wanted to have a little bit of that incorporated into the curriculum so I have set up [...] an imaginative play area [...] which is similar to what they did at kinder and it gives [children] a lot of comfort”.

Reciprocal visits and opportunities to discuss what has been observed proved to be an effective way to dispel long held assumptions. Furthermore, as a result of the reciprocal visits, participants’ knowledge and perceptions of the other site moved from what could be interpreted as dismissive and judgmental to a more interested, curious and respectful understanding of the other educational site.

## TRANSITION STATEMENTS AND INFORMATION SHARING

While not the primary focus of this project, conversations inevitably shifted to transition statements. While participants across both sites valued the intent of this information sharing, at the beginning of the project there was a misunderstanding of the content of the transition statements, which led to a devaluing of their potential to support positive transition.

As a result of conversations between teachers across the two educational settings, school teachers realised the need to 'unpack the codes' when it came to interpreting the content of transition statements. This included having greater knowledge about the strengths-based (or ability based) writing style of transition statements, which led to a greater understanding and valuing of the statements. However, there were also specific requests for more information about ways to work with children with additional needs and a desire to have access to this information as early as possible so that the school can adequately ready the environment and curriculum to support children and their families.

As a consequence of ongoing conversations about the transition statements, preparatory teachers in one site reported in the final session that one of the key outcomes of the project for them was "a better understanding of transition documentation". Interestingly, transition statements were not mentioned by any participant at the conclusion of the project in their descriptions of their 'ideal transition practice', as they had now come to a shared understanding of role and purpose of transition statements in each setting.

Preparatory participants expressed frustration about when they received the transition statements once they were aware of their potential value. There was also agreement that the statements would have a higher engagement rate if they were handed to preparatory teachers directly, rather than the assistant principal. This was reflected in the action plan developed by the kindergarten and preparatory teachers at Tarneit. As a result of reciprocal visits there was greater agreement regarding the transfer and utility of transition statements and information contained within them amongst participants.

There was also a lack of clarity related to the Privacy Act, including what information could be shared across the system, and the role parents as partners play in this process. Participants, particularly in one site, identified that this impacted on the transfer of information and consequently the success of transition to school for some children. Some kindergarten teachers were unsure about how much information they were allowed to share; what was considered professional dialogue, and what or how much consent was required from families before conversations could be held.

In relation to information sharing more broadly, reciprocal visits and ongoing professional conversations increased participant's knowledge relating to some of the structural components that impact on settings including staffing levels, curriculum planning time, ratios and curriculum and learning frameworks.

## RELATIONSHIPS

As is clear from the perspective of 'relational agency' (Edwards, 2005), the establishment of face to face relationships was a key component of the reciprocal visits project. Designed to enable cross-sector boundaries to be blurred and personal connections to be made, visits to each others' classrooms/settings and associated debriefing conversations fostered the development of trusting professional relationships amongst project participants. These relationships offered opportunities for the sharing of information, understanding of local pedagogies and practices, and support for strategies to enhance the transition to school of young children and their families.

It was clear that 'connecting up face to face' is the preferred and most effective way of building these relationships, thereby enabling the sharing of knowledge across educational sites and supporting a positive start to school for children and families. One preparatory teacher noted, "this year's cohort settled in more quickly than the past". She attributed this outcome to the stronger relationships and increased face to face communication between kindergarten and preparatory teachers resulting from the project.

The project also highlighted the importance of the frequency of face to face communication to ensure that relationships are sustained over time and that necessary information is shared and discussed in a timely manner. Related to this finding is the importance of acknowledging and accommodating turnover of staff across settings, as this clearly had a bearing on the development of sustained relationships, thereby impacting on the processes required for children's effective transition to school.

One unintended outcome of the reciprocal visits project was the building of relationships between early childhood teachers in Tarneit who had not previously been connected. As a consequence, the early childhood services worked together to facilitate a parent information session, for parents in both sites, for the first time, a strategy that is now included as an ongoing strategy in their action plan. Similarly, having identified the need to "continue to maintain and develop relationships, visits/communication and sharing between settings" as a key priority for successful future transitions to school, plans were developed by a Bendigo school to seek informal opportunities for "coffee and a chat" with their kindergarten colleagues. As one school leader stated, her goal was to "TRIPLE the conversations with kinder teachers!"

## FAMILIES

The reciprocal visit project provided an opportunity for teachers across sites to understand the perspectives of others who may have previously been silenced in the transition process e.g. parents and children's perspectives. Discussion relating to transition processes highlighted that the central role of families has been overlooked to date.

It became clear to all participants that links with families was critical to ensure children succeed in their transition across education sites. Conversations with families seemed limited to school choices and supporting children with additional needs. It was noted by facilitators that the perspective of parents was often overlooked, and as such, was given particular attention during the professional gatherings. This included discussing responses to a book chapter about families and transition (Dockett & Perry, 2013), including implications for practice.

In addition, kindergarten teachers were asked to speak with parents about their expectations about starting school, what, if anything they were worried about, and what would help them feel more prepared or comfortable starting school. Parent responses were shared and discussed. Time was also provided to revisit and amend the action plan in light of these discussions.

Ongoing conversations throughout the project resulted in teachers across educational sites, and in particular in schools, giving greater thought to parents' perspectives and implications for practice. By the end of the project there was greater understanding that transition to school required consideration of the needs of parents as well as children. One preparatory teacher noted, "We think a lot about children, teachers, in schools and kindergarten, but we haven't thought about the families... We need to think about transition to school for parents". Another preparatory teacher endorsed this sentiment when she shared the following, "I need to find more time to discuss different aspects with the parents and I need to develop more of a rapport with the parents so that they will be more likely to open up and discuss issues with me". Yet another preparatory teacher, at the conclusion of the project said, "I gave them [parents] time before, but I answered their questions quickly. Now I'm more mindful and respectful of the concerns they have".

During reciprocal visits and group discussions, there were opportunities for participants to share critical information about children and their families. This included ways in which sites have been supporting and engaging families, particularly those experiencing a range of vulnerabilities including limited literacy, and those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. It also included discussions seeking solutions to ways to address common issues. For example, in one site both preparatory teachers and kindergarten teachers expressed their concerns over families' perceived reluctance about children having a second year at kindergarten. Teachers across both sites believed that parents perceived this as a sense of failure. Participants identified that if both sites were able to represent their view from a 'united' approach parents could see the value in the additional year for the child. There appears to be stereotypes about teacher's perceptions of parents in relation to a second year of kindergarten, and limited awareness of the range of factors that may impact on this decision (for examples, cost, availability, friends going to school).



Participants in one site valued the sharing of resources pertaining to ways in which families can support their child's transition to school. This included information provided by the facilitators with links to existing resources such as those on the Department's website. Other resources included those that were developed for sharing as part of the project, and those that particular sites were using that were unfamiliar. This sharing of information was deemed to be an essential component of supporting children's educational success.

## RESOURCING

Reciprocal visits and associated gatherings were made possible due to the two issues that always arise with resourcing: dedicated time and funding. The importance of prioritising dedicated time to build relationships and understanding of cross institution curriculum, programming, planning and assessment processes, including and beyond transition to school was highlighted in both sites. It was stated by a number of the participants that they were unfamiliar with their colleagues' setting and curriculum and the discussion of this brought about new understanding and appreciation of their role.

Identified allocation within a budget and prioritising the opportunity to connect is essential in order to resource the reciprocal visits across sites. This finding is critical to the ongoing success of the sustainability of the newly formed relationships. As one staff person identified "What's going to happen when the project finishes? I know I can talk to you guys now but how can we keep this going?" From a school perspective, the assistant principal at this site identified the need for reciprocal visits to continue and stated the importance of this being written into the school's strategic plan and having recognition as a line item in the budget. For this community, the benefits of this developing relationship had been strongly recognised and the assistant principal had ensured that they were both part of the 2016 strategic plan and budget.

External facilitators were a key resource for the project. They were able to be impartial in questioning and challenging practices that were raised throughout the project and promote opportunities for critical reflection. For instance, when one group became focused on experiences for kindergarten children in the preparatory environment, facilitators were able to query the purpose of these experiences for the kindergarten children, and refer back to the relationship with the VEYLDF. Specific questions were developed as an ongoing reflective tool to be

considered in relation to suggested activities (see Appendix 6). Further, facilitators were able to provide content, direction and structure around the reciprocal visits. This was followed by opportunities to revisit content in gatherings, which allowed for reflection and the understanding of the application of this knowledge into future practice.

The effective facilitation of reciprocal visits resulted from an understanding of and being responsive to the specific context of each learning community. For example, in Tarneit reciprocal visits were arranged between the prior to school and school participants. They identified suitable times and carried these out accordingly. For the Bendigo site it proved more beneficial for participants to visit sites together as a group. Flexibility ensured that the reciprocal visits were able to occur to meet particular community needs. It was a sign of growth (phases 6 & 7 as part of relational agency, as detailed previously) that participants raised questions about how reciprocal visits could be extended across the community to include the wide scope of educational sites across the municipality, not just the sites involved in the project.

## CHILDREN WITH ADDITIONAL NEEDS

Participants acknowledged that while developing stronger relationships across educational sites would deliver better outcomes for these children, this was particularly important for children with additional needs. There was also agreement that transition statements; both content and timing of delivery, did not provide sufficient information to support positive school transition for these children. Interestingly, none of the participants were aware of the additional documentation to support these children, i.e. Sharing our Journey.

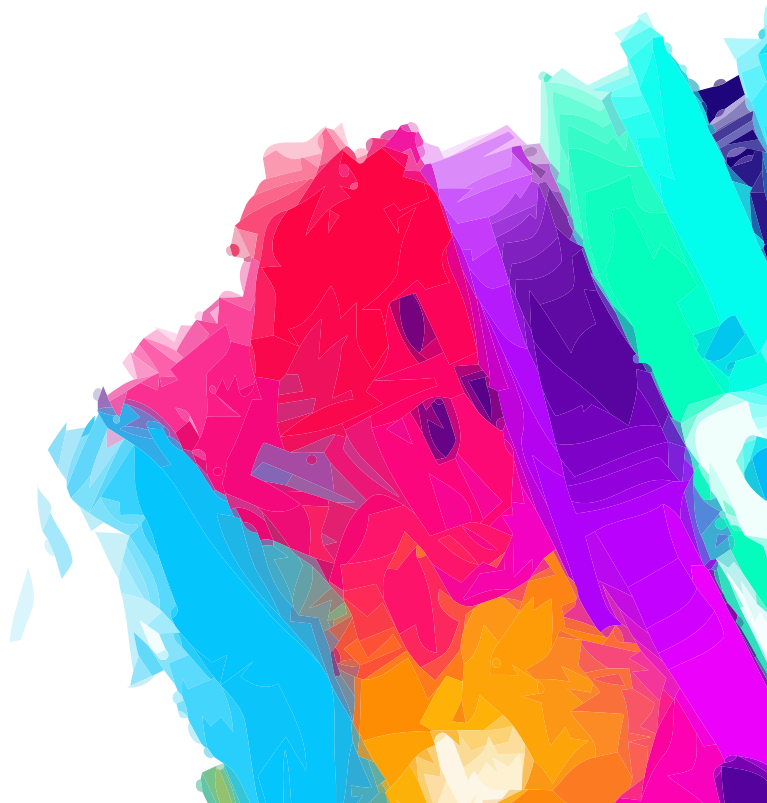
The process of assessment for children with additional needs already conducted and completed by appropriate professionals, in consultation with families, was not automatically an indicator that funding would be received in schools. Participants across sites expressed frustration at the need for the repetition of this process and questioned its purpose, given the distress this created for some families.

It was also agreed that the earlier teachers across educational sites communicated about strategies to support children with additional needs, the better prepared schools would be to ensure all children experienced a positive start to school.

## CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

Reciprocal visits and subsequent discussions during professional gatherings have been found to strengthen and sustain positive relationships between prior to school teachers and schools teachers, resulting in a more responsive, flexible and considered approach to transition to school (Smith, Kotsanas, Farrelly & Alexander, 2010). This project supports these findings, demonstrating benefits beyond teachers and educators, to include children and families. Drawing on the key themes and findings that emerged throughout the eight month project, a number of recommendations can be made to support successful transition to school processes through reciprocal visits. Specifically, it is recommended that:

1. The Victorian Department of Education and Training undertake a scoping study to identify additional sites interested in trialing reciprocal visits and an evaluation framework be developed and implemented across these sites in order to identify the outcomes of these reciprocal visits. Identification of such sites can be undertaken as part of the Bastow Institute of Educational Leadership's course Continuity of Early Learning.
2. Children and families would benefit from a resourced and coordinated approach to facilitating and delivering reciprocal visits across the community. This includes resourcing an external facilitator to co-ordinate and facilitate post reciprocal visit gatherings to support reflective thinking.
3. There is a dedicated onsite contact person at each educational setting who is responsible for transition practices, including the coordination of reciprocal visits and joint professional development opportunities.
4. Reciprocal visits have a clear outcome and intent to ensure that all related activities are in the best interests of children and lead to better outcomes for children and their families during the transition process.
5. Schools and prior to school settings prioritise the sustainability of reciprocal visits through existing budgets and systems, e.g. strategic plans and/or quality improvement plans.
6. Reciprocal visits are ongoing throughout the year and structured in such a way as to build mutual and sustain relationships.
7. Reciprocal visits include opportunities for reflection and discussion post each of the onsite visits or gatherings.
8. There is targeted communication with employers regarding the importance of resourcing reciprocal visits.
9. Transition statement structures and processes are reviewed to ensure they meet their intended purpose and rationale, that is, to support transition to school for children and families, through timely sharing of information across sectors.
10. Transition practices, including reciprocal visits, are documented at a local level to ensure practice is sustained if/when people overseeing transition leave the educational site.
11. Services and schools review and evaluate transition practices with regard to what's working well, and areas for improvement.
12. Opportunities for more targeted reciprocal visits project, incorporating schools and outside school hours care programs, are considered in the future.



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6. What would your ideal transition practice look like?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
7. What are the two main things you hope that this project will assist you with?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
8. Is there anything else the project team should know/think about?

*Please provide the following details:*

**Name:**

**Name of setting:**

**Qualification:**

**Email address:**

**Contact number:**

**Best time to contact (if/as necessary):**

APPENDIX 2: RECIPROCAL VISIT REFLECTION SHEET



RECIPROCAL VISIT PROJECT SITE VISIT THINK SHEET

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of site visit: \_\_\_\_\_

Which site were you visiting: \_\_\_\_\_

Focus of visit: \_\_\_\_\_

What was something you observed relating to the focus of the visit?

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What was something you observed which was unexpected?

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What might be the implications for your practice?

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What might change to enhance transitions?

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What would you like to know more about?

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APPENDIX 3: PROFESSIONAL GATHERING REFLECTION SHEET



PROJECT REFLECTION SHEET

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

What are one or two critical take away messages from today?

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What might you do with this information and how might it be transferred into the workplace?

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What questions have been raised that you would like to explore in more detail?

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APPENDIX 4: FINAL REFLECTION SHEET



**TRANSITION TO SCHOOL: SUPPORTING RECIPROCAL VISITS**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Describe your current transition practices.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. What are your major achievements in developing and/or delivering transition programs for:
  - a) Children
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  - b) Families
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  - c) Your setting?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. What are your major challenges in developing and/or delivering transition programs for:
  - a) Children
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  - b) Families
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  - c) Your setting?









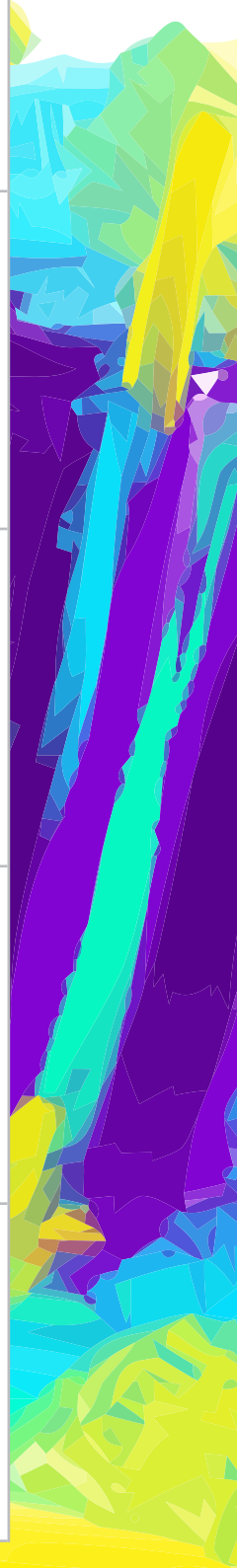
### TRANSITION TO SCHOOL: SUPPORTING RECIPROCAL VISITS – TARNEIT ACTION PLAN

#### Questions to be used as a reflective tool in the ongoing use, review and updating of the action plan:

- What is the purpose and rationale for this action? What is it about? Who is it for?
- What is the relationship between this experience/activity and the VEYLDF, in promoting best possible outcomes for children and families?
- If there is no relationship, what might be another option that respects and acknowledges the Kindergarten child now, and the Prep child they will one day become?

Issue	Discussion points	Action steps	Responsibilities	Timeline	Comments & Questions
Assessment for funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>This needs to be more timely. How do we communicate with parents who may be reluctant to have their child assessed?</li> <li>Assessment for Kindergarten doesn't transfer over to the school setting. Children receiving funding at Kindergarten might not be eligible for funding at school.</li> <li>Paperwork needs to be in by the end of March for schools to access funding.</li> <li>How does information get transferred from school representatives attending the Transition Swap Meet to Prep teachers?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>School representatives who attend Transition Swap Meet hand over transition statements to Prep teachers prior to orientation visits.</li> <li>Conduct a handover meeting so Kindergarten teachers can explain transition statements to Prep teachers for specific children</li> <li>Prep teachers meet with Kindergarten teachers about children they observe at orientation who might benefit from additional support.</li> <li>If needed, Prep teacher follows up with Kindergarten teacher in Term 1.</li> <li>Prep teachers need to complete funding paperwork by March in order to get additional support for that year.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Professional Learning Team (PLT) team leader receives transition statements and pass on to Prep teachers prior to orientation visits.</li> <li>Kindergarten teachers request meetings with Prep teachers following the Transition Swap Meetings for specific children. Kinder director will talk to Wyndham Transition Swap Group to request schools bring diaries to Swap Meets to schedule meetings for specific children.</li> </ul>	<p>November 2015</p> <p>November 2015</p> <p>End of Term 2, 2015</p>	<p>Advocate to the Department about having a transition day for discussions between Kindergarten teachers and Prep teachers, e.g. day before Melbourne Cup?</p> <p>Onus on Kindergarten teachers to speak with schools about children who might need funding in the following year, and to speak with families about this.</p>

Issue	Discussion points	Action steps	Responsibilities	Timeline	Comments & Questions
Working collaboratively towards school readiness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Presentation to groups of parents and then to individual parents, if/ as required. Sessions to include a speaker talking about 'readiness', with schools talking about enrolment and handing out relevant information.</li> <li>• Think of strategies that promote attendance, e.g. including a 'fun' element; have a buddy system with other parents, etc.</li> <li>• Include discussions about deferring starting school, according to children's abilities and needs. The key message being: It's easier to have a second year at Kindergarten, as children don't repeat at school.</li> <li>• Remember there are a number of factors impacting on a parent's decisions to send their child to school, e.g. financial factors.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hold an information session for Kindergarten families early in the year (i.e. Term 1). Follow up with individual parents as required.</li> <li>• Start small, e.g. just involving schools and prior to school settings involved in this project in the first instance.</li> <li>• Kindergarten teachers to share information about the importance of coming to ALL orientation sessions, using different strategies, e.g. newsletters, ongoing conversations, etc.</li> <li>• Kindergarten teachers assist parents to buddy up and support each other to attend orientation sessions.</li> <li>• Kindergarten teachers attend Prep orientation sessions to support children.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kinder directors and AP will drive this.</li> <li>• PLT team leader to provide orientation dates to Kindergarten teachers</li> </ul>	<p>Planning in Term 1, 2015</p> <p>Session held early Term 2 (week 2/3)</p> <p>Term 3, 2015</p> <p>Term 4, 2015</p> <p>Term 4, 2015</p>	<p>Look at this as being a regional opportunity, rather than one school and kindergarten. Local rather than all of Wyndham.</p> <p>Who is responsible to drive this and who pays? (e.g. if/ where there is a cost for the presenter).</p> <p>Costs could be shared between prior to school settings and schools.</p>



Issue	Discussion points	Action steps	Responsibilities	Timeline	Comments & Questions
Working collaboratively towards school readiness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Give families information about why orientation and information sessions are important. Link this back to what it means for them and their child.</li> <li>Include Prep teachers at sessions so parents can see from the start that the Prep and Kindergarten teachers are working together.</li> <li>Looking to the future, consider holding a 'marketplace' with representatives from Independent, Catholic and Department schools, etc. Is this something that schools and/or principals could organise? Is this something the Wyndham Transition Swap working group could facilitate? Who should facilitate this? What's the best first step for 2015?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Trial informal coffee/tea chats with parents – to provide a forum for discussion. Have a question of the month or topic of the week, etc. Kindergarten teachers are there to help families connect up.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Kindergarten teachers</li> </ul>	Ongoing throughout the year	<p>Focus on building relationships. It may not always be about school transition.</p> <p>Think about 'speakers', e.g. the Parent's Association, parents with children at school this year.</p>



Issue	Discussion points	Action steps	Responsibilities	Timeline	Comments & Questions
Prep and Kindergarten teachers working together	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Prep teachers visit Kindergartens prior to orientation to demonstrate to children and families there is a connection/partnership.</li> <li>Prep teachers read a social story about going to school/what happens in Prep. The story will be kept at Kindergartens, for children to read, review and discuss.</li> <li>Prep teachers stay on to chat with families. Capture families at the best time, e.g. prior to pick up time.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Prep teachers create and read social story (keep the story broad enough so it is relevant for children not coming to Tarneit P-9) to children about going to Prep.</li> <li>Prep teachers to review children's portfolios when visiting Kindergartens.</li> <li>All teachers to read social story on transition day.</li> <li>Kindergarten teachers and Prep teachers meet once per term to continue conversations and collaborative actions supporting positive transition to school post project.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Prep teachers to send draft mid term 2 to Kindergarten teachers for comment and feedback.</li> <li>AP to organise coverage for teachers to be released to read the social story.</li> <li>Kindergarten director will take ownership of organising this</li> </ul>	<p>Social story completed and ready for use the beginning of Term 3.</p> <p>Prep teachers visit Kindergarten to read social story in Term 4, prior to orientation visits.</p>	<p>Take care this is also relevant for children not coming to Tarneit P-9. Talk about school and school processes and procedures in general terms rather than being specific only to Tarneit P-9.</p> <p>Explore options for shared PD, e.g. learning about different cultural expectations.</p> <p>Kindergarten teachers make use of the school's PD room for training sessions.</p>



Issue	Discussion points	Action steps	Responsibilities	Timeline	Comments & Questions
<p>Prep students share perspectives with Kindergarten children</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Prep students share information with Kindergarten children about how they felt about starting school, what they have learnt, what is important to know. Kindergarten children ask questions of Prep children.</li> <li>Visits to the school have already started happening, e.g. Prep students reading to Kindergarten students.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Kindergarten children (at Tarneit Central) visit the school to utilise some of the resources they don't have at Kindergarten (e.g. the oval, the library). The library is booked on a fortnightly basis and used as required.</li> <li>Informal reciprocal visits between Kindergarten and Prep children.</li> <li>Kindergarten children visit school for walking tour of the school, accompanied by Prep children. Prep children share reflections and insights about starting school.</li> <li>Prep children return to Kindergarten for a reunion to see how the transition went and for any follow up that might be require</li> <li>Explore options for Prep children to share top tips with kindergarten children about starting school, e.g. visit or virtual visit (via video), Skype, email. Kindergarten teachers to prepare questions for Prep children to respond to.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tarneit Central Kindergarten teachers</li> <li>Penrose Kindergarten teachers</li> <li>Kindergarten teachers to organise this.</li> <li>Prep teachers and Kindergarten teachers work together on this.</li> </ul>	<p>Ongoing</p> <p>One or twice, from Term 3 Term 3, prior to orientation visits</p> <p>Late Term 1</p> <p>End of Term 3</p>	<p>How often, from when?</p> <p>Is it possible to increase Prep planning time to spend time with Kindergarten teachers planning the visits?</p> <p>Will the Kindergarten children be able to manage the expectations? Work towards this – aiming for closer to the end of the year. Perhaps bring Kindergarten children into the classroom when it is not occupied in the first instance.</p> <p>We need to be mindful of the purpose and rationale behind the visits, including links to the VEYLDF, in order to articulate this to each other, families, etc.</p>

