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# Transitions to school: Reframing professional relationships

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Systemic splits between pre-compulsory and compulsory early years education impact on transitions to school through discontinuities in children's experience. This paper presents data from a critical participatory action research project about transitions between pre-compulsory and compulsory early education schooling in Australia. The project aim was to investigate how transitions to school might be enhanced by developing deeper professional relationships and shared understandings between teachers from both sectors. Within the communicative space afforded by a professional learning community the participants engaged in critical conversations about their understandings of transitions practices and conditions, including systemic differences. Data analysis provides a snapshot of changes in teachers' thinking about professional relationships, continuity and factors influencing cross-sectorial professional relationships. Findings suggest that affording opportunities for teachers to re-frame cross sectorial professional relationships has led to transformative changes to transitions practices, understandings and conditions.

**Keywords:** transitions to school; critical participatory action research; cross-sectorial professional relationships; professional learning community.

## Introduction

Discontinuities in children's experience arising from systemic splits between pre-compulsory and compulsory early years education impact on transitions to school. Split systems have adverse effects on children due to differences in understandings of children, programme

content and pedagogical approaches (Kaga, Bennett and Moss, 2010). In the state of New South Wales, Australia this split is evidenced as children transition from pre-school (non-compulsory) to kindergarten (first year of compulsory schooling). Typically, this transition occurs in the year the child turns five though in this state, parents tend to 'hold-back' their children for an additional year (Edwards, Taylor and Fiorini 2011). Teacher's perceptions of school readiness exemplify systemic differences that have been identified as tensions within cross-sectorial professional relationships (Henderson 2012). Literature on relationships between teachers in the two sectors has emerged recently in the context of a broader focus on relational aspects of transition to school and an exploration of critical perspectives (Dunlop 2007; Grieshaber and Boyle 2013; Moss 2008, 2012; Petriwskyj 2013). Calls to re-conceptualise or re-frame these relationships have intensified as recent policy changes across western countries including Australia have provided new opportunities and challenges to do so (Moss 2013). This paper presents findings from a small-scale critical participatory action research study investigating how transitions to school might be enhanced through re-conceptualised cross-sectorial professional relationships.

The project began in 2012 a primary school requested researcher involvement with a proposal for transitions funding available at the time. Most of the children transitioning to the school also attend a co-located Long Day Care Centre yet interactions between the two separately administered sites had been limited. Conversations with teachers in both sectors revealed an enthusiasm for engaging in collaborations aimed at deepening their understandings about transitions and their professional relationship. Subsequently, the Building Bridges Professional Learning Community (BBPLC) was established and continues to meet at least once every school term to plan activities across both sites and engage in professional learning and conversations about transitions. In this paper we report findings drawn from data collected during 2013, to provide a snapshot of teachers' thinking about concepts of professional relationships, continuity and factors influencing cross-sectorial professional relationships. We begin by discussing how three inextricably entwined elements of cross-sectorial relationships identified by participants in the BBPLC (Grieshaber and Boyle 2013) are presented in the extant transitions literature (2004 -2014).

## **Literature Review**

### ***Concepts of cross-sectorial professional relationships***

The transitions literature in which cross-sectorial professional relationships forms a major element presents four ways in which concepts of relationships can be conceived. These are functional linkages, systemic linkages, partnership interactions, and dialogic interactions.

Functional linkage concepts of cross sectorial professional relationships involve uni-directional information delivery such as the transfer of child records to schools at the end of preschool or the provision of advice to preschools regarding school expectations of children's

readiness (Grieshaber and Boyle 2013; Noel 2011). Since functional linkages are dominated by pressure to prepare children for school, they are characterised by asymmetrical power dynamics (Henderson 2012; Moss 2008). Systemic linkages range from teacher visits to classrooms, joint meetings and coordination of school orientation visits (Barblett, Barratt-Pugh, Kilgallon and Maloney 2011; Dockett and Perry 2007; Einarsdottir, Perry and Dockett 2008; Noel 2011; Petriwskyj 2013) to more extensive system and policy alignment (Kagan 2010). While systemic linkages are bi-directional and involve more sustained contact, they are sometimes attended by defensiveness arising from readiness pressure (Moss 2008). System-level linkages remain a core element of transitions relationships however recent literature has emphasised interpersonal interactions through partnerships or networks characterised by collaboration and reciprocal communication (Arnup 2014; Barblett et al 2011; Dockett and Perry 2007; Noel 2011; Peters 2014).

Concern about inequality between the sectors has prompted the emergence of the concept of dialogic interaction described by Moss (2013, 229) as a “pedagogical meeting place marked by mutual respect, dialogue and co-construction”. This concept of relationships involves negotiation of the borderland between sectors through dynamic and open co-construction of understandings (Moss 2013; Peters 2014). There is acknowledgement that the two sectors have identities that should not be lost (Dunlop 2013; Woodhead 2007) and that engaging in deep professional debate requires a shared space such as a professional learning community (Henderson 2012). Further research into this emerging concept of dialogic interactions is required, in order to find new ground marked by co-contribution and power equality (Bennett and Kaga 2010; Moss 2013).

### ***Factors that constrain or enable the development of relationships***

The structural, attitudinal, pedagogic and process factors that constrain or enable professional relationships are interwoven with discussion of relationship concepts, and sometimes associated with a specific concept.

Structural constraints such as timetable misalignment, lack of time to consult, or high staff turnover in pre-compulsory settings (Barblett et al 2011; Petriwskyj 2013) have been noted in studies on system linkages and coordination. Structural enablers include pragmatic measures such as altering timetables to facilitate meetings or classroom visits by teachers and alternating the venue for meetings between settings (Noel 2011; Petriwskyj 2013). The imposition of organisational measures such as aligning programmes and policies may, however, impact on teacher attitude as a constraint as pressure to become more alike has been identified as a source of tension (Barblett et al 2011; Bennett and Kaga 2010; Kagan 2010).

The literature on linkages has identified attitudinal constraints such as the unwillingness of teachers in pre-compulsory settings to engage with schools (Noel, 2011). Literature on interactional relationships has focused on the de-valuing of pre-compulsory programmes and the domination of decision-making by schools (Moss, 2012). The attitudinal enablers of mutual respect, reciprocity and trust, and of critical reflection on power dynamics

(Dockett and Perry 2007; Petriwskyj 2013) are evident in literature focussed on partnership and dialogic relationships respectively.

Pedagogic barriers such as differences in learning environments, strategies and teacher expectations or lack of knowledge about teaching in other settings have been linked to philosophical differences based in the separate traditions of the two sectors (Moss 2012; Woodhead 2007). Pedagogic enablers such as the knowledge of curriculum and discussions of classroom pedagogies (Henderson 2012; Peters 2014) rely on shared professional understanding, yet Henderson (2012) has warned that some relationships that emphasised teachers becoming more alike caused tension.

Enabling processes for overcoming the barriers between teachers include researching with teachers to draw on their transition capital (Dunlop 2007), making practice more visible as a basis for discussion, leadership, and the establishment of a professional learning community (Arnup 2014; Henderson 2012; Moss, 2012; Peters 2014).

### ***Constructions of continuity supported by these relationships***

Constructions of continuity during transitions, representing differing theoretical perspectives, are also interwoven with concepts of cross-sectorial relationships. Within functional linkages, continuity has been constructed as readiness or preparing children for school (Moss 2012), reflecting developmental perspectives. This construction has been criticised for failing to appreciate the strengths of preschool curricula and pedagogies (Moss 2012).

Continuity within system linkages has been constructed as priming events such as orientation visits by children, introductory school meetings for families and involvement of the wider community in transition events, or as more extensive integration of curricula (Dockett and Perry 2007; Kagan 2010). These constructions of continuity indicate ecological perspectives that take account of the broader contexts of children's lives. Some constructions focus on the seamlessness of transitions through provision for play in the school programmes (Boyle and Grieshaber 2013) or "making the school ready for children" (Moss 2012, 228), yet extensive alignment sometimes risks the "schoolification" of pre-compulsory education (Bennett and Kaga 2010).

The inclusion of families and communities has also been evident in partnerships, with continuity constructed as relationship-building amongst stakeholders, indicating socio-cultural perspectives. Continuity has been constructed as the incorporation of cultural backgrounds in the school programme, collaboratively-planned transition activities, buddy programmes, and class planning that takes account of children's friendships (Arnup 2014; Petriwskyj 2013).

The emerging vision of dialogic relationships as a professional meeting place, however, draws on a shared culture in which neither sector dominates, and is framed by a critical perspective (Moss 2012). Critical constructions of continuity offer opportunities for reciprocal change in transitions practice such as teachers' negotiation of shared philosophical statements, provision of more personalized transitions strategies and inclusive involvement of all stakeholders in co-development of transitions approaches (Henderson 2012; Petriwskyj

2013). Moss (2008) argues that such changes to transitions draw on collaborative experimentation and critically reflective thought, and that further research into this approach is required. This study seeks to address this gap in the extant literature by examining how dialogic relationships can facilitate changes to transitions practices, understandings and conditions.

### **Theoretical perspective and methodology**

Habermasian (1987) concepts of 'communicative action' and 'communicative space' inform the critical participatory action research methodology (Kemmis, McTaggart and Nixon 2014) employed in this study. Communicative action requires participants to negotiate intersubjective agreement as a basis for shared understanding, so as to reach an unforced consensus about what to do in a particular situation (Habermas 1987). This action opens up a respectful communicative space between participants, builds solidarity and underwrites the conditions under which open, reflective and substantive conversations and actions take place (Habermas 1987). Drawing on these concepts, critical participatory action research:

“aims to help participants to transform i) their *understandings* of their practices; ii) the *conduct* of their practices, and iii) the *conditions* under which they practice, in order that these things will be more rational, more productive and sustainable, and more just and inclusive” (Kemmis, McTaggart and Nixon 2014, 67)

This methodology gathers evidence through conversations among those involved in order to raise questions (e.g., about relationships), stimulate further dialogue and help the participants to reflect on and (possibly) transform understandings, practices and conditions. The participants of this study, with the researcher in the role of critical friend and facilitator, convened the Building Bridges Professional Learning Community [BBPLC] as a communicative space in which to consider the conditions and understandings that inform transitions to school practices in that particular context. Initially, a professional learning community model was suggested as the format for the project as some of the teachers had positive experiences with this format and because it sets up protocols or conditions for the actions that take place within the community. These conditions were negotiated at the first gathering, documented and signed by all participants thereby establishing the conditions of a culture of respect and collaboration detailed by Dufour and Fullan (2013). Philosophical differences and potential tensions within the group were key considerations during the negotiation of these conditions. Later, these were identified by the researcher/facilitator as being in accordance with the conditions set down by Habermas (1987) and Kemmis, McTaggart and Nixon (2014, 49) for the creation of a communicative space within which participants can “establish a relationship in which people can think openly, respectfully and critically together”.

Critical participatory action research engages participants in actions and conversations about understandings, practices and conditions within a communicative space, which in this study was the BBPLC. This requires consideration of five steps within each cycle of action (Kemmis, McTaggart and Nixon 2014). Within the BBPLC four cycles of action occurred during

2013: i) Reconnaissance: Identifying the concern and establishing a statement of intent. Goals of the BBPLC were negotiated and revised at the beginning of each cycle; ii) Planning: Action plans for each cycle were detailed, diarised and agreed upon. These included transition activities for the children, professional learning activities for the teachers and data collection activities to document the research; iii) Enacting: The cycle action plans were implemented between the meetings; iv) Critically reflecting: During the BBPLC meetings and interviews participants reflected critically on how or if the actions undertaken changed understandings of practices and conditions; v) Re-planning: The action plan for each cycle was informed by the actions of the previous cycle and by new understandings of practices and conditions.

### **Methods: Participants, data collection and analysis**

Data informing this paper are drawn from interviews with six participants of the BBPLC; Penny and Peta from the pre-school room (last year of pre-compulsory sector); Kelly and Kris from the kindergarten room (first year in compulsory sector); Paula Director of the Long Day Care centre; and Kate Assistant Principal of the school. These teachers were involved in all four cycles of action throughout 2013 and have been identified using pseudonyms.

Although survey questionnaires and BBPLC meeting notes were also used to gather evidence, data reported in this paper are drawn from conversations recorded as semi-structured interviews (Kvale 2007). These individual interviews provided participants with a communicative space to engage in conversations about their lived experiences (Flick 2009) of transitions that was not afforded by the BBPLC. Stronger expressions of difference and change were noted in this data set, possibly due to the confidential and personal nature of the individual format. Capturing conversation early (cycle one) and then again late in 2013 (cycle four) provided a pre and post context to compare responses and to identify change. Each participant was asked three generic questions and two specific questions informed by issues raised or comments made in the BBPLC. The interviews lasted between 40 and 80 minutes and were scheduled at times and locations suited to participants. Participant validation (Kvale 2007) was undertaken by providing each participant with the transcribed interviews to check for accuracy.

Data analysis was guided by three questions identified from the larger study: i) what *concepts* of cross-sectorial professional relationships do teachers in pre-compulsory and compulsory early years education hold? ii) what *factors* do teachers identify that constrain and enable cross-sectorial professional relationships do teachers identify?, and iii) how might cross-sectorial professional relationships facilitate the negotiation of shared understandings to support *continuity* during transitions to school? Transcripts of the cycle one and cycle four interviews were initially coded (Gibbs 2007) as *concepts*, *factors* and *continuity* and then coded again using categories informed by the literature review. Individual category data were then collated into tables where analytical memos (Saldaña 2009) were recorded to note constructions of the categories by the end of cycle four and shifts between cycles. A final analysis of patterns and trends was compared with a second researcher and with frequency counts for each category (see Tables 1, 2 and 3). Evidence indicated in the tables below as

overall changes are presented as responses to the guiding questions. Consistent with the methodological approach, findings are presented as ‘captured conversations’ so others might take something away from the story (Kemmis, McTaggart and Nixon 2014).

## Findings

### ***What concepts of cross-sectorial professional relationships do teachers in pre-compulsory and compulsory early years education hold?***

Concepts of cross-sectorial professional relationships identified in the literature framed category codes as i) Functional: unidirectional linkages, asymmetrical power, senders and receivers; ii) Systemic: connections, alignment; iii) Partnerships: interpersonal, reciprocal communications and exchanges; iv) Dialogic: negotiation, shared understandings, transformative actions, symmetrical power dynamics.

Insert Table 1. Concepts of relationship identified by participants.

By the end of cycle four, teachers held all four concepts of relationship concurrently however dialogic concepts profiled most strongly across both sectors and were linked to the BBPLC. Peta described this interaction in the following way *“I found [the BBPLC] very inclusive and everyone was prepared to have dialogue and open their minds and think beyond what they do and see what we did with more open eyes”*. This statement is indicative of conversations acknowledging that transitions understandings and practices do not rely on the sectors becoming mirror images or forcing change on one another, but on the gradual negotiation of shared understandings about the conditions in which transitions are enacted. There was a focus on personal contact, listening and awareness of power differentials as a basis for deeper relationships, yet some reservations about reciprocity in relational initiatives and transitions activities were also expressed. Whilst some teachers identified links between dialogic and partnership concepts, Kate differentiated these: *“I don’t think it is a partnership because I don’t think we’ve got the same agenda”*. Systems concepts of relationships included discussions about the value of classroom visits for deepening understanding of practices and conditions. Karen commented: *“We spent half a day there, it was lovely. I’ve never stepped foot into a preschool or long day care centre, in the actual room where the learning is happening”*.

Change from cycle one to cycle four was particularly marked in shifts from functional and systemic linkages to an interpersonal focus on partnerships and dialogic interactions. Kate identified a shift in the nature of the relationship stating, *“Because of the time we have been able to spend together we have a relationship, better than it was 12 months ago. I think having that time to [meet and] share thoughts ... I guess I’m talking about a professional relationship”*.



There was a marked reduction in identification of functional concepts framed by sending-receiving readiness skills information. As shown in Table 1 systemic concepts decreased as understandings of systemic pressures and demands deepened. As Kris noted: *“Because we’ve had the professional discussions, we’ve come to understand each other’s situation and clarify our own a lot”*. Dialogic concepts shifted from intent to share professional understandings to an increased awareness of power differentials and insights into unforced consensus. The remaining differences between sectors clustered around concepts of systems and partnerships

In summary, concepts of cross-sectorial professional relationships held by this group of teachers encompass functional, systems, partnership and dialogic constructions, which were often held concurrently. There was a shift from systemic and functional linkages to interpersonal concepts of relationships, most notably dialogic constructions.

### ***What constraining and enabling factors to cross-sectorial professional relationships do teachers identify?***

Enabling and constraining factors influencing the development of professional cross-sectorial relationships identified in the literature were assigned as category codes. They are i) Structure: physical and organisational; ii) Attitude: beliefs, feelings, emotions; iii) Pedagogy: philosophies, approaches, curriculum, iv) Process: leadership and facilitation, procedural.

Insert Table 2. Constraining and enabling factors identified by participants.

Constraints evident at the end of cycle four were dominated by structure, attitude and pedagogy factors, including an anomaly between the school’s enrolment policy and practices and the lack of alignment between curriculum frameworks. Penny spoke about the anomaly between the school’s enrolment policy and practice *“If their policy was ‘well we won’t take them unless they’re five by the beginning of the school year’, we [the BBPLC] wouldn’t be having this debate”*. Preschool teachers noted conflicting pressures from parents wanting their children to start as soon as they were eligible (four and half years) and some schoolteachers recommending additional time in preschool. A persistent pedagogic constraint across both sectors is evidenced as different expectations and cultures regarding children’s level of choice, reflecting philosophical discontinuity. Enabling factors most prominent at the end of cycle four were attitude, pedagogy and process, evidenced as deeper respect for and understanding of practices and conditions. Enabling processes included the contribution made by a critical friend/facilitator to the BBPLC meetings, the communicative space within the BBPLC and the negotiation process of a transition statement document.

Table 2 shows that change from cycle one to cycle four was most prominent in attitude factors. Participants linked a shift from defensive attitudes to more empathetic views with on-going personal and professional contact between the teachers. Penny explained: *“Another eye-opening moment, I was looking at them and listening to these teachers and I’m*

*thinking ' You know what. You're feeling exactly the same.' I felt a sense of sisterhood with her".* By cycle four pedagogical constraints reflect comparisons between local preschool programmes replaced earlier comparisons between sectors. At each cycle these comparisons revealed a cautious and at times defensive philosophical position. Kate commented: *"I don't think they wanted us to tell them what to do and we didn't want to be, have things imposed on us either"*. All enabling factors increased, particularly process enablers. The sharp increases in process enablers related particularly to the space afforded by the BBPLC to negate power issues, engage in robust debate and critical reflection, negotiate shared understandings and collaborate on the design of the policies (for example transition statements) that changed practices. Peta explained: *"I've really enjoyed being involved... having these conversations and listening to different perspectives ... it's really increased my awareness of things and what I do in my setting because through these conversations you are reflecting and describing what you do"*. The increase in structural enablers was related to the affordance of time to engage in the activities of the BBPLC, yet there was little change in structural constraints related to enrolment policy, starting age and curriculum. A marked increase in attitude enablers, particularly in the preschool sector, arose from the sense of successful negotiation, pride in achievements and increased respect and empathy for each other.

In summary, the key enabling factors to emerge from these conversations were positive attitudes, enhanced pedagogic understanding and the BBPLC processes. Key constraining factors focused on policy context and philosophical discontinuity reflecting deep-seated and historical artefacts of a split system.

***How might cross-sectorial professional relationship facilitate the negotiation of shared understandings to support continuity during transitions to school?***

Literature constructions of continuity and the theoretical perspectives informing them were assigned as category codes, and examined for links with relational concepts. The codes are i) Developmental: readiness, hierarchical; ii) Ecological: contextual connections, seamlessness; iii) Sociocultural: stakeholder interactions, reciprocity, iv) Critical: transformative, negotiated, contextual.

Table 3. Constructions of continuity identified by participants.

Table 3 shows that by cycle four, critical, ecological and sociocultural perspectives dominated, and five of six participants expressed critical constructions of continuity as a long-term process of supported personalised change. Establishing shared understandings about continuity informed by critical perspectives meant teachers could accept and acknowledge differences between their 'two worlds' and the collaboratively develop transitions strategies relevant to a range of stakeholders. Paula commented that it is *"... Good to be different and to understand how each sector is operating and to respect that but not necessarily blend together to be the same because that would be boring for the children"*. The process of change involved deep and

sometimes difficult debate: *“And when it came to the crunch when we talked about transitional activities, that was a powerful moment... You actually have to go through a little bit of pain to grow, and that was such a huge growth moment”* (Kate). Spending time in others’ learning environments, reflecting, engaging in robust debates, and negotiating the design of a succinct and meaningful transition statement were mentioned as key experiences influencing the formation of more critical constructions of transitions and continuity.

Ecological views of continuity varied from the application of teachers’ knowledge about contextual differences to helping children adjust to change, but seamlessness across sectors was rejected because of policy gaps, pedagogical and philosophical differences, and limited knowledge about others’ curriculum frameworks and assessment practices. Kris noted the following: *“Talking about linking curriculum documents, it’s something we do need to know more about, maybe that’s where the system needs to put some energy. You know if we hadn’t been doing this project, no one would have given us that document”*. Partnerships supported sociological constructions of continuity as teacher-child and teacher-parent relationships-building during transitions. Kate commented: *“We need to see what’s going help to the parents transition to primary school. Because we’re not transitioning just the child, we’re transitioning the whole family. Preschools do that really well because they transition families into the setting, they’re always talking about the family”*. This perspective on continuity emerged through personal interactions over time, and was reflected in comments such as: *“It’s like you’re on a journey in regards to getting to know the children that will be coming to you and building relationships. I think what we have put in place has really helped with the transition of children. We’re meeting them where they’re at in regards to learning”* (Karen). By cycle four, few developmental constructions of continuity as readiness were expressed, as teachers moved towards sharing broader understandings of children before and after school entry that supported more personalized transitions and reflect critical constructions of continuity.

As relationship concepts shifted, a marked change from cycle one to cycle four was noted with movement away from developmental perspectives emphasising orientation and readiness towards a broad range of perspectives on continuity during transition. Karen observed, *“Understanding what transition is to orientation, I used to put those two words under the same umbrella. Now I know what orientation means and I know what transition means, you know orientation is just a small part of the transition”*. Initial constructions of continuity as ‘readiness’ shifted to conversations about supporting children and their families during a longer-term process through which gradual understandings of differences in settings, expectations and people could be formed. Peta explained, *“I think I understand how I probably need to help children transition into that school in terms of their understanding”*. The planning, range and time period across which transitions activities were undertaken changed from school-planned short-term orientation events to a long-term, co-developed sequence of shared activities including visits of children and teachers across the settings. There was also a shift in the language used by teachers in both sectors from hierarchical terminology (going up to school, down to preschool) to parallel terms (across, over), reflecting more equitable constructions of continuity.

In summary, while readiness views continued to be expressed, continuity constructions attended more to supporting children’s awareness of change as they

commenced school, long-term shared transitions activities, enhanced schoolteacher interactions with children and families, and more personalized transitions. The participants engaged in professional learning, respected difference, and established the shared understanding that transition practices and conditions do not have to yield to another to effect continuity.

## **Discussion**

The interweaving of relationship concepts, enablers and transitions continuity in the extant literature indicated that interactions between these elements might not be direct or linear. Our data indicate that interactions were complex and dynamic, and that multiple connected elements contributed to the transformative changes to practices, understandings and conditions (Kemmis, McTaggart and Nixon 2014). Each is discussed in turn.

Transformative change of practice was evident in a shift from short-term orientation events and school-like readiness activities towards longer-term shared transitions activities such as regular visits across settings. Changed practices were framed by shared understandings of the importance of prior learning and sustained interaction across settings (Einarsdottir, Perry and Dockett 2008; Petriwskyj 2013). The co-construction of a transition statement that linked learning across the sectors required the teachers to engage in robust conversations and professional learning in order to reach unforced consensus on the design of the statement. Developing transitions policies reflects a commitment to sustainability and personalisation of transition pedagogies framed by deeper understanding of children and families. The BBPLC provided a communicative space to examine practices, to consider cross-sectorial perspectives and to reflect on possibilities for more rational and sustainable practice. In the context of this study the provision of such a space is not common, yet it was critical to the development of mutual understandings of others' points of view. It became a space where differences were strengths or sources of deeper learning, rather than deficits or compromises.

Negotiating shared understandings is reliant on the premise that they must be reached through unforced consensus. This emerged in this study when the group reflected on a chapter written by Dunlop (2007, 165) in which she states "The two worlds of preschool and school are both important, and have identities that should not be lost, a bridge between them is important, a recognisable landscape on each side of the gap helps". From this point, conversations were freed of suspicion about forced change in the form of schoolification or preschoolification (Moss 2008). Having different agendas was seen as an opportunity to reframe practice architectures (Kemmis, McTaggart and Nixon 2014) informing transitions. Recognising difference as a strength and acknowledging the importance of having an understanding not only of the terrain on either side of the bridge, but also how it was formed is consistent with the concept of relationships as a meeting place where new and shared understandings can be co-constructed (Moss 2013).

Closely examining understandings of practices may not necessarily lead to the negotiation of shared understandings, as evidenced in this study with respect to the school's enrolment practices and policy. This unresolved matter represents a barrier (Henderson 2012) and potential source of tension or threat to the negotiation of understandings that support

rational and sustainable practices. However, as Kemmis, McTaggart and Nixon (2014, 36) note, “because communicative action opens up this respectful space between people, participating in communicative action builds solidarity between participants, and underwrites their understandings and decisions”. Solidarity, evidenced as a ‘sisterhood’, has been exhibited in the BBPLC and represents an encouraging enabling factor for future negotiations.

Consistent with Peters’ (2014) insights, the teachers in this study noted the value of classroom visits in developing deepening understandings of conditions that inform transition practice in each sector. Hopps’ (2004, 8) earlier observation that interpersonal cross-sectorial interaction “does not happen very often or very well” highlights the paucity of opportunities for cross-sectorial professional dialogue, as there are no systemic policies that mandate or fund cross-sectorial interactions in most Australian state jurisdictions. Bi-directional system linkages that develop cross-sectorial professional relationships to improve transitions make sense (Dockett and Perry 2007) but require change in policy and funding conditions.

While leadership, researching with teachers, making practice more visible and the formation of a professional learning community have been identified earlier as process enablers of deeper transitions relationships (Arnup 2014; Dunlop 2007; Henderson 2012), this study identified further factors: the external facilitation of debate, the protocols guiding operation of the BBPLC, and the process of developing the shared transitions statements. In these conditions the members of the BBPLC were empowered to interrogate long-held systems beliefs about transitions, and in doing so they transformed several transitions understandings and practices. Achieving this transformation required a relationship and a space that enabled these teachers to break through professional barriers and hierarchical concepts of cross-sectorial professional relationships (Henderson 2012; Moss 2013). Recognition of a ‘better professional relationship’ signifies a shift in conceptual framing of possibilities for cross-sectorial relationships that negate the power differentials that exist between systems (Moss 2008) and recognise both worlds as being valuable (Dunlop 2007).

## **Conclusion**

Adopting a critical participatory action research methodology, we have captured the conversations of teachers about cross-sectorial professional relationships to extend the emerging body of literature reporting critical approaches to transitions to school. Through this study we have learnt that teachers hold a range of concepts of cross-sectorial professional relationships and that relationships frame possibilities for continuity during transitions to school. The study indicated that various factors constrain or enable the development of these relationships and that some, though not all of these can be changed or reframed through sustained professional interactions and dialogue. Since context matters, the conditions that facilitated changes to understandings and practices for this group of teachers may not be suited to other professional communities. This study might, however, encourage others to consider innovative relational processes as an opportunity for change and critical participatory action research as a methodology to investigate transitions to school. Finally, the evidence prompts action at a policy level to invest in teachers as transitions capital, since strategies such

as the BBPLC reported in this paper require funding to afford teachers the time to establish and engage in cross-sectorial professional meeting places.

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Table 1. Concepts of relationship identified by participants

	FUNCTIONAL		SYSTEMS		PARTNERSHIPS		DIALOGIC	
	C1	C4	C1	C4	C1	C4	C1	C4
PRESCHOOL SECTOR	3	2	4	1	7	2	2	8
SCHOOL SECTOR	5	1	6	4	5	5	2	6
<b>OVERALL CHANGE</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>14</b>

Table 2. Constraining and enabling factors identified by participants

	STRUCTURE		ATTITUDE		PEDAGOGY		PROCESS	
	C1	C4	C1	C4	C1	C4	C1	C4
	<b>CONSTRAINING</b>							
PRESCHOOL SECTOR	1	1	8	2	5	3	0	1
SCHOOL SECTOR	3	4	2	5	4	5	1	2
<b>OVERALL CHANGE</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>
	<b>ENABLING</b>							
PRESCHOOL SECTOR	0	1	4	10	6	7	1	4
SCHOOL SECTOR	1	3	4	4	1	4	0	5
<b>OVERALL CHANGE</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>9</b>



Table 3. Constructions of continuity identified by participants

	DEVELOPMENTAL		ECOLOGICAL		SOCIOCULTURAL		CRITICAL	
	C1	C4	C1	C4	C1	C4	C1	C4
PRESCHOOL SECTOR	7	4	7	5	0	2	0	8
SCHOOL SECTOR	6	1	6	7	6	8	4	4
<b>OVERALL CHANGE</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>12</b>