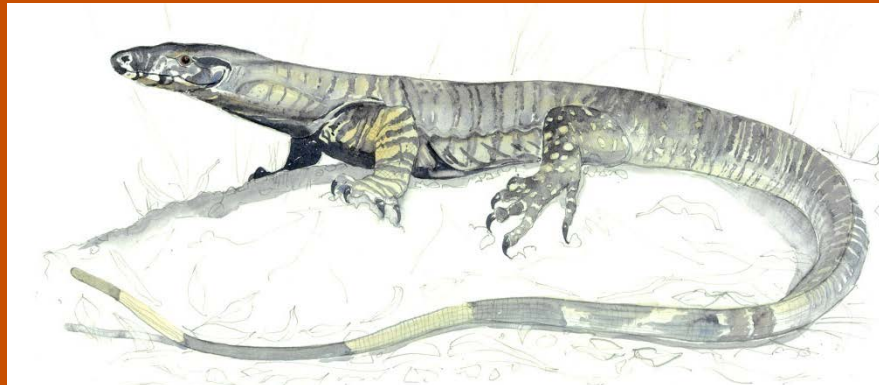# Starting school: Connecting policy and practice

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Overview

- Introduction to the project
  - team, aims, background, approach
- Sharing preliminary results
  - Phase 1: initiating policy
  - Phase 2: interpreting policy
  - Phase 3: implementing policy
    - Practitioner survey
    - Networks
- Seeking feedback
  - Small group discussions

Continuity and change as children start school

- Australian Research Council Discovery Grant DP130104276

- The research team: Sue Dockett, Bob Perry, Jessamy Davies, Paige Lee, Kathryn Hopps, Emma Kearney, Natasha Hard, Elspeth Harley

- Key Australian project in the international research alliance Pedagogies of Educational Transition (POET) supported by EU and associated funds.

Continuity and change as children start school: Context

- Increasing worldwide attention to early childhood education (0-8 years)

- Raft of early childhood reforms – including the *Early Years Learning Framework*

- Development of the *Australian Curriculum*

- Transition to school – creates the space where different contexts, systems, curricula, philosophies and approaches meet and where educators generate new pedagogies as they engage with these differences

Project aims:

1. To analyse the policy-to-practice context of the introduction of two new approaches to curriculum for early childhood education in Australia, with a particular focus on the transition to school.

2. To interrogate pedagogies of educational transition in order to provide practice-based evidence to inform the transition to school intentions of the two curriculum approaches.

Why?

While comparing the two documents provides an important basis for examining approaches to transition, Bowe, Ball and Gold (1992, p. 13) caution that 'policy does not end with the legislative moment'.

Rather, curriculum implementation involves ongoing interpretation and re-interpretation of these documents, as educators adopt, adapt and sometimes reject elements of the policy texts. Perceived tension influences implementation.

Conceptual frameworks

- Bioecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006)
  - Focus on person, process, contexts and time elements
- Policy-trajectory models (Ball, 1993, 1994)
  - Focus on different spheres of influence in policy initiation, interpretation and implementation
- Practice-based research (Potter & Quill, 2006)
  - Focus on what happens in practice and how this informs policy as well as practice

Policy trajectory model

Identifies and examines three different levels in the development and implementation of policy and practice in educational transitions:

- the context of influence (where policy is **initiated** and policy discourses constructed);
- the context of policy text production (where policy related to **interpretation** is created); and
- the context of practice (locations in which policy is interpreted and reinterpreted by educators as it is **implemented** in practice).

In this project, these are represented by:

- national early childhood education reform agenda – particularly the EYLF – and the impetus for the Australian Curriculum

- state/territory and organisational/systems approaches and guidelines to promote implementation of the curriculum approaches; and

- local educational practice as educators implement the new curriculum approaches

Analysis using this model:

- recognises that while statutory frameworks set out expected standards, various interpretations of these occur at different levels, as non-statutory guidance promotes particular pedagogical approaches or strategies;

- acknowledges that tensions occur at multiple levels in policy development as 'policies evolve, change and decay through time and space' (Ball, 2006, p. 17);

- highlights the political nature of both policy and practice; and

- positions policy as an interactive, interpretive process, rather than a linear, or top-down, process.

In this presentation:

Context of initiation:

- what are the policy contexts for the EYLF and AC?
- what references are made to transition?

Context of interpretation:

- what happens at systems/organisational levels?

Context of implementation:

- how do educators think about starting school
- how do professional networks support implementation?

Methods

Phase 1: interviews with policy elites; document analysis

Phase 2: interviews with policy elites; document analysis

Phase 3: national survey; identification of professional networks supporting transition to school; site visits and participation in network meetings

Search conference – seeking your input.

Phase 1: initiating policy

- Interviews with 29 'policy elites' – with roles in some way connected with policy development of EYLF/AC

  - 6 people declined invitation to participate
  - Difficult to locate all those who may have been involved

- Focal point – from 2007 and moves to develop EYLF and AC

- Interviews conducted 2013-2014

What we asked...

- Their roles/involvement in policy development
- Policy changes in early childhood education (0-8 years) in the last 10 years and the drivers for these
- Broad outcomes of policy changes for early childhood education
- Place of transition to school in policy
- Changes to practice as a result of changes in policy

For both curriculum approaches:

- *so there's a national effort, that means there are conversations going on across the country.*
- *it was very complex work…everything had to be negotiated with the states and territories…and we had a field that hadn't … really worked together before.*
- *It's about equity…making sure all children …wherever they are…have the opportunity to access high quality education*
- *It was a really ambitious change agenda and it required a massive effort to move to a national system…*

Policy drivers: Early Years Learning Framework

- International comparisons – *we didn't come out looking very good* in OECD reports

- Overseas research was influential –
  - Abecedarian,
  - Perry High/Scope,
  - brain research (Fraser Mustard)
  - Heckman's economic argument

- Awareness of overseas experience – *our time in the sun; sense of urgency*

National drivers:

- *There wasn't much of a research base in Australia …*
- Human capital agenda – productivity
- Equity argument
- Reinvigorated COAG processes
- Market issues – ABC

Changes in early childhood education:

- Part of a larger whole – *extensive reform package*

- *Enhanced professionalism* across sector

- Moves to greater cohesion across sector – helping to *build the integrity of the field*

- Support for *national consistency* – e.g. preschool; child care; approaches to quality

Policy drivers: Australian Curriculum

- Impetus from COAG National Education Agreement and establishment of ACARA

- Tensions – state and territory responsibilities in the contexts of a national curriculum

- A *long lead time*…staged development and implementation

- International comparisons – *competing against ourselves*

Policy drivers: Australian Curriculum

- National influences – *accountability by comparison*

- Learning from *existing effective practice*

- *Increased efficiency* with a common curriculum

- Also linked to *equity* arguments

- Interpretation at state/territory level – *expect variation*

- Support for mobile students – more a public perception than a policy imperative

A national curriculum

…in previous attempts there was politically and culturally much more emphasis on issues of states' rights. That political principle…has …been replaced by a different level of more localised ownership process.

A decade ago … if I'd been asked if we would ever have anything national in education I would have doubted that happening

Connections between EYLF and AC?

the best way to articulate them [the different documents and approaches] was through the pedagogical practice…the Australian Curriculum doesn't dictate anything about pedagogy, whereas the Early Years Learning Framework is more focused around pedagogy…[articulation would happen when] people used the pedagogical practices of the Early Years Learning Framework as they delivered the Australian Curriculum…

Connections?

…the language around what people are doing and how the two fit together is probably where we need to do the most work…that becomes really tricky with people who are philosophically in two different places…

Transition to school

if we really want to get that transition happening smoothly you need people from the other sectors involved in the work…the critical part is to get that balance right. You don't want to have too many from either side pushing the line. And there are always issues about territory…whose job is it and who knows more about it than someone else. But if you want to get a smooth transition you have to have involvement from both sectors…

Phase 2: Interpreting policy

- Interviews with 41 'policy elites' involved in the interpretation of policy at the system/ organisational level

- Similar focus to Phase 1, but emphasis on:
  - Impact of policy changes for their system/organisation
  - Actions to interpret the relevant policy
  - Actions to promote implementation
  - Plans for sustainability of implementation
  - Specific focus on transition to school

Across both sectors...

- Extensive nature of change – content and time
- Interpreting policy:
  - What is core?
  - Flexibility and creativity
  - Consistency
  - Advice about embedding relevant curriculum principles
  - Determining focus for professional development
  - Generating resources and guidance

Interpreting policy

- Building capacity and understanding
- Changing expectations – e.g. integrated services
- Time and context for reflection
- Focus on professional conversations

It was a good opportunity...[but] constraints of two new curricula have actually broadened the gap [between educators in prior-to-school and school settings]...educators, either in using the EYLF or the AC are really feeling the pressures of the other things that have come into play...like NQS, AEDI...push for data...

Interpreting policy

Some are saying 'we've got a national curriculum why do we need all these curriculum experts?' ... [people] are just trying to implement the document on their own, in the dark, and the quality is often going backwards because of the sheer load of it all...

If the issue is consistency...maybe we get that in a document. If the issue is quality, maybe we get that in a document, but the interpretation of the document and how it is implemented in each classroom is different... implementation has to be site-based..we need to focus on what is enduring beyond the latest document...

Transition to school

- *Anything we do needs to involve conversations across the sectors*
- Variation across jurisdictions
- Identified need to build professional regard and respect across sectors
- Importance of inter-setting knowledge

Phase 3: Implementing policy

- Practitioner survey
- Exploring Transition to School Networks

Practitioner Survey – Outline of Questions

- Demographics
- First five things that come to mind
- Transition in your setting
- Importance to a child's successful transition to school
- Transition to School: Position Statement
- Usefulness of transition activities
- Determining successful transition to school
- Summary statements
- Networks

Practitioner Survey

	Prior-to-school	School
Weblinks sent	187	91
Completed surveys	154	82
Response rates	82%	90%

Survey Numbers and Response Rates

|	PTS	School
ACT	2%	3%
NSW	39%	34%
NT	7%	11%
QLD	19%	10%
SA	12%	6%
TAS	5%	4%
VIC	14%	27%
WA	3%	5%

Percentage Distribution across Jurisdictions

First Five Things

A. **Adjustment**: social adjustment to the school context, including interpersonal and organisational adjustment

B. **Disposition**: children's attitudes towards, or feelings about, school or learning

C. **Educational Environment**: concern about the nature of the school environment

D. **Family issues**: issues related to family functioning or involvement with the school

E. **Knowledge**: ideas, facts or concepts that needed to be known in order to enter school

F. **Physical**: physical attributes, needs or characteristics of children, including issues about safety, health and age

G. **Rules**: fitting in with the school and school expectations

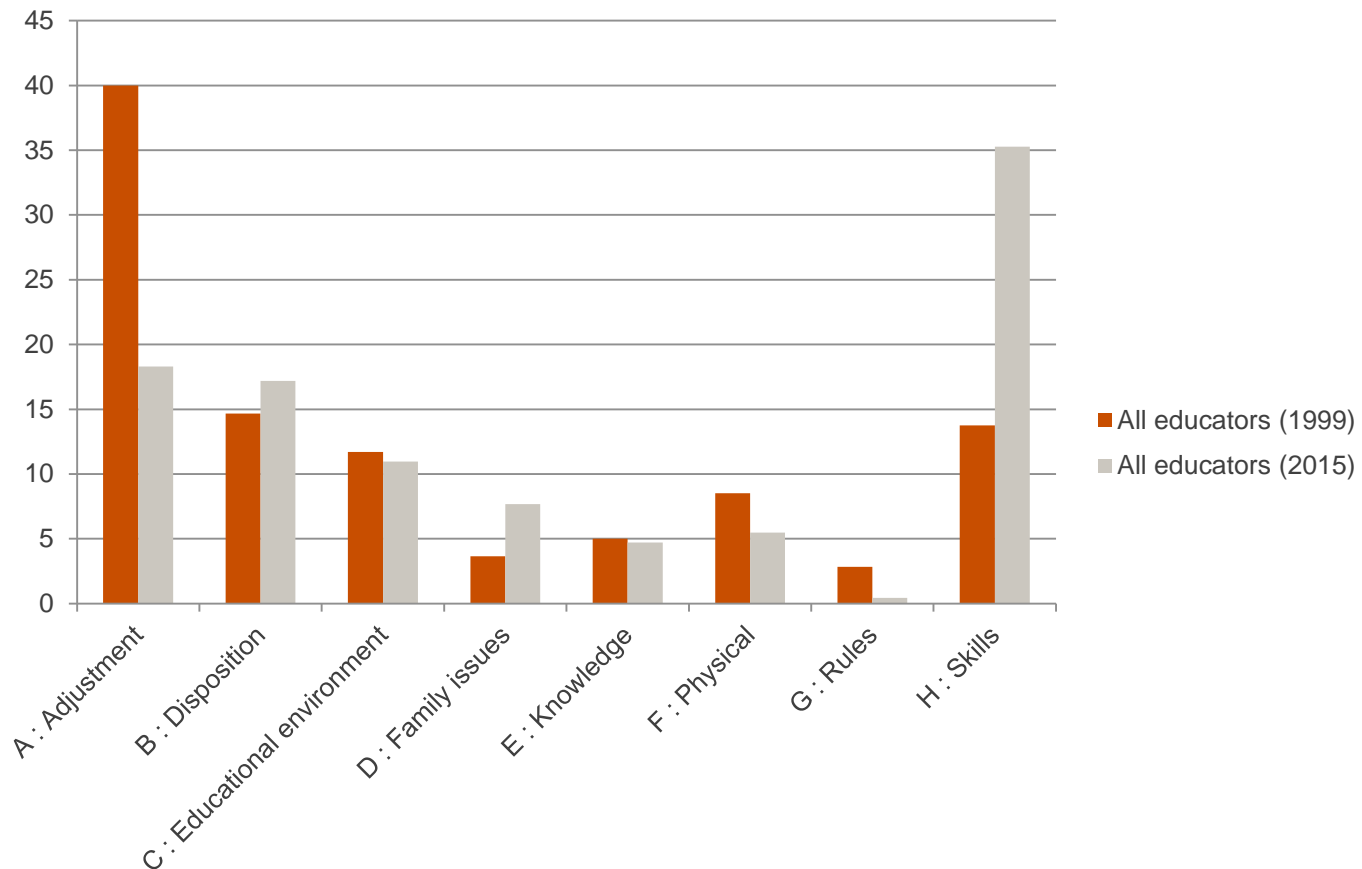H. **Skills**: small units of action that could be observed or inferred from observable behaviour

Practitioner Survey – Some Results

First Five Things
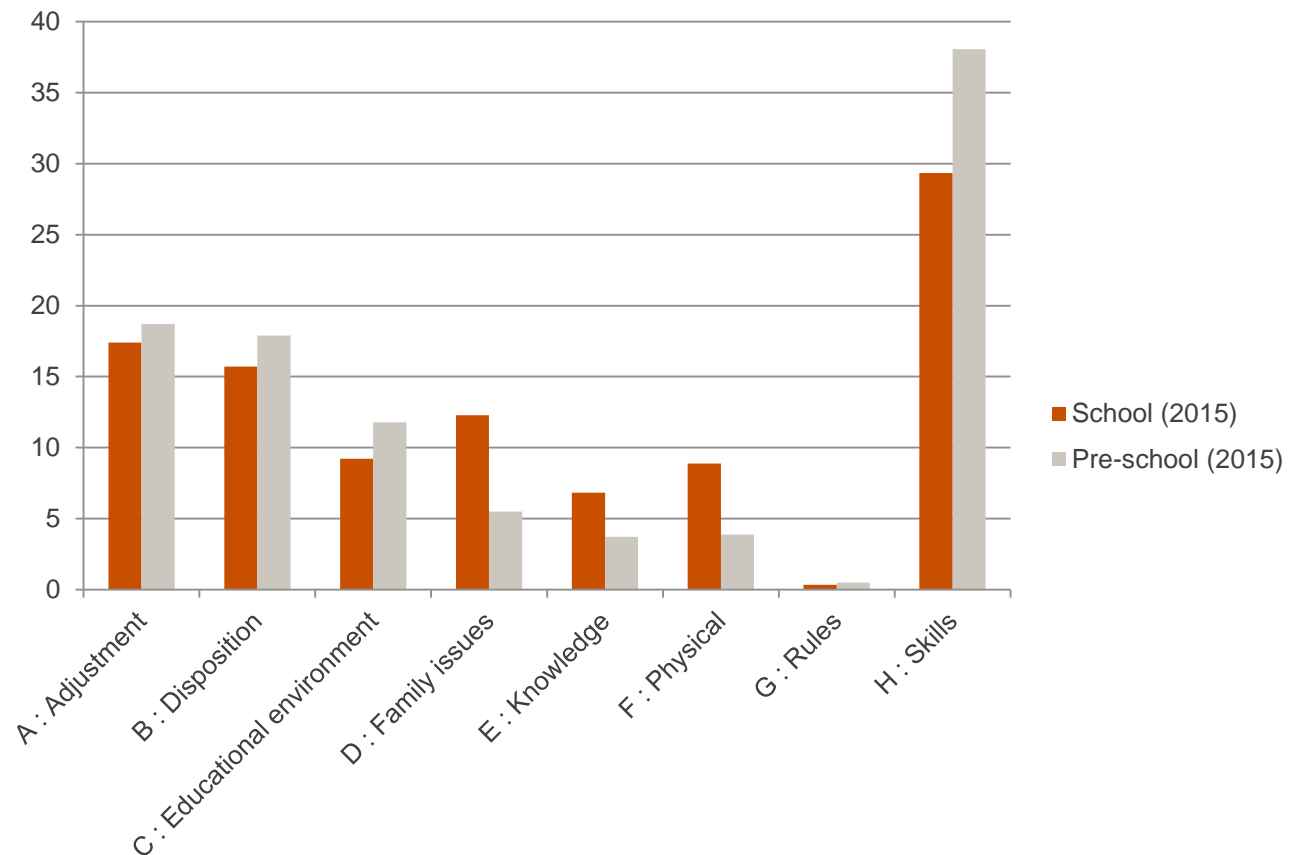
Practitioner Survey – In Retrospect

First Five Things

Network Identification

State/Territory	Number of Transition Networks Identified
ACT	0
NSW	3
NT	2
QLD	2
SA	1
TAS	1
VIC	1
WA	1

Network Visits

Visits were made by two members of the research team to one site in each of NSW, NT, QLD, SA, and VIC.

Most of the visits were to network meetings but these were extended in some sites to visits to schools and prior-to-school settings and discussions outside of the meetings with key people.

Transition to school networks

Additional network sites identified within PhD research project in NSW and VIC

Data collected from network meetings as well as follow up interviews with network members

What is required for an effective network?

- A clear purpose or reason to meet
- Leadership – both for within the network as well as from school/prior-to-school leadership

   "I think it [ability to communicate across settings] comes also from our bosses…Being community minded…our principal is very community minded. He works very closely with all the other public schools in town, and the high school"

- Mutual understandings
- Professional respect
- Organisation – informal or formal
- Commitment – effort and time

Opportunities generated from effective networks

- Relationships – both within and between settings
- Professional support for educators
- Relationships with children and families
- Relationships and links with communities
- Building greater understandings
- Interagency networking
- Identify and overcome challenges
- Planning for transition

Challenges

- Commitment to the network – worth and value for members and personal commitment

- Sustainability of the network – goal setting, aspirations

- Convenience and organisation – meeting at a time and place that suits all members

- Communication – regarding distribution and sharing of information

- Leadership

Rural contexts

- Around 30% of our country's population live outside our large cities (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010)

- Vital to Australia's infrastructure and sustainability

Strengths of rural communities

- Educational settings often 'hub' of community
- Proximity - easier to facilitate visits and relationships

"…we can just walk down there [the preschool] whenever we need."

- Smaller community size – easier to 'know' your children and families
- Often united by common goals
- Resilience

Strengths of rural communities

• Resourcefulness – creative use of facilities, resources, time, staff etc

"…there are children who don't come to preschool on that particular day that we're going up [to the school] so usually we could just bring them in but we've got so many enrolments this year that we can't do that, so what we're going to do is get the bus and go around and pick them up and take them up [to the school]…"

Challenges of rural communities

- Limited access to resources
- Proximity – distance to major centres restricting access to health professionals and other support agencies
- Staffing – recruitment, retainment and relieving of staff
- 'Blurred lines' between professional and personal lives

Discussion Questions

1. Does it matter whether the two curriculum documents (Early Years Learning Framework and Australian Curriculum) align? Why?

2. Is continuity important as children start school? Continuity in what? Why?

3. How would you explain the apparent shift from adjustment to skills among educators from 1999 to 2015?

4. How does context impact on transition to school?

5. Why are transition to school networks effective in some communities and not in others?

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