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|  | Supporting Reciprocal VisitsTransition to School |

The *Supporting Reciprocal Visits* project sought to build on current research that identifies the importance of shared pedagogical perspectives between professionals working in early childhood and school settings, combined with reciprocal visiting. A combination of these two promising practices has proven to be beneficial to children and families and the professionals themselves.

Professional development for early childhood and school teachers

Educators at early learning centres and schools regularly engage in various forms of professional development to support their knowledge and professional practice. These sessions sometimes include joint professional development between early childhood and primary school teachers. Early years networks in local areas across the state often focus on ‘transition to school’ as a topic of mutual interest.

There are several different professional development opportunities to assist educators in supporting children through transition. Information about these is available online at: [Transition Learning and Development Resources.](http://www.education.vic.gov.au/childhood/professionals/profdev/Pages/transitions.aspx)

What are reciprocal visits?

Reciprocal visits involve collaboration between early childhood educators and school teachers, through visitation to both settings.

Many schools and early childhood services use reciprocal visits as an opportunity for teachers to meet and enhance their shared professional understanding of early childhood and school based learning environments and practices.

Reciprocal visits can assist in developing a greater understanding of the continuity of learning between early learning and school settings. Communication between educators has been widely advocated as a practice which can enhance children’s transition to school (Hopps 2014).

## *Supporting Reciprocal Visits* project

Across 2014 and 2015, the Department commissioned a series of reciprocal visits to strengthen transition to school processes for children, families and teachers. The aim was to build on and enhance existing relationships between early childhood educators and primary school teachers.

This project, across four sites in Victoria, engaged early childhood and primary school educators in professional learning topics relevant to transition to school, including early literacy development, understanding of pedagogy and practice, and family engagement as rich sources of mutual learning. These were combined with reciprocal visits to deepen mutual understanding of the context and pedagogical practices across settings.

Monash University facilitated the Puckapunyal and Banyan Fields reciprocal visits, while Semann & Slattery in collaboration with Macquarie University facilitated the Tarneit and Bendigo reciprocal visits.

While reciprocal visits for educators appear to be a regular practice across sectors, joint professional learning is less common. This project explored the outcomes of combining these two practices with positive sustainable results.

The *Supporting Reciprocal Visiting Project* final reports outline the number and nature of the reciprocal visits and joint professional learning sessions, participants involved, the impact of the project and suggestions for future work to support children’s transition to school.

Additionally, video vignettes were developed to support ongoing professional learning for all educators on the use of reciprocal visits as a vehicle to reflect on and enhance children’s learning and transition experiences. These practical resources are available on the [Department of Education and Training’s website](http://www.education.vic.gov.au/childhood/professionals/learning/Pages/transition.aspx).

Methodology

We know from the longstanding research of Edwards and Apostolov (2007) that when multidisciplinary teams work together, successful partnerships build ‘relational agency’ give 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.

While the two facilitators both used the Relational Agency Model as a framework to evaluate the project, there were contextual differences in focus for each site that influenced conclusions and next steps.

Despite these differences, all sites identified similar outcomes regarding strengthened relationships between the early childhood educators and school teachers. This valuable connection between early childhood and school teachers has been identified through previous research as a major influence on positive transitions to school.

Additional information on the relational agency model is available on the [Department of Education and Training’s website](http://www.education.vic.gov.au/childhood/professionals/learning/Pages/transition.aspx).

## Project outcomes

There are many opportunities for early childhood centres and schools to create rich respectful partnerships through combining joint professional learning opportunities with reciprocal visits. Reciprocal visits can focus on identified strengths of the local network or identify areas to strengthen a shared knowledge base with a particular focus.

The Bendigo and Tarneit sites focused the reciprocal visit sessions around professional practice and pedagogy. This included discussions of curriculum practice, play cantered teaching and learning pedagogies, resources on continuity of learning, and language. The outcomes included:

* shared knowledge and a deeper understanding of pedagogy, language, environments and local situations;
* re-appraisal of current practices in the context of shared priorities for children and families;
* the identification of strengths and differences across sector affiliations;
* shared events and the opportunity to contribute to community activities; and
* action plans to support ongoing opportunities to continue the project.

The Puckapunyal and Banyan Fields sites focused the reciprocal visit sessions around literacy concepts, common language and understanding of play as a strategy to support learning and the curriculum. The outcomes included:

* greater understanding of a common language for talking about book reading interactions, text meanings and pedagogical practices;
* identification of common practices and patterns in talk interactions;
* understanding of the progressions and continuity of learning; and
* primary school teachers expressed an appreciation for the high levels of analysis of children’s learning in early childhood, linked to curriculum frameworks and quality learning standards.

Benefits of reciprocal visits

Research has identified that opportunities for critical and reflective practice are generated when groups of professionals meet (Flottman, McKernan, & Tayler 2011). Kathryn Hopps (2014) writes that there is an increasing expectation that children’s educators will communicate with each other, and that this will promote more successful transition to school.

## Greater communication and partnerships between early childhood and school teachers is also one of the principles of the Commonwealth Government’s *Continuity of Learning: a resource to support effective transition to school and school age care* (Dockett & Perry 2014).

Further recognised benefits of the supporting reciprocal visits project include:

* vastly improved knowledge of and support for reflective practice
* additional effort to support respectful and ongoing dialogue between early childhood and preparatory teachers
* an improved understanding of how different experiences in settings can be optimised
* improved awareness of how the educational focus in prior to school and school settings has an effect on the other
* greater understanding of practical strategies to support children with additional needs.

## Recommendations for future projects

Strengthening relationships between educators in the early childhood and school sector can have a positive impact on children’s transition to school (Dockett & Perry 2014).

The rich relationships between early childhood and school teachers developed through a reciprocal visiting program, or through other means, can have a positive effect on children’s social competence and has been linked to fewer behavioural problems (LoCasale-Crouch et al. 2008).

The four locations can offer insights for networks considering combining joint professional development with reciprocal visiting including the importance of:

* a clear plan for fostering and maintaining a partnership
* prioritising resources for joint professional development
* using workshop topics of mutual interest that have a direct link back to improving outcomes for children and families as they transition from one setting to another
* engaging an external facilitator with appropriate expertise
* supporting educators to take time to critically reflect upon the professional learning sessions and how this might influence their practice
* developing an action plan following the joint professional development sessions and reciprocal visits to facilitate ongoing successful transitions.

**Appendix 2** provides an example session plan.

References and further information

Dockett, S. & Perry, B. (2014). *Continuity of Learning: A resource to support effective transition to school and school aged care.* Canberra, ACT: Australian Government Department of Education.

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Hopps, K. (2014). Communication that supports positive relationships between preschools and schools at the time of children’s transition. *Early Childhood Folio* 18(2) 8-14.

LoCasale-Crouch, J., A. J. Mashburn, J. T. Downer, and R. C. Pianta. 2008. “Pre-Kindergarten Teachers’ Use of Transition Practices and Children’s Adjustment to Kindergarten.” *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 23 (1): 124–139.

The Department of Education and Training wishes to thank participants at the following sites for their time and effort in contributing to this project:

***Bendigo***

Lightning Reef Primary School

Lightning Reef Early Learning Centre

Havilah Road Preschool

Eaglehawk Preschool

***Tarneit***

Tarneit College P-9

Tarneit Central Kindergarten

Penrose Kindergarten

***Puckapunyal***

Puckapunyal Primary School

Puckapunyal Kindergarten

Mission Australia Early Learning Centre Puckapunyal

***Banyan Fields***

Banyan Fields Primary School

Banyan Fields Kindergarten (Community Kinders Plus)

William Road Kindergarten (Community Kinders Plus)

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|  | Focus | Activity | Key questions |
| Session 1 | Setting the scene  Relationship building | Introduction to reciprocal visits  Overview of current research | What do we want to get out of the program?  What does the research say about transitions? |
| Session 2 | What do we know about transition from an early childhood perspective? | Early childhood teachers provide overview of current practice.  Requirements (legislative and practical) for early childhood settings explained. | What is currently being done by early childhood teachers? |
| Session 3 | What do we know about transition from a school perspective? | School teachers provide overview of current practice.  Requirements and expectations of school teachers clearly explained. | What is currently being done by school teachers? |
| Session 4 | Reciprocal visit #1 | School teachers observe early childhood classrooms and vice-versa. |  |
| Session 5 | Reflection session #1 | Post-reciprocal visit reflection on learnings practices. | What can we learn from early childhood settings? How can we apply it to a school situation?  What can we learn from school settings? How can we apply it to an early childhood situation? |
| Session 6 | Reciprocal visit #2 | Collaborative teaching in early childhood setting |  |
| Session 7 | Reflection session #2 | Post-reciprocal visit reflection on early learning centre practices | How does the early childhood pedagogy and curriculum differ from schools, and how can it be adapted to support continuity of learning? |
| Session 8 | Reciprocal visit #3 | Collaborative teaching in school setting |  |
| Session 9 | Reflection session #3 | Post-reciprocal visit reflection on school practices.  Discussion of Transition of information including how to best utilise the Transition Statements  Initial development of action plan | How can the Transition Statement assist and how do teachers want to use it?  What strategies can be developed to support transition? |
| Session 10 | Project evaluation and action plan | Development of action plan  Project evaluation | How can we ensure a more successful transition for our children? |