Pedagogies of educational transition:
Educator networks enhancing children’s transition to school in rural areas
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Certificate of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and to the best of my knowledge and belief, understand that it contains no material previously published or written by another person, nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at Charles Sturt University or any other educational institution, except where due acknowledgement is made in the thesis. Any contribution made to the research by colleagues with whom I have worked at Charles Sturt University or elsewhere during my candidature is fully acknowledged. I agree that this thesis be accessible for the purpose of study and research in accordance with normal conditions established by the Executive Director, Library Services, Charles Sturt University or nominee, for the care, loan and reproduction of thesis, subject to confidentiality provisions as approved by the University.

Name: Jessamy Davies

Signature: 

Date: 3 August 2018
Acknowledgments

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I wish to acknowledge the Wiradjuri and Yorta Yorta peoples who are the traditional custodians of the land on which the research took place.

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To my family and friends – thank you for loving me, supporting me, and believing in me. Without the encouragement, child-minding, meals and hugs, I could not have completed this journey. Thank you to my parents for instilling in me an enduring love of, and for, learning. And finally, thank you to my son Rory who is my greatest inspiration.
Abstract

The transition to school marks a pivotal life milestone that has significant implications for children’s educational outcomes in both the short and long terms. Positive transitions to school are partly characterised by pedagogies that support children’s transition to school and promote children’s continuity of learning. While much is known about pedagogies, and transition to school, much less attention has been directed to understanding pedagogies of educational transition. This study forms part of a larger project titled *Continuity and change in curriculum and pedagogies as children start school* which analysed the impact of the introduction of the Early Years Learning Framework and the Australian Curriculum on transition to school, and interrogated pedagogies of educational transition to inform the transition to school intentions of the two curricula. The doctoral study reported in this thesis focused specifically on exploring how pedagogies of educational transition were enacted by educator networks in rural areas of Australia.

The participants of the study were prior-to-school and school educators who were members of professional educator networks with a specific focus on enhancing children’s transition to school, and were operating in rural communities in Victoria and New South Wales, Australia. The study employed a qualitative, interpretivist design, underpinned by Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model of development. Data were drawn from the network meetings, focus group interviews and follow-up interviews and analysed employing constructivist grounded theory approaches, generating a series of salient themes.

Results and analysis identified a range of pedagogies of educational transitions facilitated by educators in rural networks: the networks themselves, school visits, information nights, speed-dating, reciprocal visits, buddy programs, classroom practices, ‘all about
school’ books and transition statements. The study also identified a series of influences on these pedagogies of education transition: leadership, purpose, reciprocal understandings, relationships, professionalism and goals for transition. In particular, the study also identified a range of ways that pedagogies of educational transition in rural areas were influenced by rural contexts and the introduction of the two national curriculum documents – the Early Years Learning Framework and the Australian Curriculum.

This study makes a significant contribution to the existing literature by developing further understandings of pedagogies of educational transitions and the influences on these pedagogies in rural contexts. It asserts a theoretical model through which further understandings of pedagogies of educational transitions can be developed and suggests several directions for future research.
<table>
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<td><strong>‘All about school’ book</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Best Start</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Buddy programs</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Complex circumstances</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Educator</strong></td>
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Indigenous Australian  A person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent who identifies as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and is accepted as such by the community in which he or she lives (Parliament of Australia, 2003).

Kindergarten  Is used in New South Wales to refer to the first year of school. Is used in Victoria to refer to the year prior-to-school

L3  Language, Learning and Literacy – intervention program for Foundation students targeting reading and writing

Preschool  Refers to an early childhood education and care setting attended by children in the year prior to school.

Prior-to-school setting  Refers to all early childhood education and care settings that children attend outside the home in the year prior to starting school

Speed-dating  Refers to meetings between prior to school and school teachers or representatives to hand over Transition Statements.
**Strengths-based**

Refers to an approach to people that views situations realistically and looks for opportunities to complement and support existing strengths and capacities as opposed to focusing on, and staying with, the problem or concern. The problem and the person are separate; however, the problem is never minimised (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD), 2012).

**Transition Statements**

A pedagogical communication tool completed by early childhood educators and complement the learning outcomes for children outlined in the EYLF (or state equivalent) which are holistic, and strengths-based in nature (Department of Education and Training (DET), 2017).

**5 ‘L’s’**

‘Look, Listen, Lips, Laps and Legs’ - A classroom management teaching strategy
# List of Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AC</td>
<td>Australian Curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACARA</td>
<td>Australian Curriculum and Assessment and Reporting Authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACECQA</td>
<td>Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANZAC</td>
<td>Australian and New Zealand Army Corps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AusVELS/VELS</td>
<td>Australian Victorian Essential Learning Standards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COAG</td>
<td>Council of Australian Governments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEEWR</td>
<td>Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DET</td>
<td>Victorian Department of Education and Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ETC</td>
<td>Educational Transitions and Change Research Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EYLF</td>
<td>Early Years Learning Framework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kinder</td>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MCEETYA</td>
<td>Ministerial Council for Education, Employment Training and Youth Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NAIDOC</td>
<td>National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee</td>
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<tr>
<td>NQF</td>
<td>National Quality Framework</td>
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<td>NQS</td>
<td>National Quality Standards</td>
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<tr>
<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pre-AUSVELS</td>
<td>Pre-Australian Victorian Essential Learning Standards</td>
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<tr>
<td>VEYLDF</td>
<td>Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework</td>
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1 Chapter One – Introduction

This study examines pedagogies of educational transitions in rural areas. Pedagogies of educational transition create opportunities to promote continuity of learning, development and relationships between prior-to-school and school settings (Dockett & Einarsdottir, 2017). Supporting the continuity of pedagogy between educational settings is known to be an important contributor to the effectiveness of children’s transition to school, both in the short and long terms (Peters, 2014).

The study was conducted in four rural communities in Victoria and New South Wales where there was a professional educator network operating with the primary aim of improving children’s transition to school. By bringing together educators from prior-to-school and school settings, the networks generated ongoing opportunities for educators to collaborate with one another in order to develop and implement effective pedagogies of educational transition.

This introductory chapter begins by providing an overview of the transition to school context in which in this doctoral study is positioned. This section aims to flag the pertinent elements of this context, which will be discussed more comprehensively in later chapters. Next, the doctoral study’s background and position in relation to the larger research project of which it is a part is explained. Following this is a discussion of the researcher standpoint which explains how the researcher is situated in relation to the research. Concluding this chapter is an outline of the structure of the thesis.
1.1 Context of study

The significance of the early childhood years has received worldwide recognition alongside the potential for investment in high quality early childhood education to enhance learning and development trajectories, especially for those children in disadvantaged circumstances (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 2006). The impact of this can be seen in Australia with nationwide reforms to early childhood education with the introduction of the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), 2009a) and the National Quality Framework (NQF) (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA), 2018) as well as the implementation of the new Australian Curriculum (AC) (Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority (ACARA), 2012a). This has generated considerable interest in transition to school research, policy and practice.

Transition to school marks an important educational milestone and is recognised as a critical period for children, impacting on their ongoing engagement with, and achievement at school (Entwisle & Alexander, 1998). The transition to school marks a period of significant adjustment and change for children and their families (Dockett & Perry, 2007; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). It is during this time that children develop a sense of their relationship with formal education, authority figures, academic competency and their peers (Ramey & Ramey, 1998).

Children who have a successful start to school are more likely to experience positive social and emotional outcomes (Educational Transitions and Change (ETC) Research Group, 2011) as well as improved academic achievement (Ahtola et al., 2011). Experiences during the transition to school are likely to influence children’s long term engagement with school (Ramey & Ramey, 1998). The impact of a positive start to school is especially important for
children living in disadvantaged circumstances, where cycles of social and economic
disadvantage can be disrupted by effective transitions and increased engagement with school
(Council of Australian Governments (COAG), 2009).

Historically, transition to school was conceptualised primarily as about children’s
readiness for school, where the focus was on children’s maturity and academic abilities as
determinants of their readiness for school (Petriwskyj, Thorpe, & Tayler, 2005). More
contemporary approaches to transition have argued against this view, questioning the narrow
focus and difficulties in accurately assessing children’s readiness (Miesels, 1999; Wolery,
1998). Instead, the focus has shifted to a more holistic perspective of transition as one that
includes children, their families, educators and the wider community who all have unique
experiences and perspectives of transition to school (Department of Education and Training
(DET), 2017; ETC, 2011; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). This view emphasises the
importance of meaningful relationships and collaborations between each of these
stakeholders as being necessary for effective transitions to school (Dockett & Perry, 2004a;
ETC Research Group, 2011).

Transition to school is recognised as a time of change, and it is acknowledged that there
are significant differences between the prior-to-school and school settings that require adjustment
(Dockett & Einarsdottir, 2017; Dockett & Perry, 2014a). Among these differences are in the
settings themselves, the relationships and the curriculum (Dunlop, 2013) and this is
evidenced in the Australian context with the EYLF and the AC. Contemporary approaches to
transition have focused attention on what can be done on a pedagogical level to foster
continuity of learning between settings and support children’s transition to school (Dockett &
Perry, 2014a; Dunlop, 2013).
This section provides a synopsis of the contextual themes framing this study. Deeper exploration of these issues is found in the following chapters.

1.2 **Background to the study**

The doctoral study was positioned within, and conducted concurrently with, a larger Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery-funded project titled *Continuity and change in curriculum and pedagogies as children start school*. Chief Investigators on this project were my supervisors, Professors Dockett and Perry. The wider study generated new knowledge promoting positive transitions to school for all children through analysing the impact of the EYLF and the AC on transition to school and interrogating current pedagogies of educational transition in order to explore the transition to school intentions of the two curricula. The doctoral study contributed a focus on pedagogies of educators in rural settings to this larger study. A more detailed explanation of the study and its aims can be found in Chapter Four.

1.3 **Researcher standpoint**

This doctoral study occurred in the early stages of my professional career in education and educational research. Preceding my position as a postgraduate student, I completed a Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood) (Honours) at Charles Sturt University where I became passionate about education and teaching, driven by a belief in my ability to ‘make a difference’ and with aspirations of imparting my love of learning to others. Circumstances afforded me the opportunity to undertake Honours and now postgraduate study, which has revealed a new realm of possibilities for my future directions.
I can identify some key motivators that have allowed me to reach this point and continue to inspire me. My parents instilled in me an unyielding passion for learning, and the belief to pursue my goals relentlessly. My learning and experiences from university and as an Honours student compelled me to strive for greater understandings and to challenge myself as a teacher, a researcher and as a person. I see those who have mentored and guided me in my studies as significant sources of courage and determination. I am incredibly fortunate that these people have supported and encouraged me in my journey to become a researcher.

I bring to my study my identity not only as a researcher, but also as a mother and a teacher. I acknowledge that I bring with me my collective life experiences and beliefs, which are constantly growing and changing. I feel a particular resonance with the focus of this study being on transition to school in rural areas. As a person who experienced their childhood in a small rural community I feel an awareness and understanding of what it means to live and learn in a rural community. Some of my strongest memories are of attending preschool and primary school in my local town, and I have no doubt that those experiences have shaped my understandings of the world.

I believe that I brought to the research a genuine love of learning and discovery, a commitment to education with the belief that by contributing new understandings, I have the potential to make a difference in the life of someone else. I am comforted that while I felt apprehension and anxiety at my ability to meet the demands of a doctoral study, I am supported by a network of experienced and professional researchers who will continue to support and guide me through my journey.
1.4 Structure of the thesis

This thesis contains ten chapters. Chapter One introduces the doctoral study by providing an overview of the transition to school context of the study, and an explanation of how this study fits within the larger study. It is also the chapter where the researcher standpoint is detailed. This chapter concludes by highlighting the significance of this study in this field of research, and outlining the structure of the thesis.

Chapter Two provides an explanation of the Australian context which forms an important part of the background to the study. In this chapter there is a discussion of the political context that superintended the development and introduction of the two Australian curricula - the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia and the Australian Curriculum, as well as a discussion of the continuity between the curricula.

Chapter Three investigates the relevant literature around pedagogy and pedagogies of educational transition and, from this, develops a definition of pedagogies of educational transition that is adopted by this study. This chapter also explores the literature around transition to school, educator networks, and rural contexts, concluding with an outline of the research questions guiding the study.

Chapter Four explains the position of the doctoral study in relation to the wider study. It then outlines the qualitative interpretivist approach adopted within the study and how this aligns with the theoretical framework underpinning the study - the bio-ecological model of human development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). The four principle components of the model; Process, Person, Context and Time, are explained in relation to the study of transition to school. Ethical considerations, methods of data collection and data analysis are described, as well as the role of the researcher.
Chapters Five, Six, Seven and Eight present the results of the study in detail. Each chapter presents, individually, the results relating to each of the four rural sites that participated in the study.

Chapter Nine presents a detailed discussion of the results and analysis of all four sites, making comparisons to the existing field of research.

Chapter Ten provides a concluding chapter to the thesis, outlining the study’s contributions to the existing research, implications of the study, future research possibilities and identifying relevant limitations and challenges.

The following chapter provides a detailed explanation of the Australian early childhood context in Australia in which this study was located. Particular attention is given to the two Australian curriculum documents.
Chapter Two - Australian context

Worldwide attention has been drawn to the importance of the early years and the potential for investment in high quality early childhood education to enhance learning and development trajectories, especially for those children in disadvantaged circumstances (OECD, 2017). This international attention to early childhood education and care has been influenced by economic changes and workforce demands. Developed countries such as Australia have seen increased workforce participation by women and a call for greater gender equity in family and workplace responsibilities (OECD, 2017).

Approaches to early childhood education and care in Australia are influenced by a range of factors, and some of these are discussed here. While each of these influences can be critiqued for its value, relevance and strength, such critique is beyond the scope of this study. Sources of such critique may be found in other publications (see Press & Skattebol, 2007; Sims & Waniganayake, 2015). The aim of this section is to simply highlight these as being relevant for understanding the early childhood landscape in Australia.

Discussions around early childhood education and care have also been heavily influenced by research into early brain development. Research in the fields of neuroscience and behavioural psychology demonstrate that both genetics and the early experiences of children lay the foundations for later learning and development (Knudsen, Heckman, Cameron, & Shonkoff, 2006). Further, the range of skills and capabilities that emerge during the first three years of a child’s life have been identified as predictors of later success at school and adult life (Knudsen et al., 2006).

The political context in Australia supports the investment in, and provisions for, high quality early childhood education. Multiple benefits are expected to accrue from such
investment. Firstly, investment in early childhood education has been shown to be a sound strategy for strengthening future workforces (Heckman, 2017). The provision of quality early childhood education creates opportunities for women to participate in, and contribute to, the workforce, stimulating the economy. Secondly, citizens of a community who are well educated generally have greater opportunities afforded to them, and are able to contribute more positively to their community (Heckman, 2017; Knudsen et al., 2006). Thirdly, under the obligations of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, governments are responsible for providing access to high quality early childhood education (United Nations, 2005, 2016). Children have the right to access quality education as active members of their community, and for their own wellbeing. Further, the provision of quality early childhood education for children has been shown to have a positive effect on long term educational trajectories, especially for those children experiencing disadvantage (OECD, 2017).

Australia has responded to recommendations made by the OECD (2006) report and findings from brain research by enacting several reforms. The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (Ministerial Council for Education Employment Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA), 2008) has been agreed by all state and territory education ministers. The Declaration outlines a number of aims, guided by two main goals:

1. Australian schooling promotes equity and excellence; and
2. All young Australians become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens.

Among the reforms included in the Melbourne Declaration was the planning for a new national school curriculum, now known as the Australian Curriculum (AC) (ACARA, 2012a) - a significant change from the state-based curricula Australia has used previously.
The National Early Childhood Development Strategy was also developed, representing a collaborative effort between the Commonwealth and state and territory governments to “ensure that by 2020 all children have the best start to life to create a better future for themselves and for the nation” (COAG, 2009, p. 4). The overall aim of the Strategy has been to provide quality education and care for children from birth to eight, and to meet the diverse needs of Australian families, improve child outcomes and improve overall health and wellbeing. By improving child outcomes, the Strategy aimed to increase social inclusion, human capital and productivity, as well as positioning Australia to meet social and economic challenges and be competitive on an international level (COAG, 2009). Among the commitments made by COAG were policy changes to reflect the aims of the Strategy; actions to promote greater social inclusion and improved outcomes for children – especially Indigenous children and those living in disadvantage; and increased productivity and international competitiveness.

As a result, there have been major changes in the educational landscape, affecting both the prior-to-school and school years. The early childhood sector has seen marked reforms, with the introduction of the Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA). Under the auspices of ACECQA, The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care provides a benchmark for quality and consistency across Australian early education and care services. Components of the National Quality Framework (NQF) are the National Quality Standard (NQS) and Belonging, Being, Becoming: the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009a). The EYLF is the first national curriculum framework to guide early childhood education in Australia.


2.1 Early Years Learning Framework

*Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (DEEWR, 2009a) was introduced in 2009 as a result of nationwide reforms to the early childhood education and care sector in Australia. It was developed in a collaborative process between academics and researchers, state and territory representatives, as well as early childhood practitioners. It is a curriculum framework designed to promote quality and consistency across a range of early childhood education settings for children aged birth to five years, up to and including the transition to school (DEEWR, 2009a). States and territories have adopted the framework in various ways: some use it as an overarching document guiding early childhood education and care; others have used it to replace state based curriculum frameworks; still others have used the EYLF to supplement their existing curriculum documents (DEEWR, 2008). Some states, including New South Wales, adopted the EYLF verbatim, while Victoria developed its own framework, based on the EYLF, called the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF) (Department of Education and Training (DET), 2016). One key difference between the EYLF and the VEYLDF is that the latter is designed for children aged birth to eight years. Henceforth, for clarity and consistency, these will both be referred to as the EYLF.

The EYLF is underpinned by three key elements: belonging, being and becoming. These elements exist alongside the belief that, from before birth, children are connected to family – their primary educators – as well as community, culture and place. The EYLF argues that children learn and make sense of their world by exploring and engaging with their environment and participating in everyday life, supported by positive relationships with adults and peers.
The philosophical position taken in the EYLF argues that children bring diverse experiences, knowledge, perspectives and expectations to their learning. The framework reflects a play-based philosophy of learning where physical, social, emotional, personal, spiritual, creative, cognitive and linguistic elements of learning are fostered in a dynamic and holistic learning environment (DEEWR, 2009a). The framework outlines the principles, practices and outcomes to support children’s learning from birth to five. Five principles underpin the pedagogical practices outlined in the framework. These are: secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships; partnerships; high expectations and equity; respect for diversity; and ongoing learning and reflective practice. The pedagogical practices guide educators to support children’s learning through: holistic approaches; responsiveness to children; learning through play; intentional teaching; learning environments; cultural competence; continuity of learning and transitions; and assessment for learning. The learning outcomes designed to foster the learning and development of children aged birth to five are that: children have a strong sense of identity; children are connected with and contribute to their world; children have a strong sense of wellbeing; children are confident and involved learners; and children are effective communicators (DEEWR, 2009a). The EYLF is supported by the NQS with the aims of promoting high quality early educational service provision.

2.2 Australian Curriculum

The Australian Curriculum (AC) is the first national school curriculum in Australia’s history. It also has emerged as a result of the educational reforms promoted by COAG. The introduction of a national curriculum marks significant change in the legislation and delivery of education in Australia (Drummond, 2012). The development and implementation of the AC began in 2008, with collaboration between education authorities including national, state,
territory, Catholic, Independent and local school representatives, community members and educators about the shape and content of the curriculum. Although the AC has been formulated and is overseen at a federal level, implementation is the responsibility of states, territories and systems. As states retain legislative responsibility for education – including curriculum – decisions about whether the AC replaces, or complements, their respective state curricula are made at the state level (ACARA, 2018b). As a result, each of Australia’s states and territories has responded differently to the new curricula, based on their own histories of curriculum development and implementation practices.

Subsequently, each jurisdiction has different interpretations of how the AC fits with their existing curricula and departmental organisation, resulting in many differing policy support documents and practices (Gerrard et al., 2013). The AC outlines what students should learn as they progress through their formal schooling from the first year of school (called Foundation) to Year 12: “The Australian Curriculum sets the expectations for what all young Australians should be taught, regardless of where they live in Australia or their background.” (ACARA, 2018a, para. 2).

The AC has three dimensions: learning areas; general capabilities; and cross-curriculum priorities. There are eight learning areas, with curriculum in these areas introduced progressively since 2010. General capabilities and cross-curriculum priorities are described as contributing to, and developing from, the learning areas. The categories of general capabilities are: literacy; numeracy; information and communication technology capability; critical and creative thinking; person and social capability; ethical understanding; and intercultural understanding. Learning continua reflect students’ development of the general capabilities according to relevant knowledge, skills, behaviours and dispositions. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures, Asia and Australia’s engagement with Asia, and sustainability form the three cross-curriculum priorities (ACARA, 2012b).
2.3 Continuity between the EYLF and the AC

One of the main foci of this study was to examine how the introduction of the two new curricula has impacted on transition to school pedagogies and practices in rural areas. The transition to school provides a unique context in Australia where educators, as well as children and families, negotiate different contexts and curricula.

Broadly, both the EYLF and the AC are underpinned by the Melbourne Declaration (MCEETYA, 2008) and the commitments made by COAG (2009) to enhance educational opportunities for all Australian children. Both curricula acknowledge the importance of building on prior experiences during transitions. The EYLF states: “Building on children’s prior and current experiences helps them to feel secure, confident and connected to familiar people, places, events and understandings. Children, families and early childhood educators all contribute to successful transitions between settings.” (DEEWR, 2009a, p. 16). The AC acknowledges children’s learning prior-to-school and aims to “build[s] on the learning children achieve under the EYLF and recognise[s] that learners in the first years of school have particular needs and entitlements” (Connor, 2011, p. 13).

Continuity between the content of the two curricula can be identified in the Learning Outcomes of the EYLF and the General Capabilities of the AC. For example: Learning Outcomes 1, 2 and 3 of the EYLF align with the General Capabilities of ‘Personal and social capability’, Outcome 2 provides essential foundations for ‘Ethical understanding’ and ‘Intercultural understanding’, Outcome 4 develops skills for ‘Critical and creative thinking’, and Outcome 5 underpins the learning for ‘Literacy’, ‘Numeracy’ and ‘Information and communication technology (ICT) competence’. There are also some parallels between the learning content of the two curricula. For example the EYLF Outcome 4, Key component 2
‘Children develop a range of skills and processes such as problem solving, inquiry, experimentation, hypothesising, researching and investigating’ (DEEWR, 2009a, p. 35) relates closely to the Science learning area of the AC.

The EYLF and the AC have similar aims, yet their structure and language is different. Specifically, while the AC is defined as a curriculum with specific detail of what content is to be covered at specific year levels, the EYLF is a curriculum framework, outlining principles, pedagogies and broad educational outcomes, rather than specific content or achievement expectations. The ways that educators negotiate the two curriculum approaches across transition to school will form part of the focus for the study.

The introduction of the two new curriculum documents as part of nationwide reform has helped to reshape the Australian early childhood education landscape. The study was implemented at a time where educators were experiencing a transition themselves, as they adapted to, and implemented, the new curriculum approaches. This is significant because how educators manage these changes will have an impact on children and their families as they start school.

The ways in which educators manage and facilitate transition to school across contexts and across the two new curriculum approaches can be conceptualised through pedagogies of educational transition. An examination of what is meant by pedagogy and transition to school follows in the next section, with the aim of developing a definition of pedagogies of educational transition.
2.4 Chapter summary

This chapter has provided important information regarding the current context of early childhood education in Australia in which this study was located. This included an explanation of recent educational reforms that have impacted on early childhood education, as well as the introduction of two national curricula. An analysis of the continuity between the two curricula was also provided.
Chapter Three - Literature review

This chapter reviews the recent research informing this study. The key areas addressed are: pedagogy; transition to school; pedagogies of educational transition; educator networks and education in rural contexts. Pedagogy is explored through examination of definitions of pedagogy and explorations of pedagogy in different contexts. Deriving from this is a definition of pedagogy that will be adopted by this study. Transition to school literature is explored with a specific focus on the understanding of transition to school outlined in the Transition to School: Position Statement (ETC Research Group, 2011). Investigation of these two areas will be drawn together to define pedagogies of educational transition and the way these are conceptualised within this study. Following this is an exploration of professional networks with a specific focus on educator networks. As this study was conducted in rural areas, the final component of the literature review addresses issues of education in rural contexts.

3.1 Pedagogy

This section explores some of the ambiguity around definitions of pedagogy, connections among pedagogy, teaching and curriculum, and the role of context in considering a definition of pedagogy.

Debate surrounds definitions of pedagogy (Alexander, 2008; Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden, & Bell, 2002; Stephen, 2010). Definitions have referred to the practice (or the art, the science or the craft) of teaching (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002; Stephen, 2010) and to “any conscious activity by one person designed to enhance the learning of another”
Both of these statements focus on the element of teaching within pedagogy. Indeed, the terms pedagogy and teaching are often used interchangeably, reflecting the assumption that they refer to the same thing (Alexander, 2008). Similarly, there is often a lack of distinction among the terms pedagogy, teaching and curriculum, with these terms also used interchangeably (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002).

### 3.1.1 Pedagogy and teaching

Some approaches to pedagogy focus on the teacher enhancing learning (Murphy, Hall, & Soler, 2008). This is reflected in the definition of Watkins and Mortimore (1999), who emphasise pedagogy as a ‘conscious’ act, involving deliberate or intentional effort to enhance learning in another person. While this offers some useful elements for consideration, it does not incorporate potential unconscious acts or beliefs held by the teacher, nor does it consider the environment in which the pedagogy is being enacted or any other factors that might influence pedagogy. However, it is an important example to consider for a number of reasons. Firstly, it forms a useful starting point from which to think critically about what a definition of pedagogy should include and secondly, it highlights the ambiguity between pedagogy and teaching.

Although the terms teaching and pedagogy are often used interchangeably, they do not necessarily refer to the same things. One argument for the difference between the terms is that teaching is viewed as an act, whereas pedagogy consists of both an act and discourse. In this view, pedagogy refers to “the performance of teaching together with the theories, beliefs, policies and controversies that inform and shape it” (Alexander, 2008, p. 3). This definition offers a deeper, more complex and holistic view of pedagogy compared with the notion of pedagogy as the act of teaching. The reference to ‘controversies’ acknowledges the
complexities of additional dimensions impacting on pedagogy, including those of culture, politics and societal factors that are relevant. This is significant for the definition adopted by the study because understandings of transition to school also acknowledge the role of philosophies and beliefs, how these change over time and are debated. In addition, both pedagogy and transition to school are influenced by policies and systems according to political agendas.

Given the nature of this study, and the focus on transitions between prior-to-school and school settings, it is important to consider the context, specifically the educational settings, in which pedagogy is enacted when developing a definition of pedagogies of educational transition.

3.1.2 Pedagogy and curriculum

Just as there is ambiguity between pedagogy and teaching, there is also some ambiguity between the terms curriculum and pedagogy. There are contexts where pedagogy and curriculum have distinct meanings, linked, at least partly, to the historical interpretations of these terms (Alexander, 2008). For example, in the USA, the term curriculum is often used in both a broad sense – as an umbrella term that encompasses most of what happens in schools – as well as a specific focus – referring to what is actually taught in schools. By way of contrast, in areas of Europe, pedagogy is used as an overarching term and curriculum falls under the umbrella of pedagogy (Alexander, 2008). For example, in the Netherlands, the curriculum, or content to be taught, is considered to become educative only as it is interpreted and given life by teachers (Ax & Ponte, 2010).
With varied interpretations of pedagogy and curriculum, there is no universally accepted distinction between the two. For the benefit of this study, the explanation of curriculum is taken from Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2002, p. 27) to encompass “all of the knowledge, skills and values that children are meant to learn in educational establishments” as well as “all of the hidden and/or unintentional learning”. This broad definition is compatible with approaches outlined in the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009a) and reflective of the nature of interactions promoted in early childhood contexts.

### 3.1.3 Pedagogy and context

Context is an important element when considering definitions of pedagogy. Educational philosophies and approaches to child development, learning, curricula and teaching approaches differ from one educational setting to another. Hence, it might be expected that interpretations of pedagogy also will be different in different settings (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002). As well, perspectives of and about children change over time, reflecting different communities and societies, different cultural views and beliefs (Canella, 1997). One consequence is that pedagogies also change to reflect these evolving views. It is necessary for the purposes of this study to consider how pedagogy might be interpreted differently in different contexts.

In early childhood education and care settings, an integral component of pedagogy is the educator’s planning and provision of learning environments for play and exploration, as Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2002, p. 28) highlight in their definition of early years pedagogy as:

> that set of instructional techniques and strategies which enable learning to take place and provide opportunities for the acquisition of knowledge, skills, attitudes and dispositions
within a particular social and material context. It [pedagogy] refers to the interactive processes between teacher and learner and to the learning environment (which includes the concrete learning environment, the family and community).

This definition draws attention to some additional elements of pedagogy. In particular, it refers to the importance of planning and opportunities for learning, as well as highlighting the learning environment, which includes not only the physical environment itself, but also the people who influence that environment. It also highlights the notion of interactive processes, or relationships between the teacher and the learner.

### 3.1.4 Pedagogies of educational transition: A definition

Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (EYLF), guides educators in all Australian prior-to-school settings and refers to pedagogy as “the holistic nature of early childhood educators’ professional practice (especially those aspects that involve building and nurturing relationships), curriculum decision-making, teaching and learning” (DEEWR, 2009a, p. 11). The EYLF includes a rationale justifying the importance of the role of pedagogy in early years education: “Educators’ professional judgements are central to their active role in facilitating children’s learning” (DEEWR, 2009a, p. 11). Some comparisons can be made between the definition offered by the EYLF and alternative definitions. For example, both the EYLF definition and that offered by Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2002) identify interactive processes, or relationships as being an integral component of pedagogy. Also, curriculum decision-making and instructional strategies are identified in both definitions. This suggests that in early childhood settings, pedagogy is considered as multi-faceted.
The school context can be characterised generally as more formal and structured than early years settings, including approaches to pedagogy (Moss, 2013c). The focus in many schools, both overseas and in Australia, tends to be on the provision of curriculum, which is strongly influenced by political agendas of standardised outcomes and improved overall performance (Fenwick & Cooper, 2012; Moss, 2013c).

In contrast to the emphasis on pedagogy as a central element in the EYLF, the Australian Curriculum (AC) (ACARA, 2012b) offers no definition of pedagogy. The AC has been described as being “about content, not about how teachers deliver it” (Connor, 2010, p. 1). Part of the agreement with the States and Territories to adopt a national curriculum was the commitment that pedagogical decision-making would occur at a localised level allowing for differences in implementation and practice (McGaw, 2009). The responsibility for the implementation of the AC lies with each state and territory; therefore, decisions about whether the AC replaces, or complements, respective state curricula is made at a state and territory level (ACARA, 2018b). However the end result must be curricula which satisfy, at least, the requirements of the AC.

In a bridging document outlining the relationships between the EYLF and the AC, Connor (2011, p. 6) notes that “In terms of continuity of pedagogy, the Australian Curriculum recognises that early childhood approaches espoused by the EYLF continue to be appropriate in the early years of school”. This suggests that teachers in the early years of school ought to at least be aware of the pedagogical approaches fostered by the EYLF and early years settings, with the potential to incorporate them into their own pedagogical practice.

In summary, there are differing perspectives of pedagogy in different educational contexts. This is evident in Australia with different approaches to, and emphasis on, pedagogy in the EYLF and the AC. While the research literature suggests that there is no
single definition of pedagogy, it is necessary to be explicit about a definition of pedagogy that is adopted in this study. The definition adopted draws upon the following definitions of pedagogy as:

that set of instructional techniques and strategies which enable learning to take place and provide opportunities for the acquisition of knowledge, skills, attitudes and dispositions within a particular social and material context. It refers to the interactive processes between teacher and learner and to the learning environment (which includes the concrete learning environment, the family and community) (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002, p. 28);

and

the performance of teaching together with the theories, beliefs, policies and controversies that inform and shape it (Alexander, 2008, p. 3).

These two definitions shape a new definition of pedagogy which highlights the intentionality and interactivity within pedagogy, and the breadth of learning outcomes related to this. This definition supports the view that the learning environment is more than a physical setting, emphasising the importance of family and community. Alexander’s (2008) definition draws attention to intangible elements of pedagogy, recognising the influence of social structure, culture and politics. This new definition is adopted in this study:

Pedagogy incorporates those instructional techniques and strategies which enable learning to take place and provide opportunities for the acquisition of knowledge, skills, attitudes and dispositions, within a particular social and material context. These are considered alongside the interactive processes between and among the teacher, learner and learning environment (which includes the physical learning environment, family and community), together with the theories, beliefs, policies and controversies that inform and shape these.
This section provides a synthesis of current understandings of pedagogy and some of the ambiguities around both traditional and contemporary definitions of pedagogy, acknowledging that there is no single accepted definition. The connections and distinctions between pedagogy, teaching and curriculum and the role of the context are considered, as well as the conceptualisations of pedagogy in both the early childhood and school education sectors in Australia. The definitions of pedagogy adopted by this study are then highlighted.

The focus of the study reported in this thesis is pedagogies of educational transition, particularly the pedagogies that occur within the context of transition to school and what influences these. Having developed a definition of pedagogy, a review of the literature around transition to school provides the basis for conceptualising this term.

3.2 Transition to school

The transition to school forms the focal point for this study. The following discussion explores key concepts involved in transition, recognising the significance of the transition to school in children’s educational careers. Contemporary views of transition are examined, with the aim of identifying elements of effective transitions. This section also details the Transition to School: Position Statement (ETC Research Group, 2011), which frames the conceptualisation of transition to school adopted within this study.

The importance of a positive start to school is well supported by the research literature. A positive transition to school is linked to positive outcomes for children, both educationally and socially (Kienig, 2013). Children’s experiences during their transition to school are lasting and are likely to influence the children’s engagement with, and attitudes
towards, school (Bulkeley & Fabian, 2006). Importantly, those children who experience a positive transition to school are likely to develop a positive attitude towards school and have positive perceptions of their abilities at school (ETC Research Group, 2011). A positive start to school is linked to a strong and lasting connection with school, which is particularly important for children living in disadvantaged circumstances (Jackson & Cartmel, 2010; Smart, Sanson, Baxter, Edwards, & Hayes, 2008). The impact of a positive transition to school has been identified as a factor in disrupting cycles of social and economic disadvantage and in enhancing resilience in young people (COAG, 2009).

Recent years have seen a shift in the conceptualisation of transition to school. Previously, transition to school was considered primarily in terms of children’s readiness or preparedness for school, where judgements were made about children’s maturity and academic ability to assess their suitability to begin formal schooling (Petriwskyj et al., 2005). The focus was centred on the individual child, where children needed to manage the changes and adjustments of starting school, and therefore were considered largely responsible for their own success or failure (Dockett & Perry, 2004a). More recently, the focus on children’s readiness alone as a determinant for starting school has been challenged. Research has argued that this view is too narrowly focused, that it contradicts inclusive educational policies, that there are difficulties in assessing young children’s abilities, and questioning the notion that readiness for school could or should be standardised (Dunlop & Fabian, 2007; Graue, 2006). While readiness remains a feature of discussions around starting school is still utilised as a measure for assessing children’s aptitude for school (Boyle, Grieshaber, & Petriwskyj, 2018; Dockett & Perry, 2013b), a range of other elements have also emerged as important in understanding transition to school.

Contemporary views acknowledge that the transition to school is experienced not just by children, but by their families, educators and the wider community (Ballam, Perry, &
This holistic view of transition recognises that there are multiple contributors to and multiple beneficiaries of transition experiences, and that each set of perspectives and expectations shape the transition experiences in some way (ETC Research Group, 2011). Conceptualising transition in this way shifts the focus from the individual child, to the importance of meaningful and responsive relationships between all parties involved. Further, failing to include any one of the parties in the conception of transition can result in an incomplete picture of what happens during transition (Dockett & Perry, 2004a). This view also acknowledges that there are significant adjustments and demands that are made by and for each party involved, and that effective transitions are characterised by positive collaboration between all of the stakeholders (ETC Research Group, 2011).

In particular, recent considerations have drawn attention to the role of families as co-constructors in the transition to school (Department of Education and Training (DET), 2017; 2017; O'Kane, 2016; Rogers, 2018). The whole family is acknowledged as making the transition to school, with parents and family members both influencing, and being influenced by the process (Griebel & Niesel, 2009). Families can contribute valuable knowledge about their children entering school, which can assist teachers to plan and meet the individual needs of children (Arndt & McGuire-Schwartz, 2008). When there is positive collaboration between families, school and communities, children are more likely to experience a smooth transition (Boyle & Petriwskyj, 2014). When families take up opportunities to be actively involved and support their children in transition, they are more likely to build positive and lasting relationships with staff and with the school, ultimately improving children’s likelihood of long-term engagement with school (Arndt & McGuire-Schwartz, 2008).

Change is a key characteristic of transition: changes in roles, identities and expectations take place for all involved (Dockett & Einarsdottir, 2017; Griebel & Niesel,
Changes during transition are often due to the differences that are encountered between settings and adjustments to be made during transition (Dockett & Perry, 2006). There are significant differences between prior-to-school settings and/or home and school. These differences are noticed physically, socially, culturally, academically and philosophically (Fabian & Dunlop, 2006). Perhaps the most obvious changes are in the settings themselves, relationships and the curriculum. For example, the physical learning environment is often very different, with different resources available in a play-based early childhood setting compared to a school classroom (Dunlop, 2013). The routines and expectations for children are different in prior-to-school and school settings (Arnold, Bartlett, Gowani, & Merali, 2006) as are the relationships with adults as children start school (McIntyre, Eckert, Fiese, DiGennaro, & Wildenger, 2007). Parents often have higher academic and social expectations of their children once they start school (McIntyre et al., 2007), and children’s relationships with their educators also change (Dunlop, 2013). In addition, the curriculum is often different between early years and school settings. This is evidenced in Australia by the EYLF and the AC curriculum documents. As described earlier, the EYLF focuses on: play-based learning; communication and the development of relationships; social and emotional development; working with families and communities; and a holistic, process-focused view of learning and development (DEEWR, 2009a). The AC focuses on the content taught to students, separated into key subject areas with a particular emphasis on developing skills in literacy and numeracy. The guiding principles of the AC aim to provide a clear overview of content to be covered over stage of schooling and expected achievement standards (ACARA, 2018a).

Although there are differences between prior-to-school settings and schools, the changes experienced during the transition from one context to another are not necessarily negative. In their transition research, Dockett and Perry (2006) demonstrated that children
expect change and embrace it as part of their passage to school and to becoming a ‘big kid’. Although changes are experienced by all participants during transition – children, families, educators and communities – it is children who are expected to make the most significant changes (Dockett & Perry, 2006). Contemporary approaches to transition to school have instigated a shift in thinking where, as well as considering children’s readiness for school, there is also a focus on what can be done at systemic, policy and pedagogical levels to foster continuity between settings, and therefore make transition less demanding for those involved, especially children (Dunlop, 2013).

Rather than attempting to facilitate a seamless transition, the focus of effective transitions has involved supporting children’s adjustments according to their individual experience and context (DET, 2017). In contrast to previous views of transition where the responsibility of adjustment and adapting to change lay with the child, it is now among the responsibilities of schools to make themselves suitable and accommodating for children and their families. Part of this means acknowledging that children bring with them to school a collection of unique skills, experiences and knowledge and that these characteristics ought to be recognised and utilised positively (ETC Research Group, 2011). This approach is compatible with statements in the EYLF, which highlight the dual focus of building on prior experiences during transition while also acknowledging the potential challenges:

Transitions…between settings, and from early childhood settings to school, offer opportunities and challenges. Different places and spaces have their own purposes, expectations and ways of doing things. Building on children’s prior and current experiences helps them to feel secure, confident and connected to familiar people, places, events and understandings. (DEEWR, 2009a, p. 16)
Recent international collaborative efforts around transition to school have brought together both national and international research and understandings (Ballam et al., 2017). One outcome has been the Transition to School: Position Statement – an “aspirational document targeted to all concerned with the education, care and wellbeing of young children” (ETC Research Group, 2011, p. 1). This statement was developed collaboratively with researchers, policy-makers and educators (Dockett & Perry, 2014b, 2015). The position statement is pioneering in its strengths-based reconceptualisation of transition, where “social justice, human rights (including children’s rights), educational reform and ethical agendas” are considered as core principles alongside “the impact of transition on children’s ongoing wellbeing, learning and development” (ETC Research Group, 2011, p. 2).

The position statement is used as a key document in this study in order to frame the discussion of transition to school, as well as the discussion of pedagogies of educational transition. For this reason, it is presented here in some detail. The position statement outlines four pillars of transition: opportunities; aspirations; expectations; and entitlements. In the following, each pillar is discussed in relation to its importance for children, families, educators and communities.

3.2.1 Opportunities

Drawing on Australian and international research, the position statement argues that transition to school can be a time of opportunity for all involved. This derives from a theoretical position that emphasises the strengths of all involved (Dockett et al., 2009; Hopps-Wallis, Dockett, & Fenton, 2016) and regards transition as a time to respond to and build upon these through a range of opportunities – for children, families, educators, communities and educational systems. The strengths-based argument contends that children are afforded
opportunities for effective transitions when “they are recognised as competent and capable, when their cultural heritage and histories are respected, and when they are supported in their approaches to new and challenging situations and interactions” (ETC Research Group, 2011, p. 1). This idea is supported by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) which draws particular attention to the rights of each child to be recognised as a social agent, whose culture should be respected and their right to education embraced (United Nations, 2005).

Transition affords opportunities for families to engage in collaboration with educators and other professionals, supporting the ongoing learning and development of children. Building relationships between families and educators allows families to feel heard and understood. A mutually supportive relationship between families and educators is conducive for children’s learning and development (Arndt & McGuire-Schwartz, 2008). Transition also provides families with opportunities to build positive and respectful relationships between the home and school environments, and to play a role in facilitating their children’s learning between home and school. When family members are able to be involved in, and consolidate, children’s learning at home, children are likely to experience success at school (DET, 2017; McIntyre et al., 2007).

For educators, transition assists in the development of effective teaching and learning by building relationships between children, families and communities. Research suggests that relationships between educators and children and their families are of vital importance for effective transitions and that learning and development can be enhanced when such positive relationships are in place (Centre for Community Child Health, 2008). Transition provides a dynamic environment for the collaborative sharing of knowledge and experience for all stakeholders, but specifically between prior-to-school and school educators (Hopps-Wallis & Perry, 2017; Hopps, 2014b). Effective communication across these sectors is characterised by more than the transmission of a report from the prior-to-school educator, with educators
working collaboratively over the transition period, demonstrating mutual respect for one another as well as actively working to create opportunities for communication (Hopps-Wallis & Perry, 2017; Karila & Rantavuori, 2014).

Communities share in opportunities for transition through the recognition and celebration of transition as an important milestone. Communities can share in the transition process alongside children, families and educators who live and work within them. Communities are an important part of the support structure for children entering school (Dockett & Perry, 2014a).

3.2.2 Aspirations

The position statement describes children as holding a number of aspirations upon starting school. When children feel safe and supported, the potential for learning is enhanced (Bulkeley & Fabian, 2006). Children have indicated the importance of making and maintaining friendships as an important element for a successful transition, as well as the hope that school will be an enjoyable and engaging environment where all stages of their learning is valued (Dockett & Perry, 2003; Peters, 2010).

For families, aspirations relate to developing trusting, respectful and reciprocal relationships in order to support their children’s learning. This is especially important for families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, where building relationships with educators and schools can be complicated by diverse perceptions, expectations and experiences (Dockett & Perry, 2005b; Sanagavarapu, 2010). Families also have aspirations which include their children attaining positive educational outcomes, experiencing continuity between early childhood settings and school, being successful and happy at school, being
recognised as valued individuals, and having friends (Bulkeley & Fabian, 2006; Dockett et al., 2011),

Educators list the development of strong relationships with families, colleagues and communities within a strong and supportive environment as key aspirations for transition. Educators also hope for an inspiring, challenging and supportive environment for children to reach their full potential (Dockett & Perry, 2004b). Through the aspirations of communities to provide support and provide resources to children during transition, social, cultural, educational and economic benefits are obtained by the community (Zaslow, Calkins, & Halle, 2000).

Educational systems and organisations also have aspirations to engage all children in positive educational trajectories towards successful educational outcomes (DET, 2017). Such engagement is facilitated through commitments to enabling equal opportunities for all children and by supporting the continuity of curriculum, pedagogy and collaboration between prior-to-school and school settings (DEEWR, 2009b).

### 3.2.3 Expectations

“Transition to school is a time of changing expectations for all involved” (ETC Research Group, 2011, p. 3). Children start school with an array of expectations about what school will be like, and see school as a place where they expect to learn and to be recognised as learners. They also expect to be supported when faced with challenges. Children see school as a social experience where they can interact with friends, family and the community and expect to engage in these interactions (Einarsdottir, 2014; Perry & Dockett, 2011).

Across transition, families expect that their knowledge of their own children will be valued and utilised by educators, and that educators will collaborate with other professionals
in order to support their children. Families also expect that their children will be valued for their strengths, and their diversity will be embraced. Families expect to work in partnership with educators and contribute to their children’s education. They expect that the safety and wellbeing of their children will be of central importance (Arndt & McGuire-Schwartz, 2008).

Educators expect to develop relationships and collaborate with children, families and other educators as part of their role developing positive learning environments for children (Dockett & Perry, 2004b). Part of this is an expectation to be provided with the support and resourcing to meet the needs of individual children, and to build on children’s strengths. Educators have a desire to be recognised as professionals, competent in facilitating children’s learning, development and wellbeing. It is important that both prior-to-school and school educators’ professional knowledge is valued (Chan, 2010).

Communities also have expectations that schools will provide a nurturing environment for children, regarding them as competent and capable learners. There is also an expectation from communities that children will be able to fulfil their rights as an active citizen of the community in attending school (Dockett & Perry, 2008).

Education systems more generally have an expectation for positive outcomes for children attending school which, in turn, reduce the impacts of inequality and disadvantage as well as improve social and economic outcomes (COAG, 2009). Part of this commitment at a systems level, is an expectation that there will be specific policies and programs to support the transition to school (DET, 2017).
3.2.4 Entitlements

Current perspectives around transition states that children have a range of entitlements when they commence school (Vogler, Crivello, & Woodhead, 2008; Woodhead & Moss, 2007) that are enacted by access to high quality education that is “respectful of, and responsive to, their existing competencies, cultural heritage and histories” (ETC Research Group, 2011, p. 3). The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) emphasises the rights of children to have access to education that acknowledges diversity in circumstances and experiences. It also identifies the right for children to form positive and nurturing relationships with others, and to learn in environments that are respectful of their individuality and capacities.

For families, there is an entitlement to access high quality education that is equitable and strives to meet the needs of all children. This is seen in COAG’s commitment to a national strategy for the early years where the aim is to “better meet the diverse needs of today’s families and focus on improving child outcomes” (COAG, 2009, p. 4). Families are also entitled to feel valued as contributors to their child’s learning (Rogers, 2015).

Educators have entitlements around acknowledgement and respect for their profession and their professionalism as they work with children, families and communities throughout transition. Educators are also entitled to the necessary support and resourcing to provide quality teaching and learning environments for all children. In addition, opportunities for professional development and reflective processes are key entitlements for educators (Chan, 2010).

Communities have entitlements during transition, such as being important contributors to children’s education through facilitating children’s transition to school (Boethel, 2004; Dockett & Perry, 2008). Also, policy makers are entitled to expect that there
are provisions made by educational systems to support transition. Equally important are the entitlements of the systems and those who organise them, that children, families, educators and communities will share the collaborative effort towards positive transitions for children in order to enhance overall wellbeing and learning outcomes (ETC, 2011).

This section has investigated the importance of transition to school in terms of children’s educational outcomes with a particular focus on identifying elements of effective transitions. Contemporary views of transition involving a range of stakeholders and the importance of relationships between these stakeholders have been highlighted. The four pillars identified in the Transition to School: Position Statement have been unpacked in order to provide a framework in which to conceptualise transition to school in this study. The following section brings together understandings relating to pedagogy and transition to school to generate a framework for examining pedagogies of educational transition.

3.3 Pedagogies of educational transition

Research investigating pedagogies of educational transition is a relatively new. While there is considerable literature and research around the areas of pedagogy (Alexander, 2008; Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002; Stephen, 2010; Watkins & Mortimore, 1999) and transition to school (Dockett & Perry, 2014a; Education Review Office, 2015; Margetts & Kienig, 2013; O’Kane, 2016) there has been much less attention on pedagogies of educational transition, or a clear understanding of what is meant by this. This section explores the relationship between pedagogy and educational transition with the aim of developing a definition that will be utilised throughout the study. In doing so, this section characterises the transition to school
as a time of change and adjustment across different contexts and examines continuity between settings.

It is important to consider here what is meant by continuity. This study considers continuity as the connections, or relationships that exist between, in this case, prior-to-school and school settings (Dockett & Perry, 2014a; Dunlop, 2017). There might be such connections between the environments (which might be the physical environment or the learning environment), curricula, policies, pedagogies or relationships between people across settings.

Supporting the continuity of pedagogy between educational settings has been identified as an important contributor to effective transition to school, both in the short and long terms (Dockett & Einarsdottir, 2017; Petriwskyj, 2005). Transition programmes are most beneficial for children and their families when they are supported by, and work within, a broader approach to education and care that encompass initiatives linking the child’s home life as well as their primary schooling (Arnold et al., 2006). Developing continuity includes building on children’s prior and current experiences, assisting them to feel secure, confident and connected to people, places, events, routines and understandings (DET, 2017; Education Review Office, 2015). Specifically, recommendations have been made for prior-to-school and school settings to work closely together in order to promote continuity for children as they make the transition to school (Peters, 2014). Taking up this call, the Transition to School: Position Statement draws attention to “Opportunities for systems and sectors to define transition approaches and to consider constructive alignment of curriculum and pedagogies across educational contexts” (ETC Research Group, 2011, p. 3).

Examination of these opportunities requires consideration of the pedagogical practices, processes and perspectives that exist for those involved in the transition to school.
This leads to the notion of pedagogies of educational transition and the ways in which they might promote continuity for children starting school. Pedagogical processes are tightly interwoven into each of the key elements of transition outlined by the Position Statement: opportunities, aspirations, expectations and entitlements for children, families, educators, communities and systems. In an earlier section of this review, pedagogy was defined as:

Those instructional techniques and strategies which enable learning to take place and provide opportunities for the acquisition of knowledge, skills, attitudes and dispositions within a particular social and material context. Also, the interactive processes between teacher and learner and to the learning environment (which includes the concrete learning environment, the family and community) together with the theories, beliefs, policies and controversies that inform and shape it.

There are clear links between pedagogy and transition to school conceptualised as opportunities, aspirations, expectations and entitlements. For example, this definition of pedagogy emphasises the provision of opportunities: opportunities for learning as well as the development of attitudes and dispositions within a particular social and material context. This concept can be applied to transition, where the Transition to School: Position Statement refers to opportunities for all stakeholders related to learning or support for learning (ETC Research Group, 2011). Opportunities are also referred to in terms of opportunities for relationships, which are an integral component of effective pedagogy (Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden, & Bell, 2006). This definition positions pedagogy as an interactive process, referring not only to interactions between the teacher and the learner, but also with the learning environment, which includes the physical environment itself, as well as the family and community. The elements of interactive processes, such as communication, relationship building and provisions for learning, are key features in the Transition to School: Position Statement as well as the transition literature more generally.
According to this definition, pedagogy also encompasses theories, beliefs, policies and controversies. Both the *Transition to School: Position Statement* and the literature around transition acknowledge the role of philosophies and beliefs about transition to school, how these have changed over time, and are debated. Also, both pedagogy and transition are influenced by policies and systems according to current political agendas. The connections between approaches to pedagogy and transitions lead to the following definition of pedagogies of educational transition. *Pedagogies of educational transition* refer to:

The interactive processes and strategies that enable the development of opportunities, aspirations, expectations and entitlements for children, families, educators, communities and educational systems around transition to school, together with the theories, beliefs, policies and controversies that shape them.

Continuity of pedagogy between prior-to-school and school settings has been identified as a major contributor to the effectiveness of children’s transition to school, both in their initial adjustment and long term outcomes (Dunlop, 2013; Education Review Office, 2015; Petriwskyj, 2005). Pedagogies of educational transition have the ability to promote connections across prior-to-school and school settings, supporting the continuity of learning, development and relationships. It is also possible for pedagogies of educational transition to highlight the differences and disconnections between settings. Through the interrogation of pedagogical practices and policies around transition, there is the potential to identify practices and strategies that are contextually relevant and that support positive transitions to school.

One of the issues in continuity between settings is the continuity of curriculum. Dunlop (2013) cited curriculum changes as one of the most significant adjustments children need to make during their transition to school. Relatively few studies have investigated the nature or impact of curriculum continuity between settings. Of those that have, several report the trend for pushing-down school curriculum into prior-to-school settings in an attempt to
promote academic abilities as children start school (Dockett & Perry, 2012; Miesels, 2007; Peters, 2014). One of the aims of this study is to examine the continuity of curriculum between settings.

This section brings together the concepts of pedagogy and transition to school to establish a working definition of pedagogies of educational transition. Pedagogies of educational transition can promote connections across different contexts, and in doing so support continuity of learning, development and relationships.

3.4 Networks

The term network is used in a multitude of ways. For example, a computer network, transport network, data network, or telecommunications network and so on. In these examples, a network may be considered in its simplest form as a type of organisation or structure. The Oxford Dictionary defines network as “a group or system of interconnected people or things” (Oxford University Press, 2018, para. 2). This thesis acknowledges the many different types of networks, however focuses its attention on professional networks.

3.4.1 Professional networks.

McGuire and Silvia (2009, p. 35) offered the following definition of a professional network:

an integrated structure that involves multiple actors—nodes—with multiple linkages, working on cross boundary, collaborative activities. Such structures can be formal or informal, and
they are typically intersectoral, intergovernmental, and based functionally in a specific problem or policy area.

While professional networks are conceived of as being structures, this does not mean they are rigidly organised as the term suggests. Some professional networks are formally structured, while others are more organic in nature (Earl & Katz, 2007). However, any conceptualisation of a network is incomplete without acknowledgement of the social element (McCormick, Fox, Carmichael, & Procter, 2011b). It is the people within the networks as well as the relationships between them that create action (Bell, Cordingley, & Mitchell, 2006).

Underpinning the understanding of professional networks is the concept of ‘social capital’ which refers to “networks together with shared norms, values and understandings that facilitate co-operation within or among groups” (OECD, 2002, p. 4). Social capital emphasises the collective capacity of the relationships between members of a community, which holds both intrinsic value to the members, but also to the wider community (Putnam, 2002, para. 11). Professional networks offer an opportunity where various social capital may be mobilised to benefit the community (McCormick, Fox, Carmichael, & Procter, 2011a).

Essentially, the major purpose of professional networks is the creation and transfer of knowledge and practice. Professional networks are inherently social (McCormick et al., 2011a) and about ‘communities’ for and of learning. Professional networks are described using a number of titles including ‘professional learning communities’, ‘communities of learners’ (Lieberman, 2000; McCormick et al., 2011a), communities of learning (Education Review Office, 2015) and ‘communities of practice’ (Wenger, 1998).
3.4.2 Educator networks

There is no one accepted definition of an educator network. Niesz (2007) and Schiff, Herzog, Farley-Ripple, and Thum Iannuccilli (2015) adopted the definition of teacher networks as “groups of teachers, organised both formally and informally inside and outside the school building/day, related to teacher learning, support, or school improvement” (Schiff et al., 2015, p. 1). Similarly, Trust (2012, p. 133) defined teacher networks as a “system of interpersonal connections and resources that support informal learning”. These definitions share some common features; educator networks involve a number of people, and support the development of learning. It is these two features which are used in this thesis to define educator networks.

In educational contexts, networks have been shown to be an effective forum for enhancing professional teaching and learning to the benefit of both teachers and children (Bell et al., 2006). When educators participate in networks they are afforded opportunities to challenge their practice, which, in turn, can promote professional growth. From this, changes to practice and perspectives on teaching and learning can ensue (Lieberman & Miller, 2008). Through this process, networks are able to create a strong culture of teacher learning where the sharing and creation of new knowledge is valued (Bell et al., 2006). Networks have also been shown to improve outcomes for children as a result of increased collaboration between educators, more positive educator relationships and increased professional regard between educators (Schiff et al., 2015). For these reasons, educator networks have become popular as an effective strategy for educational reform, and there is increasing attention given to understanding the nature of effective networks in the educational context (McCormick et al., 2011a). Considering networks in early childhood education, Marbina, Church, and Tayler (2010, p. 15) note that:
A focus on developing professional networks and learning communities provides early childhood professionals with a model where critical engagement can flourish. Learning communities – communities that engage with contemporary research, strategic development, multi-agency participation and onsite or virtual mentors – provide multiple opportunities for supported, inquiry-driven changes to practice.

Networks can provide an alternative context to more formally organised and administrative professional development that is common in educational settings. Rather than targeting individuals with formalised, structured training in an attempt to provide them with new skills or perspectives, networks can be tailored to the everyday needs and challenges of the educators who then can be in control of their own professional development (Vaessen, van den Beemt, & de Laat, 2014). Hence, networks can be seen as a viable alternative, or at least complementary to, more traditional forms of professional development (Vaessen et al., 2014).

Networks afford opportunities for the promotion of educators’ professional autonomy, independent decision-making and direction (Vaessen et al., 2014). Further benefits afforded include furthering knowledge, understanding and skills, which in turn, has the potential to support inclusive practices, enhanced communication and a greater understanding of the learning process (Bell et al., 2006). As well, networks can facilitate positive relationships and professional support and regard between educators (Schiff et al., 2015), which increases educators’ engagement and motivation towards teaching and learning (Lieberman, 2000). Effective networks are also known to promote engagement in professional development, attendance at conferences and other educational events (Bell et al., 2006). Networks can also benefit educational settings and communities through improved community relationships, and the generation of new knowledge and skills (Bell et al., 2006).
Networks that have a clearly defined purpose or objective tended to set specific goals and are more effective than those that do not (Bell et al., 2006; Lieberman & McLaughlin, 1992). A clear purpose brings people together and provides a reason to sustain involvement and participation in the network. Driven by the purpose, ongoing collaboration and commitment can occur (Lieberman, 2000).

Niesz (2007) found effective networks to be flexible in nature, enabling them to be responsive to the members, and allowing members to have greater authority over the direction of the network. Part of this flexibility involved the size of networks. Bell et al. (2006) argue that the size of network seems to have little bearing on their effectiveness. Rather, the quality and flexibility of the interactions and collaborations appears to be more important than the number of individuals in a network (Bell et al., 2006; Schiff et al., 2015).

Leadership is important for effective networks. A lack of leadership can cause a network to lose its focus and organisational structure, potentially jeopardising the ability of the network to continue (Lieberman & Miller, 2008). Earl and Katz (2007) identified two different types of leadership in networks – formal and distributed. Formal leaders are usually appointed or designated by some kind of authority or management figure, and tend to be task-orientated (Luria & Berson, 2013). Distributed leadership sees many individuals take on the responsibility for leadership in a series of interactions (Earl & Katz, 2007). Vaessen et al. (2014) described leadership as being dependent on the level of professional autonomy that individuals possess in the network. Greater levels of autonomy generate independent thinking, learning and acting, promote the sharing of knowledge and, in turn, the motivation to participate. This is common among networks that employ distributed leadership (O'Gorman & Hard, 2013). Some researchers posit that leadership in networks “is not the
kind of leadership that one person can do. It is leadership that requires many people – a leader-full organisation” (Allen & Cherrey, 2000, p. 96).

3.4.3 Educator networks and transition to school

Educator networks in early childhood education have been promoted as a strategy for supporting ongoing learning and reflective practice – one of the principles underpinning the EYLF (Marbina et al., 2010). In particular, it is noted that “critical reflection is most effective when it takes place within a regular learning network” (p. 17). Across a range of research into supporting transition to school, the Victorian Department of Education and Training has promoted the involvement of early childhood educators in networks as a means to facilitate professional learning, build common knowledge, build professional partnerships, and work collaboratively to support the transition to school within their communities (Flottman, McKernan, & Tayler, 2011; Scull & Garvis, 2015; Semann & Slattery, 2015)

Transitions literature advocates for collaborative practices to facilitate effective transitions to school. In particular, it is recommended that prior-to-school and school educators work together to facilitate alignment and coordination between settings to improve teaching and learning outcomes for children (Dockett & Einarsdottir, 2017; Hopps, 2014a). Ahtola et al. (2011) noted that collaboration around curricula is especially beneficial for improving children’s learning outcomes. Other transitions researchers advocate for educators across prior-to-school and school settings to work together to create new and shared pedagogical practices to support children’s continuity of learning (Dockett & Einarsdottir, 2017; Peters, 2014). Karila and Rantavuori (2014) highlight that in order for effective collaboration to occur between prior-to-school and school educators, the different expertise that each educator brings must be recognised and valued by the other members of the
network. Educator networks have the capacity to facilitate the development of new and shared pedagogies, and to value the contributions of the members.

Educator networks have been established as an effective tool for improving professional practice. While the literature on networks in education generally is plentiful, much less is known about educator networks as a tool to improve professional practice around transition to school. It is therefore pertinent to consider how educator networks may be used in the transition to school context to enhance transitions to school.

3.5 Rurality

This study explores the transition to school experiences and perceptions of early childhood educators working in rural contexts. This section of the literature review will address what is meant by rural in this study and explore some of the issues around rural education.

3.5.1 What is ‘rural’?

The Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS) is the standard method to define remoteness in Australia. It uses ‘Remoteness Areas’ (RA) to refer to five classes of relative remoteness across Australia. These are: Major Cities of Australia, Inner Regional Australia, Outer Regional Australia, Remote Australia, and Very Remote Australia. These classifications use road distance to the nearest urban centre, and population to determine the classification of RA. For a further explanation of the ASGS RA see Australian Bureau of Statistics (2018).
An example of the ASGS classification showing the distribution of the Australian population in each of the categories is given in Table 1:

**Table 1: ASGS classification example (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), 2018)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ASGS RA</th>
<th>Major cities</th>
<th>Inner regional</th>
<th>Outer regional</th>
<th>Remote</th>
<th>Very remote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Example</td>
<td>Sydney</td>
<td>Bendigo</td>
<td>Mackay</td>
<td>Alice Springs</td>
<td>Tennant Creek</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population distribution</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The ASGS does not use the term ‘rural’, instead referring to ‘Inner Regional’ and ‘Outer Regional’ areas. Despite this, much of the literature refers to ‘rural’ when referring to these areas (Baxter, Gray, & Hayes, 2011; Halsey, 2018; Lamb, Glover, & Walstab, 2014). This thesis takes direction from these authors, and uses the term ‘rural’ to refer to outer and inner regional areas in Australia.

Australian families living in rural areas often face challenges that are less common for families living in urban areas. These challenges include issues around accessibility to essential services like health and education, and good-quality infrastructure (Edwards & Baxter, 2013). There are often significant differences between rural and urban areas in income and opportunities for employment (AIHW, 2018). In general, people living in rural areas have higher mortality rates and shorter life expectancy, higher levels of illness and disease risk factors, higher rates of mental health problems, drug abuse and a variety of other factors when compared to their city counterparts (Standing Council on Health, 2012). However, Australians living in rural areas also have generally higher levels of social cohesiveness including rates of volunteer work and feelings of safety in their community (AIHW, 2017).
While the majority of Australians live in major cities and urban centres, over a quarter of the population live in rural areas (AIHW, 2018). Rural areas are vital to Australia’s infrastructure and sustainability and it is in the country’s interests to ensure rural communities are dynamic and productive to support Australia’s population, long-term outcomes and economic viability (Halsey, 2018). While there are many challenges faced by rural communities, these communities play an integral role in Australia’s productivity and sustainability and it is important to consider how education in rural areas contributes to this role.

The Australian Government uses a statistical measure – the Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) - developed by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) for rating socio-economic conditions in each region across Australia. This measure is developed and updated using the four-yearly Census data for determining the relative advantage and disadvantage experienced in each area. Relative socio-economic advantage and disadvantage is defined by the ABS as “people’s access to material and social resources, and their ability to participate in society” (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011a, para. 1). The mean SEIFA score is 1000, and generally areas with SEIFA scores of less than 1000 are considered to be disadvantaged. SEIFA scores will be used as part of the contextual information provided about each of the sites in this study.

3.5.2 Rural education

There are a number of complex issues around the provision of education in rural communities in Australia. Rural schools hold a unique place in communities, often serving as a central hub or point of connection for the local community (Halsey, 2005). Schools in rural
areas are more likely than their urban counterparts to be integral to the social and economic network as well as the sustainability of the community.

Perhaps the most obvious issue for people living in rural areas is the geographical distance to larger centres. This means people living in rural areas have fewer options for educational services. Most primary school aged children living in rural areas attend small schools close to where they live (Halsey, 2011), while prior-to-school aged children have fewer options for services. Not-for-profit preschools and family day care are more typical in rural areas than other types of services, such as long day care (Productivity Commission, 2011).

There are several differences in educational outcomes between school students in rural areas and those in urban areas (Halsey, 2018). Lamb et al. (2014) reported a number of significant differences in educational achievement between children living in rural and remote areas when compared to those in urban areas. From Year 3, and on average, children in urban areas achieve higher levels of reading than children in rural and remote areas.

Further, once these differences in learning occur, children living in rural areas find it difficult to catch up (Mitchell Institute, 2015). There are differences in Year 12 study scores and completion rates, which are both lower in rural and remote areas (Lamb et al., 2014). These differences can be attributed in part to occupational and employment differences in rural areas. Differences can also be linked to the schools themselves. Smaller schools generally mean fewer resources, workforce issues, limited access to specialist teachers and programs and more difficulty attracting funding (Mitchell Institute, 2015).

Despite Australia having unprecedented rates of education across the country in terms of school completion, students living in rural communities have considerable less access to the range of subjects and levels of study available in urban areas, and face considerable issues
accessing the full range of educational institutions (Lamb et al., 2014). This has some significant consequences both for the opportunities available to children and families to access school and for young people once they finish their schooling. Access to education in rural areas has significance for this study because success in schooling has been linked to positive transitions to school (Fabian & Dunlop, 2006).

Alongside issues of geographical remoteness and accessibility, schools and early childhood services in rural areas also face challenges around staffing, resourcing and delivery of the curriculum (Halsey, 2018). One of the ongoing issues and pressures for rural schools and early childhood services is attracting and retaining skilled and experienced educators. This has a range of implications for the ongoing functioning of services as, under the NQS reforms, early childhood services will soon be required to meet the nationally-agreed levels of qualified staff members and child-staff ratios. In many rural areas, where staff turnover is often high, additional, and sometimes ongoing, recruitment will be necessary in already ‘hard to staff’ services (Productivity Commission, 2011).

Schools and early childhood services in rural areas also report resourcing as a factor affecting their ability to provide sustained quality education. School educators identified not only financial resourcing, but also lack of professional development, staffing and time as serious issues in rural schools (Drummond, 2012). In rural early childhood services, there are often minimal opportunities for professional development, and travelling to attend such training is problematic in terms of distance, the provision of relief staff (Productivity Commission, 2011) and sometimes safety when driving on rural roads. A range of incentives has been trialled and implemented by various governments in attempts to address some of these challenges. For example, the NSW government offers incentives for school teachers to take up positions in rural and remote centres that include increased salary, subsidised rent and
access to extra professional development (NSW Government Education and Communities, 2014).

There has been significant criticism from researchers and educators regarding recent educational policy and curricula decisions as they apply to rural areas. These criticisms stem from the fact that decisions about the provision of school education in Australia are made by those living in urban areas, with little consideration or understanding of rural landscapes (Boylan, 2012; Wallace & Boylan, 2007). Particular concern has been raised since the implementation of the AC. The new curriculum has been described as ‘metro-centric’ and a ‘one size fits all’ approach to education (Boylan, 2012). School leaders were reported to be either undecided or mildly negative about the worth of the new curriculum, with concerns about lack of consultation with rural community members and lack of resourcing (Halsey, Drummond, & van Breda, 2010).

Despite these recent criticisms, rural communities have been credited with a history of being evolutionary and resourceful when it comes to educational provision (Wallace & Boylan, 2007). Early childhood services have found creative and innovative methods for providing educational services to young children, including mobile children’s services and crèches as part of job training initiatives (Productivity Commission, 2011). Similarly, schools and school systems have adapted a range of strategies to cater for the needs of rural communities including part-time schools, travelling schools, one teacher schools, and central schools (F-10/12) (Wallace & Boylan, 2007).

The key message coming from rural communities regarding education appears to be that rural perspectives need to be heard, and different contexts bring unique challenges to education. By considering the provision of education from a rural perspective, different and innovative strategies for thinking about schooling, pedagogy, curriculum and policy are
possible (Wallace & Boylan, 2007). Educators in rural schools have indicated their desire to have greater flexibility for delivering the curriculum in ways that are relevant and meaningful to them, and to be consulted about this (Drummond, 2012). Both early childhood services and schools want support and flexible initiatives to meet challenges around staffing qualifications and recruitment (Productivity Commission, 2011; White, Lock, Hastings, Cooper, & Reid, 2011). Finally “it is essential that people who live and work in urban contexts and provide policy advice to governments, as well as those who design and manage programs intended to benefit country people and communities, deeply understand rural” (Halsey et al., 2010, p. 1).

The importance of rural perspectives has great significance for this study, which aims to explore rural perspectives around transition to school.
3.6 Research questions

Synthesis of the research literature and consideration of the place of this research within the larger project have determined an overarching research question:

*How are pedagogies of educational transition enacted through educator networks in rural areas?*

This research question will be addressed through a series of related sub-questions:

1. What pedagogies of educational transition are used by educators in rural contexts to promote effective transitions to school?

2. What, or who, influences these pedagogies?

3. What influence, if any, does rurality have on these pedagogies?

4. In what ways have pedagogies of educational transition in rural contexts changed as a result of the new curricula?

5. How do pedagogies of educational transition in rural areas inform the development of a theoretical model?

6. How can this model inform the ongoing development and implementation of policy for transition to school in rural areas?

3.7 Significance of the study

This doctoral study has the potential to impact on the transition to school experiences of Australian children and their families and, through this, to promote a positive start to
school fostering children’s ongoing engagement with education. A number of features of this study contribute to the existing transition to school literature and practice:

1. Unprecedented nationwide policy reforms in both the early childhood and school sectors, including the introduction of two new curriculum frameworks provides a unique opportunity for research. This study has the capacity to investigate the impact of the EYLF and the AC on the transition to school in rural contexts.

2. Pedagogies of educational transitions have not been the focus of extensive transition to school research. This study has the capacity to generate new understandings of pedagogies of educational transitions, particularly in response to policy reforms and the introduction of the new curricula. Analysis of these pedagogies is important for promoting positive transitions for all children, as well as examining the impact of policy changes.

3. Educator networks are known to enhance professional teaching and learning, benefiting both educators and children (Bell et al., 2006). There is relatively little known about the ways that educator networks can be used to enhance professional practice for transition to school, despite continued advocacy for professional collaboration to promote positive transitions. This study has the capacity to investigate the ways in which educator networks can promote effective transitions to school, and in particular, effective pedagogies of educational transitions.

4. The educational experiences of people living in rural areas may be quite different from those in urban areas (Halsey, 2018). By focusing on the perspectives of educators in rural areas, this study can generate understandings of the experiences of those living and working in by rural contexts, and in particular the challenges of rural education, and the impact of these on pedagogies of educational transition.
5. Connections with the wider ARC project afford mutual benefits. This study is informed and guided by the research aims of the wider study. While so far there have been limited opportunities for this study to directly influence the wider project, there is scope for this to occur in the future.

3.8 Chapter summary

This chapter has provided an overview of the pertinent literature around pedagogy and transition to school, culminating in a clear definition of pedagogies of education transition that is adopted by this study. Pedagogies of educational transition were also discussed, with particular relevance to transition to school. Extant literature on professional networks, and more specifically educator networks was discussed. This chapter also provided an overview of what is meant by ‘rural’ pertaining to this study, and some of the issues affecting education in rural areas of Australia. Finally, this chapter closed with the research questions and the significance of this study.
This chapter positions the doctoral study in relation to the wider study of which it is a part. The theoretical framework adopted by the study – a bioecological model of human development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) – is outlined. The theoretical framework informed the methodology and this is seen throughout the research design, data collection and data analysis, with the emphasis on people, contexts and the processes between individuals and their contexts over time. A description of the methodological approaches adopted, including methods of data collection and data analysis, as well as ethical considerations are also addressed.

4.1 Background and context to the study

The doctoral study was positioned within, and conducted concurrently with, a larger Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery project titled *Continuity and change in curriculum and pedagogies as children start school*. The wider study aimed to make a timely and valuable contribution to the transition to school research base by contributing new understandings that promote positive transitions to school for all children. The aims of the overall project were to:

- analyse the policy-to-practice context of the introduction of two new curricula for early childhood education in Australia, with a particular focus on the transition to school; and

- interrogate pedagogies of educational transition in order to provide practice-based evidence to inform the transition to school intentions of the two curricula.
The theoretical underpinnings of the wider project are bioecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) in conjunction with the principles of policy-trajectory models (Ball, 1993, 2006), and practice-based research (Potter & Quill, 2006). Bioecological systems theory provides the basis for examining the nature of educational transitions as children start school, through the focus on the people, processes, contexts and time as elements of transition. Contexts (including families, classrooms and communities), as well as the relationships between these (such as family-school relationships), over time are regarded as influential during transition to school (Pianta & Cox, 1999).

The policy-trajectory model (Ball, 1993, 2006) identifies and examines three different levels in the development and implementation of policy and practice in educational transitions: the context of influence (where the policy is initiated and policy discourses are constructed); the context of policy text production (where policy related to implementation is created); and the context of practice (locations in which policy is interpreted and reinterpreted by educators as it is implemented in practice).

The overall project also adopted a practice-based research approach. Used extensively in the public health area, practice-based research is defined as “systematic inquiry into the systems, methods policies and programmatic applications” of practice (Potter & Quill, 2006, p. 2). This approach created opportunities to explore approaches to the generation of research, models and theories, based on practice as well as research.

The design of the ARC Discovery project utilised a mixed-methods approach with multiple phases of data collection involving a range of people, materials and processes across different contexts and time. The timeframe for the wider project spanned 2013–2016.

Phase 1 of the overall project focused on the policy and curriculum development level. Key tasks were the analysis of key curriculum documents and supporting information
and interviews with a range of people instrumental in the policy and curriculum development process for both curriculum documents. Some initial results from this analysis are presented in Dockett, Perry, and Davies (2017).

Phase 2 addressed the implementation level. Document analysis continued (N. Hard, Lee, & Dockett, 2018), alongside a series of 41 interviews with educators and policymakers at a state/territory, organisational and implementation level, including departments of education, independent and non-government school systems, early childhood organisations and any other relevant groups, as well as focus groups of prior-to-school and school educators. The focus of this phase was the interrogation of the two new curriculum documents in relation to pedagogies of educational transition as children start school.

Phase 3 involved the implementation of a survey considering transition to school practices, school readiness and the impact of the EYLF and AC on transition to school practices for both prior-to-school and school educators. The project collected data from 154 prior-to-school and 82 school educators across sites in each of the states and territories. Part of the survey invited educators to identify transition to school networks in their local area. Eleven networks were identified from various locations across Australia. Follow-up interviews and/or visits to these networks informed this phase of data generation.

The final phase (Phase 4) involved a series of theory building workshops, conceptualised as a feedback loop, where the findings of the research were shared or ‘fed back’ to the policy makers and practitioners with the ultimate aim of influencing policy and practice.
4.2 Position of the doctoral study

The rationale for the doctoral study came from the overall project. The aim for the doctoral study was to contribute to the overall project through its focus on perspectives from rural settings, adding a unique lens and further depth to the data. To achieve this, one network from the overall study and a further three network sites were identified and became the focal point for the study.

Table 2 outlines connections between the wider study and the doctoral study. The research questions for the doctoral study are presented to show the links with the overall ARC project.
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<td><strong>Overall research question:</strong> How are pedagogies of educational transition enacted through educator networks in rural areas?</td>
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<td>• analyse the policy-to-practice context of the introduction of two new curricula for early childhood education in Australia, with a particular focus on the transition to school; and</td>
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<td>• interrogate pedagogies of educational transition in order to provide practice-based evidence to inform the transition to school intentions of the two curricula</td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Analysis of the curriculum documents and their development</td>
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<td><strong>Research focus</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Research focus</strong></td>
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<td>3. Examination of perspectives of effective pedagogies of educational transition</td>
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<td>4.2 How can these models inform the ongoing development and implementation of policy?</td>
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4.3 Research design

The doctoral research adopted a qualitative research design, informed by an interpretivist paradigm. Paradigms reflect the basic set of beliefs that guide the researcher. Four central elements contribute to any paradigm: axiology (the ethical values underpinning the research); epistemology (beliefs about the nature of knowledge); ontology (beliefs about the nature of reality); and methodology (how to acquire knowledge about the world) (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008).

An interpretivist paradigm aims to “understand the subjective world of human experience” (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007, p. 21). This approach aims to understand individuals’ experiences and interpretations of phenomena. Researchers using an interpretivist paradigm seek and accommodate multiple perspectives, on the basis that reality is socially constructed and subjective. Interpretivist researchers recognise the importance of context in the construction and interpretation of data, and the methodologies employed are often iterative and emergent (Willis, 2007).

Qualitative methods align well with the interpretivist paradigm. Qualitative methods are often used to generate rich reports of the experiences of individuals in specific contexts – which is the aim of this study. Data generated using through qualitative methods provide an avenue to understand the meanings and purposes ascribed by those contributing the data, in that particular context, at that particular time. It is from here that sets of meanings can yield understandings of people’s experiences and interpretations of the world (Cohen et al., 2007). Further, theoretical bases for these understandings should ‘emerge’ from situations, not be applied to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).
4.4 Theoretical framework: A bioecological model of human development

The bioecological model of human development frames and conceptualises children’s development by examining the complex interrelationships, over time, between individuals, groups and the contexts surrounding them (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). This model argues for the fundamental role of the environment and the relationships and processes between individuals and their environment over time in any consideration of human development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). The bioecological model describes development as “the phenomenon of continuity and change in the biopsychological characteristics of human beings, both as individuals and as groups. The phenomenon extends over the life course, across successive generations, and through historical time, both past and future” (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, p. 793).
The bioecological model is the latest iteration of Bronfenbrenner’s continuously developing theory of human development. Prior to this, the theory had seen a number of revisions, changes and extensions since ecological systems theory (1979). Ecological systems theory sees the child as positioned at the centre of a series of concentric circles, representing the various ‘systems’ interacting with the child. The theory highlights the ecological nature of human development as being between the person and different contexts, as well as the interactions and intersections between the contexts (Dockett, Petriwskyj, & Perry, 2014).

In this earlier version, Bronfenbrenner accentuated the role of the context, differentiated as the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem (Tudge, Mokrova, Hatfield, & Karnik, 2009). Although not discussed since, it is in referring to mesosystems in the 1979 theory that Bronfenbrenner described ‘ecological transitions’. Here Bronfenbrenner described transition as “whenever a person’s position in the ecological environment is altered as the result of a change in role, setting, or both.” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 26). Bronfenbrenner noted that ecological transitions occur throughout one’s lifetime, and are “both a consequence and an instigator of developmental processes” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 27).

Despite ecological systems theory being used widely, it has been criticised on a number of fronts. Critics, including Bronfenbrenner himself, assert there is an over-emphasis on the context, and insufficient emphasis of the role of the person on his/her own development, the processes that occur between the various systems, as well as the influence of time (Tudge et al., 2009; Webb, Knight, & Busch, 2017).

As a result, Bronfenbrenner’s later revisions included a greater emphasis on the characteristics of the person, on processes, and on time. In these later revisions, Bronfenbrenner emphasised the role of the individual as a “highly complex biopsychological
organism – characterised by a distinctive complex of evolving interrelated, dynamic capacities for thought, feeling and action” (Bronfenbrenner, 1993, p. 7 cited in Rosa and Tudge (2013)). The addition of ‘proximal processes’ were also as a result of Bronfenbrenner’s reflections on the inadequacies of earlier versions, and became the primary focus of the bioecological model (Rosa & Tudge, 2013; Tudge et al., 2009). Bronfenbrenner also added the chronosystem, which refers to the changes in individuals over time of both the individual and the environment (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) acknowledging that although individuals may share similar events or processes, different time periods influence these experiences (Webb et al., 2017). Despite these improvements, the bioecological theory has attracted some criticism for being oversimplified, and not accounting for differences in individual, social and cultural experiences (Vogler et al., 2008), or children’s long term trajectories (Petriwskyj, 2014).

Considering these criticisms and subsequent revisions, it is the bioecological theory that has been adopted by this study. The four principle components of bioecological theory are Process, Person, Context and Time (PPCT). This model acknowledges that differences in transition experiences are influenced by contexts – family, school, community – as well as the relationships between these contexts, such as home-school relationships. The PPCT model also recognises the importance of the element of time. This is consistent with contemporary understandings of transitions occurring over a period of time (Education Review Office, 2015; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000).

### 4.4.1 Process

At the core of the bioecological model are processes. Processes, specifically proximal processes, describe the interactions that occur between individuals and their environment
over time. Proximal processes form the foundations of the bioecological model, appearing in two key ‘propositions’. The first states that:

...human development takes place through processes of progressively more complex reciprocal interaction between an active, evolving biopsychological human organism and the persons, objects and symbols in its immediate external environment. To be effective, the interaction must occur on a fairly regular basis over extended periods of time.


It is acknowledged that while processes form the focus of the model and often determine development, they are influenced by the characteristics of the individuals, the environment, and the time in which the processes occur (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, 2006). The second proposition addresses this:

the form, power, content, and direction of the proximal processes effecting development vary systematically as a joint function of the characteristics of the developing person; of the environment – both immediate and remote – in which the processes are taking place; the nature of the developmental outcomes under consideration; and the social continuities and changes occurring over time through the life course and the historical period during which the person has lived. (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, p. 996).

Processes form a key feature in the doctoral study. Transition to school is conceptualised as a process of relationship building between children, families, educators and communities over time (ETC Research Group, 2011; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). The doctoral study focused specifically on the pedagogical practices and processes that occur during transition, from the perspective of educators. Processes included those interactions and relationships educators have with children, their families, other educators and professionals and the community. They also included different types of interactions, such as educators’
interactions with policy documents, planning and educational systems. The notion of processes is also relevant to the conceptualisation of pedagogy employed within the study, with pedagogy characterised by interactions and processes between the educator, the learner and the learning environment.

4.4.2 Person

Earlier representations of the ecological model of development focused primarily on the influence and elements of context. Focus on the individual developed as the theory has evolved (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Darling, 2007). The model considers biological and genetic influences of individuals, as well as the personal characteristics individuals bring with them to social situations (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). These individual characteristics, or elements of the Person, are categorised as demand, resource and force characteristics. Demand refers to personal stimulus characteristics such as age, gender, skin colour and physical appearance. These characteristics impact on proximal processes by inciting reactions and expectations from others (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Resource characteristics incorporate cognitive and emotional resources – past experiences, skills, intelligence, access to social and material resources and educational opportunities. Force characteristics are those which relate to differences in areas such as temperament, motivation and persistence. Bronfenbrenner’s rationale for the inclusion of force characteristics was that, while children may have similar resource characteristics, outcomes could vary because of differences in motivation and persistence (Tudge et al., 2009). While Bronfenbrenner acknowledged the existence of these characteristics and their potential impact, he was generally more concerned with the mutually affective nature of these characteristics on
individual development and how individuals ascribe meaning to their experiences as a result (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

Attention to a Person’s characteristics is an integral part of transition to school. Transition is understood to involve many individuals and stakeholders, each with their own experiences and perceptions of the transition process. It is important that different perspectives are gathered to form a more complete picture of transition (Dockett & Perry, 2004a). The bioecological model allowed the exploration of the personal characteristics of the participants in the study – specifically the perspectives around pedagogies of transition to school in rural areas. Characteristics of the participant(s) or Person(s) included resource characteristics such as past experiences; of their own schooling and as educators, teacher education and professional development, their own beliefs and philosophies as well as the resources, both material and social, available to them. There were also examples of force characteristics in terms of the participants’ level of motivation and engagement with the transition to school process and their role within it. The characteristics of the Person were also applicable to understandings of pedagogy, where the practices of the educator were being considered.

4.4.3 Context

The model refers to the environment, or context, as a series of interrelated systems. The first system, known as the microsystem, incorporates any environment where an individual spends considerable time engaging in interactions with others. For most children, these are likely to include the home, school or other educational setting, and friendship group. Microsystems influence the individual in terms of the available resources and the significant people within them (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).
The interactions within and between microsystems generate *mesosystems* (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). The relationships between mesosystems and the potential influence of these in transition to school can be seen in the importance of home-school relationships. Similar expectations and mutual understandings between families and schools promote positive relationships and provides support for children (Arndt & McGuire-Schwartz, 2008). Another example of a mesosystem is in the relationship between prior-to-school settings and schools. When these relationships are proactive and collaborative, children are more likely to have positive experiences during transition (Flottman et al., 2011; Kagan, 2007).

As well as focusing on the interactions in contexts that are closely related to children, it was also necessary to consider those contexts that may be further removed, yet still influential in a variety of ways. Bronfenbrenner referred to the *exosystem* – contexts where children do not have an active role, yet are affected indirectly. Examples of this might be friends of family, neighbourhoods as well as governing and organising bodies (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). The influence of communities and systems is relevant to understandings of transition to school. The provision of support and resourcing by communities has an indirect, yet recognisable impact on the effectiveness of children’s transition to school. Similarly, commitments by education systems and organisations to provide quality education impacts on children’s learning outcomes (ETC Research Group, 2011).

The *macrosystem* refers to the outermost layer of context within the bioecological model. This system relates to the social, political, economic or cultural influences on any group within the microsystem of the child. It includes the values, belief systems, attitudes and ideologies of groups such as government or employing authorities. These may have an indirect but important impact on children (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Tudge et al.,
In the doctoral study, the macrosystem contained government policies such as the national quality reform agenda, employer and setting owner beliefs and values around early childhood education, and funding models. As well, the conceptualisation of pedagogy adopted by this study acknowledges the influence of theories, beliefs, policies and controversies – all of which can be considered part of the macrosystem.

4.4.4 Time

Time is an integral component to the PPCT model. Time is described in three ways: microtime refers to what is occurring during the course of a specific activity or interaction; mesotime is the extent to which activities and interactions occur with some consistency in the individual’s environment; and macrotime refers to the alteration of developmental processes according to the specific historical events that are occurring as individuals progress through their life course (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Tudge et al., 2009). In earlier iterations of ecological theory, macrotime was referred to as the chronosystem.

The importance of time can be noted in contemporary understandings of transition to school. For example, rather than occurring at one point in time, transition spans across time and is different for each individual (Education Review Office, 2015) and the historical context in which transition to school occurs influences the nature of that transition (Turunen & Dockett, 2013).

The bioecological model with its emphasis on PPCT informs this study in a number of ways. The characterisation of transition as movement between contexts over time, and the adjustments made as a consequence of this, constitutes interactions in the mesosystems created by the intersection of home, school and prior-to-school environments. Indeed, this reflects the definition of transition posited by Bronfenbrenner in his ecological model (1979).
Building on this, attention to the elements of Person, Process, Context and Time highlights the involvement of multiple stakeholders in transition, the characteristics they and their interactions bring to transitions and the importance of reciprocal relationships between these people. Further, attention to the element of time reminds us of the importance of both time and timing in transition.

4.4.5 Bioecological theory and transition to school

The flexibility afforded by the PPCT model, has meant it has been used widely for guiding research about transition to school (Dockett et al., 2014; Dunlop, 2014; Vogler et al., 2008; Webb et al., 2017). The model provides a sound framework for understanding transitions in a number of important ways.

The model’s primary focus is on processes, which emphasises the importance of relationships and interactions that are central to transition to school. Transitions are recognised as involving a series of interactions between people – children, families, educators and communities and the various systems and contexts in which these people are located (Dockett et al., 2014). The model’s contention that processes become increasingly more complex as they occur over time, reflects the opportunities afforded during transition for building and maintaining relationships (O'Toole, 2016) and “the power of relationships to effect change to, and for, individuals” (Dockett et al., 2014, p. 6)

The model highlights the active, bi-directional interaction and influence that takes place between the individual and the various contexts in which they are positioned (O'Toole, 2016). This perspective is shared in understandings of transition where children, families, educators and communities are not passive participants, rather, they are recognised as co-
constructing their transition experiences by contributing to these relationships and interactions (Dunlop, 2014; Murray, 2014). In addition, transition is understood to occur over time,

In addition, the model acknowledges the individual characteristics and resources that each individual brings to transition to school. These individual characteristics and resources interact with the various contexts in unique ways, meaning transition is experienced differently for each individual (Dockett et al., 2014). For children, the individual characteristics and attributes that they bring with them to school are significant for determining their success starting school (Rosier & McDonald, 2011). Further, the child is positioned at the centre of the model, and while this has generated some questions around privileging children above other stakeholders in transition (Dockett et al., 2014; Murray, 2014), it nevertheless highlights the integral role children play in transition to school. Given the model’s acknowledgement of the context, attention has been given to ensuring early childhood settings provide children with quality programmes, which are recognised as being important for offsetting children’s potential vulnerabilities during the transition to school (Vogler et al., 2008).

Dunlop (2014, p. 41) provided a succinct summary of the advantages of the PPCT model, with its additional consideration of the chronosystem:

“It focuses on the child at the centre of the theoretical model; it acknowledges that a child affects and is affected by the settings in which time is spent; it recognises the importance of family, settings and community; it allows for the immediacy of interaction and interrelation between subjects and conditions; it encourages dual analysis of interlocking systems; used as a base framework, it can incorporate development over considerable time”.

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The influence of the PPCT model can be observed in a number of key Australian transition to school policies and resources developed with the aim of facilitating successful transitions to school. One such example is the Victorian *Transition: A Positive Start to School Resource Kit* (DET, 2017). The document frames transitions as context-dependent where transitions are unique for each child, who are considered active participants in their learning contexts, and that these contexts are influenced by family, culture and experience. Here, positive relationships between children, families and educators are identified as central to successful transitions, and fostering these should be a primary focus for educators and professionals. Transition is acknowledged as a time of change, and the importance of continuity for those making the transition is highlighted. Educators are encouraged to “recognis[e] the strengths [children] each bring to transitions, building on the competence they demonstrate and scaffolding the abilities of each child” (2017, p. 4).

Another key Victorian resource advocates for the facilitation of reciprocal visits (where educators visit one another’s settings) between prior-to-school and school settings for the development and strengthening of positive relationships between educators (Semann & Slattery, 2015). Engaging in reciprocal visits can promote positive relationships, and in turn, improve understandings about a range of educational issues, enhance communication and information sharing, and improve understandings of the multiple perspectives involved in transition to school (Semann & Slattery, 2015).

One of the ways that brings these perspectives together, is through the use of transition statements. Transition statements are used in both New South Wales and Victoria. In Victoria, the use of transition statements is mandated, while in New South Wales their use is highly recommended, but not compulsory. The Victorian DET (2017, p. 7) explains that The Transition Learning and Development Statement is to benefit children, families and educators and “has been designed to assist families and educators share information and
specific strategies to support each child’s learning and development. Transition statements in both Victoria and New South Wales are completed jointed by the family and prior-to-school educator, on behalf of the child and are given to the school educator. The transition statements provide information about children’s abilities, interests, approaches to learning and potential teaching strategies, in line with the relevant early childhood curriculum framework. The statements provide an opportunity for the transfer of important information about children’s learning, and for school educators to get to know children before they commence school, irrespective of the setting they are transitioning to, or from (DET, 2017; New South Wales State Government, 2018).

Transition statements are known to help support positive transitions to school for children, and develop stronger relationships between educators from across the prior-to-school and school settings (Sayers, West, Lorains, Laidlaw, & Robinson, 2012). While transition statements are one way of achieving these outcomes, other, similar strategies are also used for the same purpose. Speed dating is a strategy where prior-to-school and school educators meet to exchange information by handing over transition statements (DET, 2015) and/or exchanging other information about children’s learning. These strategies share benefits by increasing the awareness of the importance of transition to school for all involved (Skouteris, Watson, & Lum, 2012).

This section has highlighted the ways in which contemporary research and practice around transition to school are strongly influenced and underpinned by the PPCT model. Current practices designed to improve transitions to school acknowledge the role of the individual and the different contexts in which they are positioned, as well as the complex interactions and relationships that occur between these, and over time.
4.5 Methods

This section addresses the research methodology, referencing the importance of both epistemology and ontology in efforts to investigate the perceptions and experiences of participants within the contexts of their networks. Issues related to axiology – the ethical underpinnings of the study – are addressed separately. Discussion of the importance of rigour in interpretivist research concludes this chapter.

4.5.1 Sampling

Phase 3 of the ARC project identified a purposive sample of geographical sites in each state and territory, considering variables such as relative isolation, cultural diversity, socioeconomic status and Indigeneity. In each of these geographical sites, all schools and prior-to-school settings were invited to participate in various aspects of the study. These schools and settings were approached seeking a staff member to complete the survey. Of those invited, 154 prior-to-school and 82 school educators completed the survey.

As part of the survey, participants were asked about the existence of educator networks in their settings that focused on transition to school. It was from these responses that the doctoral study planned to yield sites in rural areas that identified as having a transitions network to form the sites for the study. Rurality was defined as ‘those areas that are categorised by the ASGS as inner and outer regional areas’ (see Chapter Three) and determined by the postcode provided in the survey.

However, due to lower than expected survey responses generally, there were also fewer than expected responses indicating the presence of transitions networks. Of those in Victoria and New South Wales (the states in which, for reasons of cost and accessibility, the
doctoral study was conducted), only one of these survey responses from the larger study met the criteria of rurality and transition to school network. This site became one of the sites for the doctoral study and is given the pseudonym Blacksmith. Hence, only data from this site is available from the survey used in the overall ARC project. The reasons for the small number of survey responses were not clear. It was also not clear why, so few sites identified as having a transition to school network. Some possible explanations are that those sites where there was a transition network were not part of the larger study’s survey sample; that those sites with a transition network did not respond to the survey; or that there are few transitions networks generally. It is also possible that, in the context of the major changes within early childhood education at the time, responding to a survey was not seen as a priority for some educators.

Due to the lower than expected yield of nominated transitions networks from the larger study, an alternative sampling method was devised. The researcher employed a peer-recruiting method, using a variety of existing professional network affiliations to identify a further three rural sites; one in Victoria and two in New South Wales where a transition network was known to be operating. These, together with the site yielded from the larger study, formed four sites which became the sites for the doctoral study. These sites were assigned the following pseudonyms: Robinleigh, Westill, Blacksmith and Fern Creek.

4.5.2 Participants

A note about site descriptions: In Victoria, the year prior to school is known as Kindergarten, and the first year of school is either referred to as ‘Prep’ (Preparatory) or Foundation. In New South Wales, the year prior to school is referred to as Preschool, and the first year of school is Kindergarten. Given that the participants in this study hail from both
states, the terms are used differently in each site, which has the potential to cause confusion. For this reason, the results refer to Preschool to indicate the year prior to school, and Foundation to refer to the first year of school.

The participants for the doctoral study were educators and professionals from both prior-to-school and school settings who worked in a rural area, and who belonged to a network which met regularly to collaborate around transition to school. Educators were those teaching in both prior-to-school and school settings. Professionals were not teachers, but held other roles associated with the provision of education, such as maternal and child health nurses and community education organizers.

Once the sites were identified, the researcher made initial contact with educators in each of the sites, inviting them to participate in the research. As detailed in the following descriptions, the networks varied in size and extent. Across the various networks, there was a range of participants – some of whom engaged regularly with the network and others who were more occasional participants. In addition, the networks met with varying frequency. As a consequence, not all network members contributed data to the study. Data construction involved attendance at network meetings or focus group interviews with network members, and follow-up interviews. The numbers of research participants involved in network meetings or focus group interviews at each site are detailed in Table 3:

**Table 3: Number of participants in networks**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Robinleigh</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westhill</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blacksmith</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fern Creek</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A series of follow-up interviews were conducted with all of the network members from each of the sites who gave their consent. The number of participants for each of these follow-up interviews are detailed in Table 4:

**Table 4: Number of participants in follow-up interviews**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Robinleigh</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westhill</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blacksmith</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fern Creek</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the two smaller sites, all of the network members consented to a follow-up interview, while in the larger two sites, this was not the case. While it is not clear why this was so, one possible explanation is that generally, both follow-up interviews in the smaller sites were done in person. It is possible that the network members were more motivated to participate in a face-to-face interview, than via phone.

More information about the network visits, interviews with networks and follow-up interviews is given in Chapters Five, Six, Seven and Eight where data from each of the sites are presented separately.

### 4.5.3 Data collection

Although the survey data from the overall project itself did not form part of the formal data collection for the doctoral study, it nevertheless served as a useful source of information for the researcher. The survey responses from the one site generated from the larger study – Blacksmith - was reviewed. This provided the researcher with some initial information.
regarding the participants’ roles as educators (whether prior-to-school educators or school educators) and their views and perceptions about transition to school. Also, having some background information about the participants assisted the researcher in developing appropriate focus group questions for all the sites.

Due to differences in the ways the networks operated, including how often they met, and the availability of the participants and the researcher, data were collected through attendance at the network meetings, focus-group interviews and follow-up interviews as outlined in Table 5:

Table 5: Schedule of data collection

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>First data collection</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Second data collection</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Third data collection</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Robinleigh</td>
<td>Network meeting</td>
<td>April 2015</td>
<td>Network meeting</td>
<td>July 2015</td>
<td>Follow-up phone interviews</td>
<td>August, September 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westhill</td>
<td>Focus-group interview</td>
<td>July 2015</td>
<td>Follow-up focus-group interview</td>
<td>February 2016</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blacksmith</td>
<td>Network meeting</td>
<td>August 2015</td>
<td>Follow-up phone interviews</td>
<td>August, September 2015</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fern Creek</td>
<td>Focus-group interview</td>
<td>July 2015</td>
<td>Follow-up focus-group interview, follow up phone interview</td>
<td>February 2016</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Network meetings

As much as possible, the aim was for the researcher to attend network meetings in order to gauge how these functioned and what issues were discussed. This is in keeping with the interpretivist paradigm which advocates for data to be generated in participants’ ‘natural setting’ (Cohen et al., 2007). The role of the researcher during these meetings was to observe as much as possible, adopting a ‘neutral’ stance as an ‘outside’ researcher (Walsham, 2006). At the same time, it was recognised that all individuals bring their own backgrounds, biases, knowledges, understandings and preconceptions to any research situation. Following Walsham (2006, p. 321), the neutral positioning of the researcher was understood in the sense that “the people in the field situation do not perceive the researcher as being aligned with a particular individual or group within the organisation”.

Initial visits to the networks were important for data collection purposes, but also for establishing rapport with the participants.

Prior to the network meetings in Robinleigh and Blacksmith, the researcher introduced herself to network members whom she had not already met, explained the purposes of the research, and ensured she had the consent of all the network members before proceeding with recording the network meeting.

During the network meetings in Robinleigh and Blacksmith, the researcher had little involvement, although did ask some questions to clarify information. Despite the presence of the researcher, participants indicated that, the meetings proceeded as they would have usually operated. With permission, the network meetings were audio-recorded for later transcription and analysis.
As is described in Table 5, the researcher visited and recorded the network meetings at Robinleigh on two separate occasions. This was because the network meetings were held with greater frequency in Robinleigh.

*Focus group interviews*

The researcher visited Westhill and Fern Creek on two separate occasions to conduct focus group interviews. Focus group interviews were conducted with the members of the networks in Westhill and Fern Creek due to difficulties coordinating the spontaneous nature of the network meetings in these sites, with the availability and distance to travel for the researcher. Dates and times for the focus group interviews were negotiated with the network contact, who coordinated the other members of the network. All focus group interviews were audio-recorded for later transcription and analysis.

McMillan and Schumacher (2006, p. 360) described focus-group interviews as when “a purposefully sampled group of people is interviewed, rather than each person individually”. The aim of the focus group interview is to “create a social environment in which the group members are stimulated by one another’s perceptions and ideas” (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006, p. 360). From this, the quality and richness of the data is increased when compared with one-on-one interviewing.

Focus groups interviews are an example of a data collection technique consistent with a qualitative, interpretivist approach. The use of interviews “sees the centrality of human interaction for knowledge production, and emphasises the social situatedness of research data” (Kvale, 1996, p. 11). Interviews create opportunities for participants to discuss their interpretations of the world in which they live, and to express opinions from their own point
of view (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). A focus group interview yields a collective, rather than an individual view. In a focus group interviews, the participants interact with one another, as well as the researcher and the participants’ views emerge from these interactions (Cohen et al., 2011).

Focus group interviews have the ability to focus on a particular issue, and produce large amounts of data in a short period of time. Because of their collective nature, individuals can be encouraged to speak out and voice their opinions, yielding insights that might not have surfaced otherwise. They also provide opportunities for in-depth discussion about key issues and opportunities for the researcher to ask further questions to yield deeper explanations (Cohen et al., 2011). However, there are limitations to focus group interviews, which will be discussed in Chapter Ten.

Interview guides were developed for each focus group interview. The guides noted some general topics and questions that were generated from the research questions and the survey response. These were essentially questions to guide, but not direct, the conduct of interviews. They also provided opportunities to follow-up on issues raised by participants. Examples of interview guides are included in Appendix A and Appendix B.

The researcher utilised thematic and dynamic dimensions in the interview questions, in order to ask ‘good’ interview questions. The thematic dimension relates to the topic of the interview, or the core of the investigation for exploration and analysis, and the dynamic dimension promotes positive interactions with the participants (Kvale, 1996). The researcher utilised both dimensions by creating interview guides that had both the research questions (that form the thematic dimension) and the interview questions (which form the dynamic dimension). The rationale for this was to translate the academic research questions into a more informal, easy-going style of questioning to generate spontaneous and rich descriptions.
(Kvale, 1996). In this approach, one research question was investigated through several interview questions, with the aim of gathering varied and deep responses. The researcher also asked open-ended questions wherever possible, inviting participants to respond in a manner that is reflective of their perspectives.

The researcher conducted a number of focus group interviews with members of each network wherever possible. Utilising more than one focus group interview provided several advantages. Multiple interviews with network members allowed the researcher to develop a relationship with the participants that was likely to be closer than that in a ‘one-off’ interview. It also created an opportunity to follow-up with participants about particular topics or issues that were pertinent to them, or to tease out concepts beyond their initial mention.

Follow-up interviews

Follow-up interviews were conducted via phone with participants from Robinleigh and Blacksmith and one network member from Fern Creek. Dates and times for the follow-up interviews were negotiated with the participants. With permission, all follow-up interviews were audio-recorded for later transcription and analysis.

4.6 Role of the researcher

In all interactions, it was important for the researcher to develop an open and communicative relationship with the participants and for participants to feel as comfortable and relaxed during the interviews as possible in order for them to share their views and beliefs about the topics (Kvale, 1996). Strategies employed to facilitate this included engaging in informal conversation with the participants prior to the interview; demonstrating
attentiveness and interest to the participants (Kvale, 1996); and briefing participants before the interview. The latter included explaining the purpose of the interview, the use of the recorder and answering any questions before starting the interview (Cohen et al., 2011).

The researcher positioned herself as an interested observer in the network meetings – someone who was interested in transition to school and who, if called upon, could contribute information to the meeting. However, she made it clear that her primary role was to observe and listen. While an integral part of the interviews, the researcher aimed to ask relevant and provoking questions that facilitated the interaction among the participants.

Across both the network meetings and interviews it was important for the researcher to establish credibility in her role. There were some occasions when participants sought information or a response. In responding to these situations, the researcher was aware that participants had volunteered their time and expertise to the project and had the right to expect some feedback and/or information. In addition, the researcher offered to share resources and information relating to transition to school. These were distributed to the network members at the conclusion of the data collection. While the initial intent was to promote the ‘neutrality’ of the researcher, it was also important to recognise that research roles can change over time and according to the context, particularly as relationships are built between the researcher and participants (Walsham, 2006). It is also important to note here that the use of the term neutral is not taken to be equivalent of ‘objective’. In other words, the researcher sought to position herself as unaligned, rather than objective, recognising both the subjective nature of qualitative research and the impact of her presence on both the interactions of participants and the issues raised. This is in keeping with the interpretivist paradigm which regards knowledge as socially constructed (Cohen et al., 2011).
4.7 Ethical considerations

The Australian National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC, 2014) outlines a number of principles for the conduct of ethical research. Ethical research has research merit and integrity; abides by the principles of justice; and beneficence; and demonstrates respect for participants. Adherence to these principles was reflected in the approval to conduct the research provided by the university ethics committee.

Ethical approval for the doctoral study was obtained as part of the approval for the wider ARC study. The researcher was identified and nominated in all of the ethics approvals for the ARC project as part of the overall research team, and was therefore also included in information sheets given to participants. As a member of the overall research team, the doctoral student had access to the data collected by the larger project. Therefore, it was within the approvals of the ethics for the larger ARC project that the doctoral student had access to, and was able to utilize any data collected by the larger project.

The ethics approval processes for the wider project were complex. Initially, ethics approval was granted in 2012 by the Charles Sturt University School of Education Ethics Committee (Protocol number 301/2012/04). Following this, applications to conduct research were lodged with all of the Australian state and territory departments of education. All of the states and territories (excluding Tasmania) granted approval.

Nationally, 22 Catholic dioceses were approached seeking approval to conduct research in their jurisdictions, of which 21 (including the state of Tasmania) were successful. Approvals to conduct research were sought from multiple relevant prior-to-school organisations and services and independent schools. Gaining approval for prior-to-school services was a complicated task, with individual organising bodies needing to be identified and then contacted in order to seek approval. The wider project concluded this stage of
approvals in July, 2014. After ethical approval was granted by the relevant state bodies, organisations, and individual schools and settings, principals and directors were asked to nominate a staff member to complete the survey. Collection of data via the survey, including the nomination of networks, commenced in August, 2014.

Although approvals to conduct research were secured by the overall project from the relevant authorities, there remained some particular ethical considerations for the doctoral study.

4.7.1 Informed consent

While participants who completed the survey indicated their consent to the larger project, consent needed to be obtained separately from those respondents invited to participate in the doctoral project. This was because not all members of the networks, nor, indeed, three of the sites, had been involved in the overall ARC project.

For each of the sites, the researcher contacted a member of the network to invite their participation in the network. These invitations were initially sent via email to the nominated email address provided by the participants of the survey, and through the peer-recruiting strategy. Copies of the information statement (Appendix C) were attached to the email. Follow-up phone calls were made to confirm the invitations to participate.

Once the contact person for each network indicated their willingness to participate in the research, they were contacted by email and phone to arrange an initial meeting. At this meeting the researcher took the opportunity to explain to the other members of the network the purpose of the research and what would be involved for participants. This was done through a detailed discussion of the contents of the information statement. At this point, if the
members of the network group gave their consent to continue and be involved with the research study, the researcher provided a formal consent form (see Appendix D).

The researcher obtained formal written consent from participants before the gathering of data and after making explicit all aspects of the research, including the aims and procedure and expectations of the participants. The researcher did not anticipate that the participants would experience any ill-effects as a result of participating in the research. However, participants were entitled to self-determination and freedom to make decisions regarding their participation (Cohen et al., 2011). It was made clear to participants that they retained the right to withdraw their participation in the research at any time. The nature of focus groups meant, however, that any data that they had already contributed to the focus group could not be deleted, even if they decided to withdraw before the end of the discussion. All of the network members present at the initial meeting with the researcher gave their consent to participate in the data collection conducted at the network meetings. While no participants exercised their right to withdraw from the study, some chose not to continue their involvement in follow-up interviews.

4.7.2 Confidentiality

Confidentiality refers to the obligation of researchers to separate the information provided from those who provided it (Cohen et al., 2011). Further, confidentiality requires that data generated not be shared with anyone else in its raw form. This latter element of confidentiality can be an issue in group interactions, where the information contributed in a group context is shared. In this project, discussion with participants outlined procedures for data analysis and reporting that did not identify either individuals or locations. This addressed issues of public confidentiality (Hill, 2005). However, it is also acknowledged that it can be
difficult to ensure total confidentiality when data were generated in a group context. Hill (2005, p. 76) notes that “in group situations, it is not just the researcher who has to keep confidences from nonparticipants, but other members of the group”. While it was not anticipated that data collection would present situations that were regarded as contentious or harmful, it was important each group to be aware of network confidentiality and agree not to disclose information that could be linked with specific individuals.

In this study, pseudonyms are used in all written material produced from the data to maintain confidentiality of the participants and the educational contexts in which they work. To this end, the real names of participants, networks and educational settings are known to the researcher and her supervisors. The researcher used this information to arrange contact with and collect data from the participants. The de-identification processes have been undertaken thoroughly with the intention that research sites and participants cannot be identified. Hard copies of data are stored in a safe and secure location under key, and only accessible to the researcher, her supervisors and other members of the overall research team. Electronic data are also stored safety and securely by password protected computer. Procedures for ensuring confidentiality were made known to participants via the information statement.

4.8 Data analysis

With the focus on in-depth exploration, qualitative research tends to produce a great deal of data. This was the case in this study. The first step in managing this data was to develop some rules for transcribing the interviews and network interactions.
All audio-recorded interviews were transcribed. The researcher transcribed all of the interviews, which allowed her to listen again to what had been said, and revisit what had transpired in the interviews, increasing the familiarity with the data. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, with only minimal changes made to grammar and spelling conventions to improve the clarity of expression.

A note about numbers of participants: The researcher recognised that the numbers of participants across the four network sites differed, with fewer participants in Westhill and Fern Creek networks than in Robinleigh and Blacksmith. More important than the numbers of participants in the networks, were the opportunities for interaction and contribution by the participants, ensuring that participants’ voices were heard and valued, regardless of the size of their network. Through this recognition, data from the networks with a greater number of participants were not given greater value or emphasis than data from the smaller networks.

4.9 Constructivist grounded theory data analysis

The analysis of the data was underpinned by constructivist grounded theory. “Grounded theory is an inductive, iterative, interactive and comparative method geared toward theory construction” (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2011, p. 41). The iterative nature of constructivist grounded theory is one where data collection and data analysis occur together, with each informing the other (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2011). This approach holds the constructivist view that meaning does not lie dormant within objects waiting to be discovered. Rather, meaning is created as individuals interact with and interpret these objects (Charmaz, 2006). A central element of constructivist grounded theory, and one which separates it from grounded theory, is the notion of the co-construction of data, whereby data and analysis are co-constructed in the interaction between the viewer and the viewed, the
researcher and the participant (Charmaz, 2003, 2006). Constructivist grounded theory acknowledges the standpoints and positions of the researcher, research process and the participants, forming an interpretive inquiry method (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2011).

A further tenet of constructivist grounded theory is to give voice to participants. Charmaz (2003, p. 270) states that grounded theorists should seek to construct “a picture that draws from, reassembles, and renders subjects’ lives”. Constructivist grounded theory seeks to draw on multiple voices and perspectives of participants in their lived experiences (Charmaz, 2006). Methodological strategies within constructivist grounded theory are viewed as flexible guidelines dependent on the involvement with data collection and data analysis. This approach differs from the more structured, procedural approaches of a more traditional grounded theory approach (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2011).

The focus of constructivist grounded theory is on the individual and the processes, or interactions between people and their contexts for making meaning. This aligns closely with the interpretivist approach adopted by the doctoral study. It also resonates with the theoretical framework underpinning the study and the focus on processes, people, context and time. The methods of constructivist grounded theory provide systematic yet flexible guidelines to create a simultaneous process of both data generation and analysis. Using strategies such as coding and memo-writing, theories can be constructed that are ‘grounded’ in the data themselves (Charmaz, 2006).

In keeping with the methods of constructivist grounded theory, the data collection and data analysis occurred simultaneously, rather than in a linear process. A cyclical process was employed whereby data were generated and initial analysis undertaken. This informed further data generation and the construction of theories.
In this study, data analysis began by employing memo writing where patterns in the data were recorded early during data analysis. Memos were made primarily during the transcription of data, as ideas and thoughts were generated, but also during early coding of the transcribed data. Charmaz (2006) has described the benefits of memo writing as allowing the researcher to record thoughts, comparisons and connections that are being made, helping to generate questions and directions for further analysis.

Next, after the data had been transcribed, the researcher began some preliminary coding – “naming segments of data with a label that simultaneously categorises, summarises, and accounts for each piece of data” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 43) to identify the key themes and concepts that arose from the data.

From this, initial coding was implemented where further interpretation and analysis of the data occurred. Initial coding was applied to each individual interview transcript separately. Here, the aim was to explore what was happening in the data, and to represent this in codes. These codes were designed to capture the key ideas and meanings provided by the participants, so as much as possible, the language used by the participants was retained.

Questions posed by Charmaz (2006, pp. 47,51) guided this process of data analysis:

- What do the data suggest?
- From whose point of view?
- What do actions and statements in the data take for granted?
- What process(es) is at issue here?
- How can I define it?
- How does this process develop?
- Under which conditions does this process develop?
- How does the research participant(s) think, feel and act while involved in this process?
- When, why and how does the process change?
- What are the consequences of the process?

The aim during initial coding was to analyse the data critically (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2011). The initial coding was provisional and able to be modified and adjusted according to the incorporation of subsequent data. As new data emerged, a constant comparative method was employed to ensure a strong fit between the codes and the data. During this process, data were compared with other data, data with codes, and codes with codes in a method of continued refinement and modification of the coding. In particular, comparisons were made between interview transcripts from the same site to determine common features and patterns. Identification of the more frequent or significant codes was an important part of the initial coding (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2011).

Following this stage was focused coding, where the codes identified as being particularly significant or prevalent were used to filter through codes that contained large amounts of data. While traditional grounded theory argues for one single code to be used in this process, constructivist grounded theory is more flexible and encourages the use of more than one code (Thornberg & Charmaz, 2011). The focused coding was more specific and selective than the initial coding. During this stage, the initial coding was revisited and modified as necessary. Focused coding also lead to the development of conceptual categories from the codes, and set the scene for the construction of theory. An example of the process of focused coding leading to the development of categories is included in Appendix E.

Initial coding and focused coding were applied to each site, with the emergence of categories and sub-categories from each site. These are outlined in Table 6:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Sub-categories</th>
<th>Definitions</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>About the network</td>
<td></td>
<td>Data that pertained to the network organisation, but did not fit within other categories</td>
<td>“The early years person in the Shire heard about it on the grapevine and she rang me…that’s how she got involved [in the network].” (Lauren)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having a purpose</td>
<td></td>
<td>Data pertaining to the reason or ‘why?’ for the networks</td>
<td>“And that’s why we’re involved too, because of the [report] data that Clear Horizons Foundation said we need to do something too, so we can pick up the gap, or fill in some of the gaps, in transition to school. [This program] was something that evolved out of wanting to help set parents up to support children’s learning, so that’s how we became involved.” (Network member)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Leadership         |                | Data pertaining to the role or influence of leadership in or on the network                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | “Our principal does support it, very much so, and it does cost a lot of
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationships</th>
<th>Reciprocal understandings</th>
<th>Importance of understandings</th>
<th>Building understandings</th>
<th>Communication</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>money, the cost of relieving teachers…” (Nerida)</td>
<td>“The fact that we have a group of like-minded people, with the student at the centre is a success…” (Evonne)</td>
<td>“I’d love to see the principals come around and just plonk a spot, for a session and just watch what we do. I think it could make a difference if they came into our preschool environment and actually sat and watched what we do…” (Tarryn)</td>
<td>“There is always a way to fix it, and sometimes you just have to sit back…we do a lot of talking in our staff meetings. We have staff meetings every week…” (Connie)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting</td>
<td>Role or Influence of Relationships</td>
<td>Quote</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Between settings</td>
<td>Data pertaining to the role or influence of relationships specifically between different settings</td>
<td>“We visit as much as we can, so that we’re part of that wider community with the school, and not just segregated preschool and school.” (Anne)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>With children and families</td>
<td>Data pertaining to the role or influence of relationships specifically with children and families</td>
<td>“The other thing that’s really important is making those connections with the parents as early as you can, and making those positive deposits in the piggy bank so to speak so if there are some issues at the start of the year, you have a positive relationship to fall back on with the parents.” (Charlotte)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Professionalism</td>
<td></td>
<td>“There were teachers when I first started that have come to respect what we do more…they value what we do more, and see us as education providers rather than just…” (Lena)</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support</td>
<td>Data pertaining to the role or influence of professional support among network members and professionals</td>
<td>“…you know how sometimes people have a thing where they don’t want to be seen that I can’t work this out myself? I’m not going to ask what anyone else thinks, which I think is a flaw because obviously we know that we’re more empowered when we work as a community…” (Clarissa)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sustainability of the network</td>
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<tr>
<td>Goal setting</td>
<td>Data pertaining to the role or influence of how the network will be sustained by setting goals or objectives</td>
<td>“I hoped that in our first meeting or two after attending the PD during the year, I would like really like us to sit down and actually nut out for ourselves the ‘why’. Why do we want this group to succeed?” (Lauren)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Goals for transition</td>
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<tr>
<td>For children</td>
<td>Data pertaining to any specific goals held for children and the transition to school</td>
<td>“That’s what they say, they want to play, they think it’s going to be like [preschool] where they get to do lots of play-based learning.” (Network member)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For families</td>
<td>Data pertaining to any specific goals held for families and the transition to school</td>
<td>“I think really open communication with families about the importance of transition. That includes things like the formal transition program at the school…I think that’s really vital that the families realise the importance of that, and that they try and attend as many sessions as they can.” (Leanne)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>For educators</td>
<td>Data pertaining to any specific goals held for educators and the transition to school</td>
<td>“We read that book, separately, and then came back together bubbling with ideas, we had notes everywhere! Ways that we could take a lot of what was said in that book to improve the transition process again, but also to think about building all our kids’ success</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities and strategies</td>
<td>Data pertaining to any specific goals for activities and strategies for transition to school</td>
<td>“We do group time, like we’ll often do an activity and come back down to the floor sort of mimicking what will happen at school so they get used to transition from sitting and listening to going off and doing an activity. I think that helps a lot.” (Lena)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transition statements</td>
<td>Data pertaining to specific goals for the use of transition statements and the transition to school</td>
<td>“We’re doubling up in a way, so we don’t have to do the statements if we’re having a conversation.” (Jill)</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Children with diverse needs | Data pertaining to specific goals for children with diverse needs and the transition to school | “We certainly aim to put in as many supporting services at the earliest possible age that we can, when they need it. Because I mean, all of the evidence shows us that the more early intervention we can do, whatever that might mean for that
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Curricula</th>
<th>Data pertaining to specific goals for the use of the curricula and the transition to school</th>
<th>“Really knowing the curriculum, knowing the stage that comes before, knowing where the students are at and moving forward.” (Evonne)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rural contexts</td>
<td>Characteristics of rural contexts</td>
<td>Data pertaining to the role and influence of any specific characteristics of rural contexts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Familiarity with people

Data pertaining to the role and influence familiarity with people has in rural contexts

“I think being in a smaller community too...like I can see Anne down the street, I know who she is, I feel comfortable to make a phone call to her...and to the other centres.” (Nerida)

Issues in rural education

Data pertaining to the role and influence issues in rural education has in rural contexts

“I think there can be challenges for rural areas because we sometimes get families that come, that are placed, from cities, coming to rural areas, particularly families who are experiencing family violence and things like that, they get shunted off to the country, and they are often quite isolated so that can present challenges...” (Carly)

Isolation

Data pertaining to the role and influence of isolation in rural contexts

“You know, isolation from...just exposure to stuff in terms of giving our students opportunities and exposing them to things. I think the
city kids often have more things right at their fingertips that are easy to access that cost a lot of money for us to take kids to, and the time it takes to get there.” (Kayla)
It is these categories and sub-categories that will form the headings under which the results from each of the sites are presented in the following chapters.

The next stage in the data analysis involved cross-site analysis. The aim of applying data analysis across the sites was to determine the similarities, or differences in the codes and categories identified in different contexts (Stake, 2006). While cross-site analysis generated some useful and interesting results, the researcher was mindful of preserving the integrity of the sites as singletons, and not allowing the cross-site analysis to dominate the writing of results. In the cross-site data analysis, the researcher highlighted the commonalities, but also the idiosyncrasies of the sites. The research employed ‘replication logic’ (Stake, 2006), to search for patterns or similarities across the sites. Again, this process was informed by the research questions and theoretical underpinnings of the doctoral study. During this process, the researcher referred back to the research questions in order to generate findings that contributed to the theory building of the study. The findings are also a valuable source of rich data relating to transition to school in rural contexts.

4.10 Research rigour

Interpretivist research seeks to explore the perspectives and experiences of participants within their specific context. It accepts the subjective and multiple viewpoints of participants. Interpretations of data that are generated through interpretivist research recognise the specificity of the context involved. Following from this, interpretivist research does not aim to produce widely generalisable results. Nevertheless, interpretivist research does demand rigour.
Rather than adopting positivist concepts such as validity and reliability, interpretivist approaches rely on the concepts of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability to judge the trustworthiness of research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility is established when participants in the study regard the results as credible – that is, when they consider the data and the way these are reported to reflect their contributions. Credibility is enhanced when readers consider the research reported and inferences made to be credible. Providing details about the processes of data generation, management and analysis also contributes to credibility.

Transferability is attained when the results and the methods for achieving these can be transferable to other similar settings. Transferability relies on the development of rich, detailed data of the setting, context, people, actions and assumptions and processes, to ensure that comparability is appropriate.

The dependability of an interpretivist study is established through clear articulation of the research processes. Reflexivity on the part of the researcher contributes to dependability, by affording opportunities to evaluate the intended and/or unintended consequences of research decisions. Providing detailed description about the phenomenon being investigated and the contexts in which it is embedded enables readers to assess the dependability of research.

Confirmability relates to the degree with which the results of studies are clearly linked to the data, with analyses reflecting the “experiences and ideas of the informants, rather than the characteristics and preferences of the researcher” (Shenton, 2004, p. 72).

In keeping with the interpretivist paradigm adopted in this study, the researcher acknowledges the multiple truths that emerge from different experiences, perceptions and interpretations. Details of the processes employed in the study are provided to promote the
credibility of results and to allow readers to discern the appropriate of inferences and
conclusions made. The adoption of established research methods, ongoing engagement with
participants, researcher reflection, and comparison with existing research results also
contribute to the credibility of results. Rich, thick descriptions of the contexts and
assumptions on which the research is based are provided, facilitating consideration of the
transferability of the research. The same rich, thick descriptions and the reflexivity of the
research provide the basis for judgements about the dependability of the research. Finally,
assumptions made, and decisions taken throughout the research project are shared – as are
challenges, limitations and misdirections – to allow readers to assess the credibility of the
research.

4.11 Chapter summary

This chapter has provided a background and context for this doctoral study by
explaining its position in relation to the larger study of which it is a part. It has situated the
study within an interpretivist paradigm and outlined the connections between this,
Bronfenbrenner’s PPCT model and the qualitative approach adopted in the study.

This chapter explained the research design and its application of constructivist
grounded theory. It has described the focus group interviews and follow-up interviews and
how these were conducted with four networks of rural educators in New South Wales and
Victoria. The data were transcribed and analysed according to the processes of constructivist
grounded theory, and from this, a series of categories and sub-categories were developed for
each of the four network sites. These rich data and the analysis of these are presented in the
following four chapters, using the categories and sub-categories as organisers.
5 Chapter Five - Results – Robinleigh

5.1 Context of community

Robinleigh is a small rural township in country Victoria with a population of approximately 2,500 people. The town and the surrounding area are best known for the production of fine wine and food, and scenic landscapes. Because of this, the area attracts a high number of tourists throughout the year. A strong culture of tourism is reflected in the town’s shops and businesses. In 2011, Robinleigh rated 967 on the SEIFA Index of Disadvantage (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011b), which indicates a slight level of disadvantage compared with the mean rating of 1000.

5.2 Education services

There are two schools in Robinleigh - a government school and a Catholic school, as well as a preschool. All three educational settings service the town and surrounding areas.

Robinleigh Primary School has approximately 236 students. According to their promotional material, the school aims to build resilient and resourceful lifelong learners particularly through the development of strong links between the school and community.

St Margaret’s Catholic school has approximately 105 students and has a strong commitment to providing quality primary education guided by the Catholic faith.

Robinleigh preschool is a not-for-profit organisation, working in partnership with the local health district to provide early childhood services to the families and children of Robinleigh and surrounding area.
5.3 Network context

The Robinleigh Early Years Network was a relatively new network, and very much in its development stage in 2015.

The catalyst for the development of the network came from two Foundation/Grade 1 educators from the Catholic school who had undertaken a study trip to the United Kingdom to visit communities where schools had formed collaborative ‘clusters’ to work together to strengthen the community capacity. The success of the ‘clusters’ in these communities was attributed to sharing resources, establishing common goals and enhanced educator empowerment through specialized training. During the initial meeting with the Robinleigh members, educators spoke of returning home ‘inspired’ and ‘motivated’ to attempt to implement a cluster alliance in their own community with aspirations of achieving similar successes. During early 2015, a number of community education professionals were invited to express their interest in participating in the network. The list of network members and their professional roles is included in Table 7.

At their first meeting, the members agreed to be involved and considered the benefits that could be generated for both themselves and the community. They agreed that the core focus of the network would be transition to school, although other early childhood issues were open for consideration as well. The network was named ‘Robinleigh Early Years Network’. The network planned to meet at the various educational settings, and not one set location. The network planned to meet at least once every school term.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lauren</td>
<td>F/1 teacher, St Margaret’s Catholic School</td>
<td>Leader/organiser</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julia</td>
<td>F/1 teacher, St Margaret’s Catholic School</td>
<td>Leader/organiser</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mike</td>
<td>Principal, St Margaret’s Catholic School</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kayla</td>
<td>F/1 teacher, government primary school</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evonne</td>
<td>F/1 teacher, government primary school</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rob</td>
<td>Principal, government primary school</td>
<td>Attended initial meeting only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jill</td>
<td>Preschool educator/Director</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eva</td>
<td>Preschool educator</td>
<td>Attended meeting at preschool only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michelle</td>
<td>Maternal and Child Health Nurse</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophie</td>
<td>Early Years Community Development and Liaison Officer</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kitty</td>
<td>Preschool educator</td>
<td>Attended meeting at preschool only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nadia</td>
<td>Teacher, special education coordinator, St Margaret’s Catholic School</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>Director, Regional education project</td>
<td>Attended initial meeting only</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5.4 Network visits

There were four interactions with members of this network during the study: three face-to-face meetings and a series of follow-up interviews.

The first meeting took place in April, 2015 with the two main organisers of the network, Lauren and Julia. The meeting was held at St Margaret’s Catholic School and discussed the aims of the research study and background to the network.

Also in April, 2015 and at St Margaret’s, the researcher attended the first official meeting of the Robinleigh Early Years Network. The business of the network meeting was to meet other network members, discuss the development and aims of the network and possible topics for consideration by the network. The researcher was able to introduce and discuss the purpose and implementation of the research study. The meeting went for approximately two hours.

The researcher also attended a second network meeting in July, 2015 held at the preschool in Robinleigh. This meeting also went for approximately two hours.

Follow-up phone interviews were conducted with Lauren, Julia, Kayla, Evonne, Michelle and Sophie in the month following the meeting in April, 2015. The other network members declined invitations to participate in a follow-up interview.

5.5 About the network

As the network in Robinleigh was new, before any consideration could be given to the purpose of the network, some initial organisation was required. This involved contact being made with educators and other education professionals, inviting them to participate in the
network. Mostly this was done using existing connections and relationships with other educators and other education professionals in the area.

Julia knew a girl at Robinleigh Primary, so she spoke to her about that, and then they spoke to their principal. I’d spoken to Mike [Principal] so he knew what was happening…I made a phone call…We invited Robinleigh Primary, the [preschool]. (Lauren)

In some instances, the organisers of the network did not personally know individuals, and therefore invitations to participate were passed along by others.

I didn’t know the health sister so I asked them [preschool] to invite her to come along, because I didn’t know who she was. (Lauren)

In other instances, people heard about the network through word of mouth or from a colleague, and asked to join.

The early years person in the Shire heard about it on the grapevine and she rang me…that’s how she got involved. (Lauren)

I think they approached Michelle…They sent us an email just saying from a Shire perspective would you like to be involved… (Sophie)

There were also instances where individuals were invited to participate, but declined. No reasons were offered for this. One of the organisers of the network described how the process of inviting people to participate was made easier by existing connections

I think it was really important that we had developed a friendship already with Robinleigh Primary so it didn’t seem so daunting…if that makes any sense? It was good that I knew Evonne previously…it made it a little bit easier to navigate. (Julia)
5.6 Having a purpose

The members of the Robinleigh network felt strongly about needing a clear purpose for the network. One of the goals for the network in its first year was to develop a document outlining the core purpose for the group. During the period of time where data were collected, the network developed a first draft of this document. The following statement outlines the purpose of the network, or their ‘why’.

Through professional collaboration we aim to facilitate growth and development of children within our community.

In accordance with the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF) (Department of Education and Training (DET), 2016) (the Victorian equivalent to the EYLF) we believe:

- Children have a strong sense of identity
- Children are connected with and contribute to their world
- Children have a strong sense of wellbeing
- Children are confident and involved learners
- Children are effective communicators

These are the specified outcomes of the VEYLDF. It is possible that the network viewed the links to the VEYLDF as giving the network legitimacy, however this was not clear. The document also identifies the purpose of their team:

Team purpose

- Common language
- Improved outcomes for Robinleigh community
- Build up the profile of the community
• Working collaboratively to meet the needs of all children
• Professional team
• Strong sense of wellbeing (for children)
• Strong sense of identity (for children)
• Confident and involved learners (for children)
• Effective communicators (for children)

The development of such a document reflects the importance the group members attributed to having a purpose and clear objectives for their network.

As well as this document, the members of the network talked about the purpose of their network in the meetings and follow up interviews. In this instance, the purpose of creating a new network was to develop an ‘alliance’ between the schools and early childhood services and community members, to support children and their families in Robinleigh.

When you’ve got two schools and [preschool]…and they’re all within you know, 10 minutes of each other. We needed to try and work together. I felt that there was lots of competition and that it was time to work together. Lots of people with expertise but all working in different directions. (Lauren)

Driven by their inspiration from the overseas visit, the organisers of the network aimed to create an alliance between services to strengthen the capacity of their community. They felt that there was a need to support the children and families of Robinleigh, regardless of the educational setting they attended, and that there was a great opportunity for collaboration between the services.

They [UK community] all worked together in one big organisation…they were tracking all of their children and that was from a low socio-economic area and they were seeing success in that program where they got the children right before birth, almost in that birthing class, up
until they went to that place for [preschool] and then they had all that early intervention so before they started school. No kids were left behind. So then we really were so inspired we wanted that for Robinleigh…We’re one town, we should be able to do that, be able to flag those kids so no kid in Robinleigh gets left behind. (Julia)

Other network members could also see the benefits of such a network for families within the community.

The really important local networks with the early childhood educators supporting each other to support families is really, really important so I had no hesitation in supporting that, and being involved in it. (Sophie)

As well as seeing the potential benefit to the children and families of Robinleigh, some of the network members identified benefits for themselves – particularly opportunities to improve their professional practice.

We are very strong-minded educators who aren’t happy just to rest on our laurels, we are always wanting to improve and do something better (Kayla)

It was also important that the network was developed by its members, for the members, so that it had inherent benefits for the network members.

I think the best part about this is it’s come from the local people, it hasn’t come from a Shire perspective or another professional somewhere else, it’s come for the locals, so they are passionate about making it work for their community. And they know their communities best. (Sophie)

As well as the potential benefits of starting a network, there were also some initial challenges to working across schools and settings. One of the challenges identified by the network members was a recognition of a degree of competition for enrolment between the
schools, and in particular, the school principals. The tension between the two schools and school principals was felt by the organisers of the network as they deliberated whether or not to include the principals in the network.

When you’ve got two principals in the area who hate each other’s guts it’s very hard…that’s what the competitive part is about. Originally, I didn’t invite the principals, I had the full support of Mike [principal] and all the rest of it, but I purposely did not invite him to come along. I told Robinleigh [primary school] that I didn’t want him to come, and they spoke to Rob [other principal] about it and he basically told them ‘well I’d go along, but don’t be giving out numbers and information blah blah blah’ like that was his attitude. (Lauren)

Members described that as a result of existing competitiveness between the schools, expertise, knowledge and resources were wasted, rather than being used productively. Aware of the competitiveness and rivalry between the schools and the schools principals, the group felt strongly about not allowing negativity and alternative agendas to alter the focus of the network.

After our first meeting I said feel free to invite your principals to the next one, it would be great for them to be part of it, but make it very clear – this is NOT about school numbers and all that, if Rob is going to be like that, tell him not to come. This is about taking out of the equation any competitive nature or any of that sort of stuff ‘this is my school, this is your school, this is this, we do it this way’ I didn’t want any of that, I just wanted it to be…the opportunity to share. (Lauren)

Although initially not included in the network, after some discussion between the network members, both school principals were invited to participate after the first meeting. Both principals attended at least one meeting together. Some of the members commented on this.
Lauren: And they both came along, and they’ve come to a few haven’t they?

Julia: Yep.

Lauren: Not all of them, but a few.

Julia: And they’ve been quite good too, like, they’ve been quite good.

As cited above, one of the network members concluded that by attending some of the meetings, the principals were able to see beyond the rivalry, and see for themselves the potential advantages of the network.

In addition to the purpose or the ‘why’ set out in their draft document, the members of the network identified a number of points illustrating the need to have a strong purpose for their network. These elements related strongly to their community of Robinleigh, the children and families who live in the community, as well as themselves – as educators and professionals. The members strongly believed they all had a great deal to offer through participating in the network, and that it was an extremely worthwhile endeavour.

The members of the network identified the existing competitiveness between the schools as a potential barrier to them building their network. Through recognising this barrier and having a frank conversation between themselves, the network members felt they were able to overcome the impact this may have on the ability for the network to progress successfully.

5.7 Leadership

Leadership emerged as a key theme for the Robinleigh network, both within the network itself and outside of it. The instigators of the network took on a leadership role for
the network, at least in the initial phase of inviting members, organising the first meetings and setting the agenda. Without having people to initiate the idea of the network, and drive the initial meetings, the network would not exist. While being instrumental for bringing their ‘vision’ to the network, and taking on responsibility for the initial organisation, the instigators did not perceive themselves as the official leaders of the network.

We’ve got a vision in our mind and I know that the girls from the Primary School have been like ‘oh we get why you’re…we get it’ …we are the leaders, but not officially. (Julia)

Julia, one of the instigators, described how after the first few meetings, some of the other members showed initiative in organising subsequent meetings.

I know that Evonne organised the first meeting this year…So they’re stepping up, so it might be the case that we might be the leaders for a little bit, and we might step back while everyone else kind of comes up. (Julia)

They were keen to see the role of leadership distributed amongst the other members, to share responsibility for, and investment in, the network. They believed it was important for them not to assume ultimate responsibility of the network, and that the role of leadership should be shared.

The thing is from a school perspective, you have to have someone from each school community to be the driver from within their own school, to keep the motivation going. So it started with a vision and people have just jumped on board, and that’s great. I mean sure, we are leaders to a degree, but we’re probably always going to be leaders to a degree, but to what degree might change. (Lauren)

Although the question of leadership did not appear specifically in the network meetings, elements of leadership were raised. For example, organisation and scheduling of the meetings was mostly organised by one member, Lauren, who was also one of the
instigators of the network. Even when meetings were held at different settings, Lauren took responsibility for leading the meeting, taking notes, and for directing the meeting where necessary. It was also Lauren who sent emails around to the other members outlining date and time of the next meeting and attach any relevant information. It was clearly important to have someone to ‘drive’ the network. It was also clear that the instigators of the network had stepped into this role, even though the network had not explicitly addressed the issue of leadership.

Leadership was important not just within the network itself, but also beyond the network. Specifically, the roles of principals and supervisors, who supported the members of the network, influenced the leadership and the effectiveness of the network.

Initially, the school-based network members needed to request the approval of their principals to initiate the network and conduct the meetings on the school premises. Both school principals agreed to this. Their approval suggests that they could see the potential benefit that participating in the network could have for their staff members. The members felt that giving principals an opportunity to attend one of the initial meetings would provide a further opportunity for them to see for themselves what the network was about.

As already noted, attending one of the meetings allowed one principal to throw his support behind the network. Both principals ended up supporting the network, although did not attend regularly.

Yeah, and I think that Rob probably, once he’d been to a few and got involved in the group, he probably took it a bit more seriously and was supportive of the girls to be part of it.

(Lauren)
Acknowledgement from principals that the network was a positive thing bolstered the ability of the members to engage in the network and to collaborate meaningfully. In one example, the members described a professional development session they wished to attend that focused on community capacity building. They felt that attending the session would be beneficial to their network members but needed the support of their leaders to attend. It was noted that by attending one of the meetings, one principal was able to see how this would be beneficial for his staff members and gave his approval.

…it was really when Rob got the buy-in there they were allowed to come. (Lauren)

Leadership within other organisations also supported network participation. For example, a supervisor encouraged her colleague – Sophie - a maternal and child health nurse, to respond to the invitation and attend the network. Sophie’s involvement in a network in a different community contributed to her willingness to be involved. Another network member – Michelle – also was encouraged to participate by her team leader.

I had no hesitation in supporting that, the network and being involved in it…We also started one at [another nearby town] just prior, so I sort of had a little insight into what was possible or what…how it may look. (Sophie)

It was mentioned to me through my team leader, being based in Robinleigh and the fact that I did already collaborate quite closely with the preschool staff, she felt it was appropriate that I be involved, with the collaboration with the primary school level as well. (Michelle)

Leadership was a key component of the network at Robinleigh. Having clear leadership within the network helped provide purpose and direction, as well as organisation. While there was obvious leadership from certain network members in the initial stages and first meetings, the members felt that the role of leadership could be a flexible one, and change as the network progressed. Supportive and encouraging leadership outside of the network by
principals and supervisors enabled the members to engage in the network, knowing they had
the full support from their leaders.

5.8 Reciprocal understandings

The network members identified reciprocal understandings as important. In order for
their network to be effective, it was necessary to ‘be on the same page’ about a range of
elements relating to their professional practice. At the very least, this required understandings
of what happened in the ‘other’ settings. Evonne noted that the very development of the
network, and members’ willingness to participate indicated that a level of understanding
around working together, and improving practice, already existed. The reciprocal
understandings that brought the members together were reflective of a collective desire to
improve the educational outcomes for children and their families in their community.

The fact that we have a group of like-minded people, with the student at the centre is a
success. It’s been a success purely in the fact that we’ve formed a group. (Evonne)

Another element related to the importance of understanding each other’s professional
roles within different settings. Having an understanding of where children have come from,
and to where they are moving, allowed educators and professionals to build greater insights
from which they could plan and enact their practices most effectively. This perspective
acknowledged that there were differences between what happened in, and what was expected
of, the preschool and school contexts, as well as some confusion about the role of maternal
and child health services.

I think it’s really important for services to have a really good understanding of what each
service offers, and the requirements and what they need to do. So I think a really good cross
understanding of services [is needed] so therefore we can really know where this child is moving into, transitioning into the next stage. (Sophie)

Sophie reported that previously there had been a lack of understanding and appreciation for what occurred in different roles and settings, and this had, in turn, created inconsistencies and mismatches in expectations across settings.

I’ve seen there is a bit of a disconnect between what expectations…or what the role is of you know…of Maternal and Child Health, of [preschool] and the schools. I don’t think there is a thorough understanding of each of the different services and roles. (Sophie)

Sophie identified that she had not been aware of the potential importance of having sound understandings of different roles prior to her involvement in the network, and that she assumed professionals already knew what each other did.

I made the assumption, wrongly, that people knew what maternal and child health nurses did, and how they delivered their service and you know, that nurses knew what [preschool] was and the expectations or what a typical [preschool] day or child might look like, and so forth into school. But being in a couple of meetings, there was a real disconnect between what the school knew about what maternal and child health nurses did. You know, that’s the whole start of a child’s journey. The child doesn’t turn up at school at six years of age without any history. That’s valuable, really important information there, and obviously that can be transitioned into preschool, [preschool], child care etc. (Sophie)

Sophie concluded that good understandings of the respective roles across settings were vital in order to meet the needs of children and their families.

When we transition children and families through the services we know where they’re heading, and how we can best facilitate that, how we can best equip them, and what they need to know, and what’s important and what’s not. (Sophie)
Lauren described the network as a platform whereby members had the opportunity to establish reciprocal understandings about the roles of different members within their settings, as well as clarifying the associated expectations of the different members. Further, a link was established between having reciprocal understandings and the ability of professionals and educational settings to provide continuity of learning for children and their families as they transition from one setting to another.

That opportunity to start having that conversation I suppose…developing a clear understanding of what everyone expected of one another. From a [preschool] perspective, if they understand where they’re coming from, and we understand where they’re coming from and we’re using similar language and we’re supporting each other as professionals then that has to improve continuity of learning and transition. (Lauren)

Michelle explained that by having an understanding of the roles of educators in other settings, she was better able to give more informed and considered advice to parents regarding transition and school.

It’s [the network] given me an opportunity to hear what their concerns about transition are, because parents ask me those questions. It’s been helpful to hear from a primary school teacher’s perspective. (Michelle)

5.8.1 Communication

The data suggested that the degree of communication that occurred between members had a direct impact on the development and consolidation of reciprocal understandings. In Robinleigh, communication related to the professional practices of the members, and to information about children or families and their transition. In order for the members of the
network to grow their understandings, it was necessary for members to be willing to share information with the other members. Equally, there was a necessity that the information shared was acknowledged and respected by those receiving it. During the network meetings, members brought attention to how improved communication between members could enhance the transition experience for all involved, and make the process far more effective.

An example of this occurred when the network discussed, at length, how, prior to the network being established, there was a lack of communication about the specific needs of children and their families making the transition to school. In this instance, concerns were raised around the difference in professional opinions towards particular children’s readiness for school, and the conflicting advice that was being given to parents by educators in the different settings (prior-to-school and school). Members reported that the conflicting information had caused considerable anxiety for the families involved, who became confused about whether or not to send their child to school, and had questioned the ability of educators to agree on issues important to them. One of the network members raised this issue in a network meeting, referring to an information session that had been run the previous year, as an example of the inconsistent understandings between educators.

I wasn’t very happy…I would like to have a conversation about why I wasn’t very happy with the Q and A session we had with the parents last year. (Jill)

The educators at the prior-to-school setting felt that they knew the children and parents because they had attended their setting for some time, and that the knowledge and familiarity generated during this time was not respected by the educators at the schools.

We knew the parents of course, better, because they’ve been at the [preschool]. (Eva)
In the instance noted above, the professional advice provided to the parents by the prior-to-school educators was that the child was not ‘ready’ for school and, rather than starting school, ought to have another year at the preschool.

We had a child that was set on coming back but then after hearing that [advice from the school], they did a complete 360. (Jill)

The prior-to-school educators felt that whether or not a child had attended another year of preschool, or started school should be something that was discussed and agreed upon by educators in both the preschool and schools setting, to prevent misunderstandings and confusion.

With the parents we found last year there was a bit of confusion that came from both parts – from the school and probably from ourselves as well, so that’s why we feel it would be good to be on the same page, more in regards to a second year of [preschool] or a second year of school in the early years because I think that’s where parents were getting a bit confused and there was a bit of mixed messages happening. (Jill)

These misunderstandings also impacted on the educators. After the information session for parents, where they provided advice to parents that was contrary to that of the preschool educators, Kayla and Evonne questioned their and others’ understandings and beliefs around children’s readiness for school, and described frustrations about the lack of transparency and communication between prior-to-school and school settings.

Kayla: We initially felt a bit frustrated, and perhaps a little…

Evonne: Insulted.

Kayla: I was going to say bloody annoyed! Yeah insulted is probably a good word. There was a lot of issues that probably spilled over from the panel evening. I suppose in defence of
us all, we were really only answering questions that were thrown at us from parents. It wasn’t like we went there with our own agenda. We had no agenda, and we had no set information we were sharing. The idea was that you answer questions that parents give you, which we did, all of us, including our two Principals to the best of our knowledge and opinion. But there was a little bit of angst developed from that evening. The cohort of parents was, in some ways, a little difficult in that they were indecisive about whether to send their child to school or not. They were going to and fro between the [preschool] and us quite a bit, and as with any case, we make our decision based on our professional opinion of what we see of the children when they come in. I think the [preschool] staff were a little bit annoyed we advised parents that we felt their child was ready to go to school, where perhaps they had advised not.

Kayla raised her concerns about this at one of the network meetings, explaining to the other network members her concerns around lack of professional reciprocal understandings, and how that was problematic for transition.

I would like to touch back on an issue that I think came about last year with parents coming to us, us giving our professional opinion. I don’t know the answer to this, but I think obviously it has caused some concerns about two different professional opinions being given, and I just think it probably needs to be dealt with, so we don’t have the same issues this year. I wonder whether it would be beneficial to us, in those kinds of contexts to communicate with each other more by saying, so and so has come to talk to me about this, this is what I am observing, this is what I have said to the parent. (Kayla)

The network members proceeded to brain-storm some ideas for how they could go about this, suggesting meetings between educators to discuss any concerns.

Michelle: Do you think there should be perhaps an email process or something where you can say, ‘I’ve spoken to such and such’?

Kayla: Even if we just shot through an email and said…
Nadia: Could you have a dual meeting? Would that be appropriate?

Eva: What between the school and us?

Kayla: I think we just need to say ‘so and so has been to see me about my child, let’s make a time to catch up and talk about it’ so that we, professionally, are on the same page as each other.

Some of the members identified that having such meetings between educators would be helpful for school educators, because the time they had with children during transition visits was far less than the time the children attend preschool, and some information could easily be missed.

Julia: Because there could be things we don’t see. So your concerns could be about social stuff…they’re coming to us for 2 hours, they’re really great, they sit, they engage, they’re listening to the story, they’re putting their hand up, they’re sharing with the class. You’re thinking ‘what do you mean they’re not ready for school, they’re awesome’…We don’t see that other flip side…

Jill: And that can describe a child that I have at the moment…up in the air. If he went for the visit you’d probably say ‘yep’ because you wouldn’t get the chance to see the social and emotional…

Kayla encouraged the members to commit to a process, so that there was something in place for these instances. Some of the other members agreed that it was a good idea to create a formal process.

Kayla: If we lock it in, there has to be a process. If a parent comes to us in that…two frame of mind, not sure we say ‘so and so has been to see us, can we catch up for a bit of a chat’

Mike: It’s good to have it locked in as a…
Eva: Yes this is a great idea

During the remainder of the meeting, the members discussed how the process would work, and who to include. They worked on developing an action around this, so that it became a formal process that was agreed upon by all the members.

Julia: When a parent is undecided about whether to send their child to school or not….

Kayla: I think If a parent comes and says I’m undecided or whatever, I’ll contact the [preschool] and say ‘so and so’s been in, let’s catch up for a chat’.

Jill: I don’t think the parent needs to be there.

Kayla: Sometimes you need to have conversations without feeling you have to be diplomatic, sometimes it just needs to be blunt conversation.

Julia: So what…I’m just wording it…

Kayla: It’s basically that the [preschool] and school will communicate regarding…

Michelle: May I say and me? Because parents will come to me and they’ll say ‘[preschool] have said he should, and school have said he shouldn’t’ and if they’re someone I’ve known for a few years through the centre, they will come for my opinion as well.

Jill: Has that happened in the past?

Michelle: It has.

Eva: Well the more input the better I say.

After this meeting, Kayla and Evonne reflected on the network being a place to air issues in order for them to be discussed and worked through. They acknowledged the
difficulties in voicing concerns amongst colleagues, but were convinced that honesty was important for resolving issues successfully and moving forward.

I think our early years network helped a bit. You know, a degree of uneasiness in the group and I think it spilled from that information panel session. I think it’s been a challenge but I feel that it was very difficult for Jill and Eva [preschool educators] to air that at the meeting. It was not easy, you could see that they were very uncomfortable but I think honesty needs to come out and it needs to be done in a professional way and I came away feeling better that the issue had been slightly resolved. (Kayla)

One of the factors compounding the issues around communication between the preschool and schools was confidentiality. Prior to the development of the network, the preschool educators had felt strongly about protecting information about children and their families. Conversely, the school educators felt that the more information they had about children and their families making the transition to school, the better they would be able to plan for, and cater to them.

I can remember two years ago when I went to a transition meeting with them [preschool educators] at the [preschool], and we had a little boy who had quite a serious physical ailment, and Jill would not tell me what the ailment was. ‘You will need to get permission from the parents to discuss it’. And his parents were very elusive and we had NO idea, even when he started school, what his medical condition was, and what things we needed to put into place. He could have DIED on the first day, and we would have had no idea what we were doing. (Lauren)

That’s probably the bit I find frustrating about early childhood. This confidentiality thing – they sort of can’t get past that, we’re all professionals you know, and we’re all trying to do the best that we can, and the more information that we have as a professional to support
families, well it only has to have positive outcomes doesn’t it? But hiding away information and all the rest of it, from that perspective I find a little tiring sometimes. (Lauren)

The school educators felt frustrated that what they regarded as important information about children and families was not being communicated to them, believing this to hinder the transition process, and causing them to be ‘on the back foot’.

From the 3 ½ check [developmental stage check carried out by Maternal and Child Health Nurse] and all of that…Those services that had been offered or that students had been seeing, they couldn’t actually pass that on, and then when we get the school nurse in, which often isn’t until Term 2, we are on the back foot. (Evonne)

Other explanations for the lack of sharing of information were also offered. Sophie explained that sometimes, it was a simple lack of understanding that important information was collected about children prior to them attending school.

They haven’t realised that there has been a whole lot of information that has been collected, work that’s been done, with a child and family, through Maternal and Child Health, or [preschool], or child care, prior to school. (Sophie)

The issue of confidentiality was raised during the network meetings and a number of ideas were discussed to determine how the network members might work collaboratively to manage this. All of the strategies spoken about by the network involved focusing on building greater reciprocal understandings and communication between prior-to-school settings and services, and schools. The group proposed to build greater reciprocal understandings around the expectations are in each setting and the various roles and responsibilities of those involved. In addition, the use of language emerged as central to establishing these reciprocal understandings among the network members. More specifically, the members identified that
developing a common language that was familiar, relevant and understood across sectors and settings would aid the establishment of these understandings.

5.8.2 Language

Network members acknowledged that part of the cause for lack of effective communication and reciprocal understandings across settings was the absence of consistent professional language. Some network members noted that the network itself provided an opportunity for discussion and dialogue between professionals, and a place to become familiar with the language used in different settings.

The language that was familiar to a Maternal and Child Health Nurse with a background in health was quite different to the language used in educational settings. This can pose some challenges when professionals from these two sectors need to communicate with one another. An example of this can be noted in the documentation that is used by Maternal and Child Health Nurses in recording data about children. These records focus on the developmental stages of children and the language used in them reflects this. In contrast, the language used in preschools is generated from the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework and is more holistic in its descriptions of children and their learning.

Further, the language used in prior-to-school settings is also different from the language used in schools. This is evident in the writing and sharing of transition statements. The usefulness of transition statements was discussed at length in the network meetings and follow-up interviews. Sophie indicated that the language used in the early years and school
curriculum documents was very different, and that this was problematic for educators attempting to understanding and make meaningful interpretations of transition statements.

It’s the language that’s used. It’s a totally different language in the Early Years Learning and Development Framework to what you guys use in schools. So I think it’s the information, it’s the way it’s written, it’s the way it’s presented I think, has been proving very difficult for teachers to understand what the [preschool] teacher might actually be trying to say. (Sophie)

Lauren stated that one of the benefits to the network was the opportunity to seek clarification around the use of specific language, in an attempt to glean understanding.

The more you question each other, the more you work in networks, the clearer the understanding. The more understanding and clarification you have of the vocab that everyone is using, that can only improve things. (Lauren)

Lauren commented that as time went on for the network, and the more opportunities there were for developing a common use of language, the greater the opportunity for relationship building and the promotion of continuity between the settings.

We’re working on it, the more meetings that we have and the more our vocab is the same, and the more relationships that build, the better continuity. (Lauren)

Despite language being identified as a challenge for the network, members considered themselves able to overcome the challenges by continuing to work together in a collaborative manner.
5.8.3 Building understanding

As a result of acknowledging a lack of reciprocity regarding understandings of professional practice, the network members began making deliberate attempts to improve the level of understanding that existed between the members working in different educational settings. Members held aspirations that, with increased understandings about the different professional practices, and expectations across settings, transition could be improved for all involved.

One of the main concerns for the school educators was children transitioning to school who had particular needs, a disability, or learning difficulty. Previously, information about these children often had not been transmitted to schools, because of concerns around confidentiality. The network members agreed that it was in the best interests for not only the child, but also their family and the school, that information be transmitted to help make the transition for these children as effective as possible.

Certainly information sharing before the transition process, just making sure that we were aware of the quirky kids and all that sort of stuff, that information. The things that already currently worked for them, within their current environment, so things that might you know, hit the mark for them. And meeting with Nadia from her welfare and special needs point of view can meet with those parents and develop an individual learning plan. (Lauren)

One of the strategies suggested by the network members was for both the Maternal and Child Health Nurse and the preschool educators to encourage parents to approach the school as early as possible with relevant information about their child.

I think to get the message across to parents to go and talk to the schools. I think the sooner we know about a kid the better. (Kayla)
Some of the members acknowledged that enrolment time was usually the time that parents communicated any potential issues or concerns to the school, but that support from the preschool would assist in this process, especially for those parents who may not be forthcoming with relevant information.

Parents often come for open days, or they might come back again for enrolment, and they will say my child has such and such, but I think they perhaps need to hear it from the [preschool] as well, as a little reminder to say, if you are going to start your child, you need to start working with your school now. (Kayla)

The other little thing that’s a bit compounding is especially if it’s the eldest child, if it’s their first child, a lot of parents don’t know to admit…it’s a little bit of a defensive thing at first. Then once they get there it’s fine. So sometimes on those transition things [transition statements] they’re not honest. (Mike)

One of the concerns for school educators was being aware of children who may be eligible for additional funding to support their learning upon their enrolment at school. School educators described how it was important for them to know about these children prior to them starting school, in order for them to meet the requirements of the funding applications. They described a desire to explain to prior-to-school educators how their funding systems worked, to assist in their understanding of the importance of relaying relevant information about children with additional needs early.

The difficulty for us is that, certainly in our system, getting funding is becoming increasingly difficulty and you really have to jump through hoops on your head for some kids to get funding, so the sooner we know the better. (Kayla)

During one meeting, the network members had a lengthy discussion about each schools’ funding processes for children with additional needs. This included discussions
about the importance of timeframes for applications, and the procedures for acquiring supporting documentation from relevant professionals such as paediatricians and occupational therapists. Members noted cut off dates for applications for funding in the different settings.

Another strategy that the network members agreed upon for improving communication and the development of reciprocal understandings between the members, was scheduling regular transition meetings. The members were already engaged in the network meetings, as well as meetings towards the end of the year around transition statements, which the members felt had been very effective in terms of communication. They agreed that it would be beneficial to organise some additional meetings earlier in the year, to discuss children who may need additional support as they made the transition to school. The aim of this meeting was to be the provision of information to assist educators to make decisions about additional transition visits, applications for funding, and to do this at a time that was not as busy at the end of school term.

Eva: I think we need to have greater talks.

Jill: Because we’ve been doing that closer to the end of the year, do we need to move that up earlier in Term 4 or, do we need more time?

Kayla: From my point of view a bit earlier might be good. I mean we’ve had it towards the end of Term 4, it’s a busy term and there’s a lot going on, but I guess if there are things going on that you want to make us aware of, that we might want to action some stuff before the end of the term. I think by early Term 4 you probably have a pretty clear idea of what you’re going to say to us.

Jill: I’m happy to meet up earlier.
Some of the network members reflected on these additional meetings, in their follow-up interview, identifying how beneficial these had been for improving communication. This was the first year that the network had trialled these meetings and network members concluded that they contributed to achieving greater communication and reciprocal understandings between prior-to-school and school settings.

Lauren: We actually did two transition meetings with the [preschool] staff, the first one was like a general one where we just had a conversation about transition, what it would look like, how it would work, and all that sort of stuff. Then we had a meeting one on one with each [preschool] teacher, and talked specifically about each individual child that was coming to our school. That was pre-transition statements and pre-transition full stop.

Julia: Which was really good.

Lauren: Which was really good. And then we had another meeting later on. It was more specific with the transition notes, the passing of transition notes and things to make sure that we had all the information. The [preschool] staff have been much more helpful and informative about the type of information they’ve given us.

In addition to having end of year meetings about children making their transition to school, the preschool educators expressed a desire to have an opportunity for some feedback about children who had started school.

Eva: Yes this is a great idea. It would be nice to just touch base with how they’re going.

Eva reflected on seeing a child she had taught in preschool at school one day, and how it was rewarding for her to see how well he was going, and that he remembered her.

He was very happy to see me. He hasn’t seen me, and he remembered me. (Eva)
This suggests that in addition to children and their families making the transition to school, transition is also lived by the educators, who feel a desire to re-connect with those children once they are at school, or receive some kind of feedback. Following this, the members discussed the possibility of preschool educator visits at the school during Term One.

During a follow-up interview, a network member also pointed out that when she checked in the following year after transition, it gave her an opportunity to see how effective both her verbal information and the transition statements had been for those children.

And it was almost like a check-in after transition to say ‘what were you finding? Was there more information you needed?’ So we did some clarification. (Lauren)

At the time of the follow-up interviews, network members noted a number of changes that had been affected by the network, particularly around improving communication and building reciprocal understandings.

Early on, network members had identified lack of understanding regarding the roles of professionals who worked in the early childhood field. Sophie indicated that this was particularly evident in her experience as a health-based professional.

At the moment, we’re operating in silos and I think it’s because of that lack of understanding. But also lack of [knowledge of] where they’ve come from, that base knowledge of where they’ve come from. And there are a lot of different issues that a Maternal and Child Health Nurse might look at, but at the same time, they need to know the educational value of what they’re doing, and how they’re educating parents to then educate their children. So they’re working with Mums to give them ideas, examples and strategies to work with their child, so they need to know. (Sophie)
Michelle recalled at the first network meeting that one of her aspirations for her involvement in the network was that she wanted to learn about the expectations of children in primary school, in order to better inform her practice.

I’d like to learn what is it, what your expectations are of a child entering primary school so that I can give that information accurately to Mums. (Michelle)

Sophie acknowledged that improving understandings between Maternal and Child Health and community workers, and educational settings would be a challenge, particularly because they were situated in different professional sectors.

I think one of the major stumbling blocks is our Maternal and Child Health Nurses are trained as nurses, so they’re not trained as educators. It’s very different to how a child care educator or [preschool] educator would be trained, the nurse is coming from a totally different basis. They’re coming from a nursing background, not an education background, yet they work with the family. They’ve got a huge role to play in the development of the child and that information being transferred to other services. So they gather a whole lot of information about a child right from the get-go. (Sophie)

One of the original intentions of the network was to involve a range of professionals who worked with children and families in their early years, including Maternal and Child Health Nurses, and, through this, to promote cross sector understandings.

As well as believing in the importance of reciprocal understandings between settings, interview data also revealed an aspiration of the network to strive to build reciprocal understandings as part of their undertaking as a network. The members acknowledged that through improving and strengthening their understandings and meeting the challenges of respecting confidentiality and language differences, it was possible to enhance the transition experience for all those involved.
5.9 Relationships

The importance of relationships was highlighted in the data. References identified the value of relationships of network members between different settings, as well as and relationships with children and families. The concepts relating to relationships align closely with those of reciprocal understandings and communication. However, both categories are reported separately in order to explore how they might be mutually beneficial, or indeed different.

5.9.1 Between settings

One of the achievements of the network itself has been its ability to bring together professionals from a range of settings and provide a platform for the creation of relationships between these people. Many of the network members described how participating in the network enabled them to familiarise themselves with other professionals working in the community and to develop working relationships with them.

Previously I hadn’t met any of the primary school staff, so it’s given me an opportunity to meet more of the people who are working with young children in the area. (Michelle)

Michelle explained that, through developing relationships with other professionals, her approach to providing advice to families had been affirmed.

I was reassured, I felt that we were pretty much on the same page which was good. The last thing we want is conflicting advice going out to families. (Michelle)
This is one example of where the development of a relationship between professionals can lead to improved opportunities for facilitating reciprocal understandings and effective communication.

Sophie also gave an example of this, highlighting that positive relationships pave a pathway for effective communication between professionals which ultimately improves transition experiences for children.

A really good rapport between the professionals working in each of the different areas, in different services so that they can communicate where the child is at, and having a good understanding again of what the expectations of the child are…the direction of the child to where they’re heading. You know, make it a smooth transition for them. (Sophie)

Sophie also noted that becoming familiar with someone in a face-to-face context was particularly meaningful for her. Having actually met someone, and having the opportunity to ‘get to know someone’ appeared to make subsequent communications that much easier for the network members.

The other thing that I think has been really, really good is that they’ve actually met each other and can actually have that conversation now as professionals without you know…not to say they couldn’t before, but they’re more familiar with each other now so it’s ‘oh yep, no worries I’ll give Lauren a call and I’ll chat with her about this, or tell her about this’. You know that just sort of opening up a bit more, that conversation. (Sophie)

Some of the members identified some pre-existing tensions in the relationships between the two schools in Robinleigh. Traditionally, there had been some competition between the schools in terms of vying for enrolment numbers. The coming together of members of staff from both of the schools to generate a new transition network suggested that
these staff members saw benefit in the network by working together collaboratively for the benefit of the community, not individual schools.

Kayla reflected on her awareness of the existing competitiveness, and how she perceived herself as a professional, concerned with providing for the needs of children, rather than with rivalry between schools.

It’s funny that I feel that for us as sort of the early years teachers, I don’t think we’ve ever had a competitive ‘us and them’ mentality. We are a lot more focused on the child at the centre. I think we’ve come from it as open-minded, that it is about children at the centre here, it’s not about the competition between our schools or anything. (Kayla)

Julia acknowledged that having some existing connections between the staff at the schools certainly helped in the development of further relationships in the network.

I think it was really important that we had developed a friendship already with Robinleigh Primary so it didn’t seem so daunting. (Julia)

Another member reflected on the time that the network had been operating, identifying that time was necessary for the development of relationships.

I think that we have developed relationships. That was going to be a process, and if you want to have a strong group those relationships and the trust in those relationships is really important. (Lauren)

Lauren also described how effective professional relationships can facilitate action.

To have a professional relationship with the professionals in our town, so that you can make things happen. (Lauren)
A further example of the development of relationships between the different settings can be seen through the descriptions in the previous section about the importance of building reciprocal understandings. The members reported that as time progressed, and the network had open and honest conversations about ideas and issues, greater understandings evolved. From this, relationships between the settings were fortified, with members reporting that other network members were more forthcoming and willing to share information.

They’ve [the preschool educators] have been much more helpful and informative about the type of information they’ve given us…From that perspective, the building relationships with that [preschool] group has certainly benefited. (Lauren)

The context for the network was cited as a factor that impacted on the development of relationships. Julia described how working in a smaller community facilitated relationships between the settings, because it was manageable.

I think for our cluster we are really happy that we’re in a small kind of town, because I think we’ve been able to build relationships and it hasn’t gotten too big. (Julia)

5.9.2 With children and families

Members noted that the network also provided opportunities for the facilitation of relationships with children and their families.

In her role as a Maternal and Child Health Nurse, Michelle felt it was hugely advantageous to be part of the network, as it helped her to have better relationships with the families she worked with.
It will be a great benefit. I think if the parents have a long term trusting relationship with their nurse, I think it’s reassuring for them that their nurse has given, with parental consent, relevant information about their child [to the preschool or school] so that the child is not an unknown when they arrive at school. (Michelle)

Michelle proceeded to explain that she felt positive about telling families that she was a member of the network, because she believed that her involvement and participation in the network would be reassuring for families.

It also reassures them [the families] that the school cares enough about an individual child that they’re trying to set up things that will benefit that child in their transition. (Michelle)

For Michelle, a direct outcome of the network was improved and stronger relationships with professionals from different settings. Greater reciprocal understandings and communication between the network members also contributed to these relationships. In summary, the network provided opportunities for positive relationships to develop between professionals.

5.10 Professionalism

Professional regard and support for other professionals emerged from the network meetings and follow-up interview data.

5.10.1 Regard

Professional regard relates to the respect accorded to educators and professionals who participated in the network. In some cases, network members referred to professional regard from families. Some of the members described a desire to have greater professional regard
and support from one another making decisions and providing advice to families. The example cited earlier about educators making a collaborative decision about whether or not to advise to parents to give their child another year of preschool, is relevant here. Some of the members reported that large discrepancies in professional opinions were not helpful and that being able to support one another on professional matters was important.

An issue that came about last year was about us giving our professional opinion, and the [preschool] giving their professional opinion, and then obviously causing some angst on a number of fronts. (Kayla)

Kayla explained that having differing professional opinions created some negative reactions from parents, and potentially caused parents to have diminished regard because of their inability to reach a professional consensus.

It obviously caused concerns about two different professional opinions being given. I wonder whether some parents played us against each other a bit in information, and I think it reflected badly. (Kayla)

Kayla acknowledged that the frank and honest conversations during the first and second meetings about particular issues could have been unsettling for some, but

Hope[d] professionally…they [preschool educators] see us as a supportive network. (Kayla)

Kayla’s comments suggested that she cared about how well supported and regarded other network members felt.

One of the ways that the network attempted to build professional regard was to hold the network meetings at each of the professional workplaces of the network members, whenever possible. This helped foster an atmosphere of equality amongst the members,
promoting the idea that no one setting held greater importance than another. Lauren voiced her views about this.

Everyone was introduced to each other’s environment. Everyone was encouraged to do that, and to talk about their story, where they see themselves fitting within that scenario. And that was important I think, to make sure that everyone feels valued. (Lauren)

During one of the network meetings, members were discussing supporting parents in their decision around school choice, and how that was ultimately the parent’s decision. A comment made by one of the network members reflected an attitude of regard towards both schools.

Both schools have a lot to offer, and they’re [the child] is going to be supported in either school. (Nadia)

5.10.2 Support

Some data also referred to a desire by the network members to have collegial support in their professional practice, and the hope that participating in the network would provide them with greater support in their roles.

Evonne noted that her participation facilitated her getting to know other professionals who could provide a support network for her.

I suppose for me, it’s been a success in getting to know people who are there to support us. I’d met some of the other teachers before, but not others, so I’ve seen it as a success in building my own professional network. (Evonne)
An educator from a nearby small community, who had joined the network a little while after it began, described feeling a sense of relief that she had an opportunity for professional discussion and support with others, as she was the only educator in her setting.

I feel quite relieved just to have people to discuss things with! I’m the sole educator at my centre. (Kitty)

Since its initiation, the network members have attended one joint professional development session focused on building community capacity. The members attended with the viewpoint that the session would contribute to their understandings about the collaborative ways that they could work together to build strong links with their communities. Those who attended reported feeling a sense of encouragement; they felt affirmed in their objectives for the network and noted that attending together had tightened the relationships between them. They emphasised that opportunities for professional development were one of the benefits of the network for them.

We were quite fortunate about getting to go to the PD. She was phenomenal to listen to, and I think it was a real turning point for us in our group, in that we need to have that ‘why’ behind us, we need to have a full purpose that is clear, consistent and that we can communicate out whenever we do something. Certainly that professional development is really important for us as well. (Evonne)

Another benefit from the network has been the sharing of professional ideas and knowledge. For example, Nadia, whose role was to provide specialist support for children and families with additional needs, had a lot of experience working with other professionals, such as paediatricians and occupational therapists. She shared some of her experiences and advice with the other network members.
Nadia: It’s frustrating sometimes, I’ve worked with someone last year and the paediatrician, not always a lot is done.

Jill: The waiting list for paediatricians is…

Nadia: We find [the paediatricians] fantastic. They’ve been amazing with me so far this year as far as communication and I’ll flick them off an email quite regularly and they’ll call me at home on my mobile, they’ve been amazing. I’m really impressed with them actually.

While the network has faced some initial challenges in building professional regard and support, it also provided a medium through which professional regard was fostered between members, especially between those in different settings.

5.11 Sustainability of the network

Evidence emerged in the data regarding the ability of the network to sustain itself. A primary concern for the network members was to set goals and to commit to regular meetings in order to keep the network progressing and moving forwards. While it was not an immediate concern for the network to have an ongoing and stable leader, the question of who would help drive the direction and speed of the network was raised by some members. As with any ongoing involvement in such a group, the ability of members to make a commitment to the network in the long term also emerged. Another potential influence on the sustainability of the network was potential competing professional priorities among the network members.
5.11.1 Goal setting

Some evidence for the setting of goals was evident in the network meetings. For example, the scheduling of the following meeting at the end of each meeting indicated a process that the network members had adopted to ensure the continuity and regularity of the meetings.

Another example could be seen during one of the meetings where a number of things had been flagged by the network members for action. These included the information meetings for parents held during Term 4, that were discussed earlier, as well as the follow up meetings planned for touching base with educators in the new year, after children had made the transition to school. Setting goals that involve meeting with other network members on a consistent basis could be seen to aid in the sustainability of the network.

During one of the network meetings, there was some feedback about a proposal from one of the members to investigate the possibility of funding available from a rural education body.

Lauren just wanted everyone to know that Peter, who came to the last meeting, is working on some funding for us and working on bits and pieces and he’s got some people involved. Something might be happening with a pilot project. (Julia)

Access to funding would give the network greater scope for initiatives, and encourage planning, both potentially stimulating the focus of the network into the future. The utilisation of funding may also create a degree of accountability for the network to show its effective use of funding.

During the follow-up interviews, some of the members described feeling anxious to begin setting some tangible goals for the network. They felt that there were different degrees
of engagement, or ‘buy-in’ from the different members. This meant that some members were very focused on setting goals, and getting things moving at a faster pace, while others seemed less concerned about pursuing goals. Kayla acknowledged that people worked differently, and that she was mindful to respect that.

I know for me personally, I’m just wanting to move things a bit quicker. But then that’s also about saying that people move at different paces and you’ve got to work a bit flexibly with people. (Kayla)

Kayla admitted that in order for her to continue her professional investment in the network, she needed to see progress and success.

I think we are keen to keep going if there is proof…If you want to say that what we’ve started is successful then yes. It’s the little things like the discussion about transition, about the students being moved forward much earlier in the year, that has proved successful. (Kayla)

These comments suggest that Kayla was seeking some evidence of the effectiveness of the network justify her continued involvement. She also recognised the importance of the investment of other members.

Evonne also cited the importance of having equal ‘buy-in’ from all members, in order for the network to progress and meet their goals in the future.

Looking forward, what is important is having everyone’s buy-in. When we get down to setting our goals, and setting our purpose and setting out why I think we really need to make sure that everybody had that buy-in, I think that’s going to be really important. (Evonne)

For a couple of the members, attending the professional development session about community capacity building had inspired them to clarify, the real purpose, or ‘why’, for the network.
I hoped that in our first meeting or two after attending the PD during the year, I would like really like us to sit down and actually nut out for ourselves the ‘why’. Why do we want this group to succeed? (Lauren)

One of the concepts that the educators had taken away from that session was around the importance of the community members being the ones to decide for themselves what is important to them and what it is they want to achieve. This ideology had carried into the network.

One of the quotes was about nothing is more important than a community, a community finding out, you know the heart and soul of it and where it’s going to go. I think we’ve kind of done that too. It’s probably taking us a little bit of time to nut out where we’re going rather than this is just a casual drink. (Julia)

Sophie also voiced the ‘where to’ as being a challenge for the sustainability of the network. She elucidated that having a clear path and clear goals were necessary for the network to continue effectively, as well as the members being able to see the ongoing value in their participation.

The challenge I think is ‘where to’, to make sure it’s valuable for each of the members of the group. I think it has the potential to slip into…just pick up half way through the year or something if we don’t have a clear path. You need to have a purpose – what’s the purpose of the group and why do people keep coming back? I’m speaking from experience with another group, you get to a point where it’s ‘what next?’ We’ve built this relationship, we’ve got to know each other, we’ve developed an understanding of what each other does in their roles, ok so what next? (Sophie)

Some of the members who had been involved with instigating the network indicated that they had aspirations to invite other professionals to participate in the network. Their
intentions included extending invitations to other small neighbouring communities, as well as considering the involvement of Year 7 high school co-ordinators. Lauren acknowledged that it may be beneficial to ‘start to develop those relationships with the high school’ as transition from primary school to high school highlights many of the same challenges as transition to school.

We probably need to think about increasing the group size so that we’re including as many members of the community as we can. I would love to get a local speech, and someone from [local region] involved. (Lauren)

Julia commented that although the network was small and ‘friendly’, it may be limited by its size, and therefore inviting others to participate might be a good move to generate greater breadth of experience.

The cluster is small, it’s friendly and it’s things like that, but if it’s too small it’s too limiting. (Julia)

5.11.2 Leadership

The leadership of the network has implications for its sustainability. As noted previously, there is no official leader of the network, although Lauren assumed many of the leadership responsibilities and tasks: in many ways, she fulfilled the role of network leader.

Although Lauren, and to some extent Julia, have led the network thus far, they did not perceive themselves as the long term leaders. They suggested that the leadership could be fluid, changing over time, depending on who else was willing to take responsibility. In addition to leadership of the network, Lauren also identified the importance of supportive
leadership within each of the settings. Without such support, the motivation to engage in the network was expected to wane.

While the network was still in its infancy, and was yet to be directly challenged by factors impacting on its long-term sustainability, the members were acutely aware of what these challenges may be, and how they may impact on the network. Specifically, members stated the need for goal setting, in order to ensure the network had direction and tangible outcomes to work towards. While leadership had been considered by some of the members, it did not appear to be the primary concern. It may be that the network members had not had the need to think about the role of leadership as part of their long term plans. Despite this, the issue of leadership was relevant to the focus on goal setting.

5.12 Goals for transition

Goals for transition related to the people involved in transition – children, families and educators. Overall, these comments reflected the goals they held for enhancing the transition experience for those involved. Much of the discussion during network meetings surrounded the activities and strategies that educators planned for, and enacted, during transition. Members also identified issues related to transition processes, transition statements and the curricula.
5.12.1 For children

Educators often referred to their key focus in transition being on the child, with aspirations for transition to be smooth and happy. When asked in the follow-up interviews about what made an effective transition, responses included:

When kids can come to school and feel safe and happy, and that they are successful in their transition in that they feel comfortable in their new environment, and that they are ready to begin their new journey. It’s really about making this transition at one point in time as smooth and as comfortable and as easy for them as possible…not worrying and having anxieties about it. (Kayla)

For me it’s just about that successful transition into the learning classroom. The school setting is quite different from the [preschool] setting so the role of transition is to make that as smooth as possible so they have the expectations of what the classroom looks like, feels like, and how it differs from [preschool]. (Evonne)

Also being able to build a rapport with the teachers…building that connection with their buddies and people who are going to be their support network – their teachers and other teachers they will come across. An understanding of all the people that are going to be part of their relationships in school. (Kayla)

Also helping them build independence in bringing their bag in, being organised in the morning, and bringing in their drink bottles, reader folder and lunch orders, things like that. They’re comfortable, they’re confident interacting with each other, knowing their way around the school. (Evonne)

Much of the data relating to children’s transition focused on how to provide for the needs of individual children. One of the decisions facing preschool educators involved
making judgements about children who may benefit from a second year of preschool, even though they were eligible to start school.

When we look at children for a second year, we don’t really look at the academic, intellectual side of things. Some kids might be academically and intellectually ready, but socially and emotionally, the skills aren’t there. Because if they can’t communicate with their peers, can’t attempt to solve their own problems and cannot manage their emotions then they’re going to struggle at school. (Jill)

Making the decision to advise parents that their child could benefit from another year of preschool was a complex one for educators.

Educators held firm goals for children. Most commonly, these goals centred on meeting the individual needs of children and assisting them to make a happy and smooth transition to school. Most of the goals educators had for children making their transition to school related to their adjustment - socially and emotionally, and feeling comfortable in their new environment.

5.12.2 For families

Data suggested that educators and professionals also had goals for children’s family members during transition. There was some concern among educators that parents had unrealistic expectations of children’s learning, particularly involving expectations around academic achievement.

Some members described a desire to assist families understand the focus on play, especially in the preschool setting. Jill explained that parents had been very focused on the academic achievement of their children.
Last year we had families that were all into ‘are you writing with them, are they reading?’ and so on, that is what prompted us to do this. (Jill)

As a result, the preschool organised an information night for families, where the preschool opened one night, and was set up to show families what the preschool looked like when the children were present, so parents could see the types of activities and experiences children engage with. The educators hoped that by including photographs of the children playing and some signage with links to learning outcomes, it would help parents understand the learning that could occur.

We had an information night, and we invited families just to pop in, and pop out, what suited them. We thought it would be better than a one-on-one, we set up the room as if the kids were coming. So we set up the playdough, the painting, all the activities, we had the signage up, and we had some photos. In the block corner we had this [shows example to the network] it shows the learning outcomes. It tells the families that they demonstrate trust and confidence and all the advantages they get from the activity that they might not have thought of. (Jill)

The preschool educators noted that some of their parents held certain expectations around what their children needed to be learning in preschool. The educators hoped that by inviting families to attend, accompanied by explanations of the importance of play and meaningful learning experiences, educators could dispel some of the unrealistic expectations.

There were a few families who came in and it was really good that they took away what we were hoping for. A couple of parents said to Eva ‘Oh I didn’t realise that when my child was doing this activity they were gaining these skills’. (Jill)

School educators also noted that parents often had a particular focus on the academic side of learning. Educators saw part of their responsibility was to help parents understand approaches to learning.
I think one of the biggest challenges particularly in the Early Years Framework, is a lack of parent understanding about these documents. A lot of parents have an academic focus when their child is at school, it’s a lot of pressure coming on staff, it has to be all about learning, learning, learning in a more purist academic sense. They don’t see much of the other stuff, the play-based learning and the enquiry stuff being really important to their development so I think we as educators need to educate our parents to help them understand. (Kayla)

Evonne suggested that inviting parents to attend information sessions would be one way of communicating about the reasoning and justifications for the way children are taught in schools.

The challenge is to make the parents aware of the whole child as well, especially the Foundation [first year of school] level, that there is so much more to that year than reading and writing and counting. (Evonne)

Educators acknowledged that, while a range of strategies could be utilised to assist parents’ understandings of teaching approaches and learning, it was the responsibility of the educators to initiate these.

Michelle also reported that even at the time of the three-and-a-half-year-old check conducted by the Maternal and Child Health nurse, parents quizzed her about the expectations of children to recognise letters and numbers.

A lot of parents are very, very focused on academic achievement, even at three and a half. There are quite a percentage who are concerned their child doesn’t recognise letters, doesn’t write their name, those types of things. From a nurse’s perspective at this age, that isn’t the key thing. As a nurse, we are far more focused on whether they’ve got the fine motor, the cognitive skills, the social skills to function in a classroom. A lot of parents are concerned that their children don’t learn obvious literacy and numeracy in preschool. (Michelle)
It was interesting to note, that professionals across the Maternal and Child Health setting, preschool and schools all reported similar concerns about the expectations of parents regarding their children’s learning. Though it was not stated explicitly, the comments raise the possibility that the network could have a role to play addressing this issue.

In the following example, some network members highlighted it was pertinent to remember that parents knew their child best, and that their opinions and beliefs were important.

Mike: It’s a matter of the parent knowing their child.

However, the notion of families knowing their children best was not conveyed consistently. Rather, there was the sense that educators held the ‘right’ belief and the ‘correct’ knowledge, and families needed to be convinced of this.

5.12.3 For educators

Much of the data relating to the transition goals for educators has been covered in relation to developing reciprocal understandings, improved communication, and fostering professional respect and support. These concepts have been explored in detail, yet it is still appropriate to acknowledge they are examples of goals held by educators during their transition experiences.

Some of the school educators made reference to a professional resource – ‘Continuity of Learning (Dockett & Perry, 2014a)’ that provided them with numerous ideas for implementing strategies designed to improve the transition experiences for all involved. Kayla reflected that reading the suggestions in the resources expanded her thinking beyond
planning for children transitioning to their first year of school, to children transitioning between years within school as well.

We read that book, separately, and then came back together bubbling with ideas, we had notes everywhere! Ways that we could take a lot of what was said in that book to improve the transition process again, but also to think about building all our kids’ success for learning and their education, before they come in the door for the start of their next year. (Kayla)

5.12.4 Activities and strategies

Some strategies employed by the network to improve transitions have been described previously. These include the network meetings themselves, the meetings scheduled between professionals at various times of the year, as well as the understanding that practitioners can readily communicate with one another at any time about a particular issue.

The information night run by the preschool has already been described, however that is one example of the type of activity scheduled by educators during transition. As well as giving parents an opportunity to come to the preschool and learn more about what their children were doing, and why, it also served as an opportunity for families to connect with the educators, ask questions or discuss concerns.

A strategy implemented by some of the school educators was to distribute a survey to parents, seeking feedback on how to make transition more effective for them.

We really wanted to improve on the transition every year, and not to rest on our laurels, so we introduced a feedback survey three years ago for our families as the starting point to give us feedback on how we can improve the transition process. From the very first survey we got a lot of feedback, so we made a lot of changes to the way we went about transition. We then
implemented the survey again, and refined the process again. Our plan is to build that learning community and really connect more with families right from the get go. (Kayla)

Another strategy adopted by one of the schools took an idea from the Continuity of Learning resource and created an ‘All about school book’, designed to travel between school and home, with contributions from children, their families, and from educators over the transition period and beyond.

We wanted to give parents an avenue to have a conversation with students – ‘what have you done today? How are you feeling?’…thinking about us as a learning community. In this book students have a friendship tree, so that’s the names and photos of all the people in their class. (Kayla)

It was apparent that educators were researching, and striving for new and innovative ways to improve their practice. As well as implementing a range of strategies to enhance their ability to work collaboratively with other professionals, educators clearly perceived parents as an important source of information regarding children’s transition. A variety of new strategies was being trialled to engage parents in the transition process, and include them in the transition journey as much as possible.

5.12.5 Transition statements

The usefulness of transition statements was something that was discussed at length by the network members. The issues raised regarding transition statements included: the time required to complete them; their ability to communicate across settings in a meaningful way; and their relevance for parents.
One member commented on school educators’ apparent lack of understanding by of the Early Years Learning Framework, on which the statements are based.

They [educators] are seeing the transition statements for children, but there is no understanding of what the fundamentals are based on. So there is no understanding of the EYLF and I’ve heard teachers say ‘I’ve never see it, I’ve never heard of it’ and they’ve been receiving documents, transition statements from [preschool] teachers based on this document. So I do think there’s a lot of work to do in that area. (Sophie)

Both the preschool educators and school educators described transition statements as problematic. Preschool educators noted that the statements were time consuming to complete, and questioned the value with which they were interpreted by school educators.

Jill: We’re doing the statements, but we’re also meeting up with the teachers which is…

Kayla: I think those sessions are very valuable. I think it really gives us a good chance.

Jill: They are, we get more out of them than the statements.

Kayla: I think they are personally, more valuable than a transition report…Sometimes I feel like the transition statement is written in a way where, there is a big list of stuff you feel like you have to put lots of things in, whereas it could probably be more of just a, like a simple statement about it, rather than having to list every climb on the climbing frame.

Jill explained she followed a guide when completing the statements, but agreed that they were time consuming and repetitive.

Julia acknowledged that the statements could have a place if they were the only source of information about children. In this instance, the educators all agreed that a much simpler format for recording children’s abilities was possible, coupled with face-to-face
meetings between educators to discuss each individual child. This suggests that information about children’s abilities was the type of information sought by school educators.

Julia: If that’s all you had, and you never talked about any child, then they might be useful, but we talk about the kids before they come.

Lauren described the transition statements as ‘wordy’, noting that they were ‘problematic’ in the sense that the information included in the statements was carefully selected in many cases.

You have to be extremely careful of the type of words you use. Sometimes you spend more time reading between the lines than you do actually, rather than what the guts of the matter is. (Lauren)

Because it’s for the parents too, so the [preschool] isn’t going to say anything like ‘they hit children’, which might be the reality. (Julia)

Julia also questioned the usefulness of the section inviting parent input, observing that some parents did not complete this section, so important information was often missing.

Mostly you’ll find that the kids who are going to be super fabulous, theirs are filled out in depth, you know exactly what they’re like. But those kids that you really, really need all that information from, the parent stuff is blank. (Julia)

One member described how transition statements were discussed at a recent staff professional development session that she attended, and that resoundingly, educators questioned the usefulness of the format. There was a consensus that the idea was good, but the format and content were described as too ‘wordy’ and complex, and it was suggested that a simplified tick-box type design would serve better.
The network members discussed this idea briefly, but came to no firm decisions on altering the format of the statements. There was a clear consensus that verbal exchanges during meetings were most effective, and preferred by the educators.

**5.12.6 Children with diverse needs**

Conversations around recognising and planning to meet the needs of children with diverse needs were also important issues for members of the network.

Elements of this issue have already been discussed to some extent, including the network working on building greater understandings across settings and communicating more effectively in order to share relevant information about children. Much of this discussion focused on the need to identify children with additional needs as early as possible, in order to put in place strategies to assist them and their families. Discussions also occurred around timeframes and applications for funding for children who may be eligible for additional financial support through the school. Through building reciprocal understandings, the preschool educators were able to learn about the funding procedures at the schools, to assist streamlining this process.

The [preschool] wasn’t aware of the types of funding that you can get. They didn’t realise if a child’s got a special need or flagged, that perhaps they could get funding, or how strict our dates are. (Lauren)

Network members also initiated strategies that encouraged parents to communicate with both prior-to-school settings and schools about the needs of their child.
Network members agreed during network meetings that the earlier professionals were aware of children with diverse needs, the better they could support them.

We certainly aim to put in as many supporting services at the earliest possible age that we can, when they need it. Because I mean, all of the evidence shows us that the more early intervention we can do, whatever that might mean for that particular child, the better their opportunities are. (Michelle)

Recognising and meeting the needs of children with diverse needs was a priority for the network members. In order to support these children, communication and reciprocal understandings across different settings is necessary. The network had already implemented strategies to enhance understandings, as well as to encourage parents to share information with professionals.

5.12.7 Curricula

Some educators felt that there was a ‘disconnect’ between the two curriculum documents that accompany the early years, or prior-to-school settings and the school settings. Sophie commented on the lack of consistency between the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework and the Victorian iteration of the Australian Curriculum, entitled the Victorian Essential Learning Standards.

From what I see there is a disconnect between the Early Years Learning Framework and the VELS [Victorian version of the AC], from what I can understand they haven’t really cross referenced the two documents so I think that’s a start. There needs to be a closer…marriage between the two documents in the early years and the learning outcomes in the early years of school. (Sophie)
Some of the network members regarded a thorough understanding of the curriculum documents necessary for effective transition planning. The rationale for this was that understanding the continuum of learning expected within the curriculum required understanding of what comes before, and after, each stage.

We at the school really look at what’s going to link from one stage to the next stage, how we can support students to make those steps, to form that continuum. (Kayla)

When asked about what role, if any, the curriculum documents played in the network meetings, responses suggested this was something for the future.

I don’t think we are at that point yet. (Lauren)

I think we’ve got a lot of groundwork to do before we kind of get into the nitty-gritty of that, and um, build up a lot of trust before you go into curriculum stuff, because that’s really knocking at their door…opening up other schools for kind of interrogation…Yeah scrutiny. (Julia)

It was not entirely clear what Julia meant by this comment. Perhaps she felt that questions and discussion around the use of curriculum documents would be interpreted as threatening by the other members.

5.13 Rural contexts

Data relating to rural contexts and communities were generated mostly from the follow-up interviews when network members were invited to share their views of the characteristics that defined rural communities. Their responses highlighted bonds that exists in these communities and, strengths within communities. Members also noted some of the
disadvantages of living and working in a rural community. As well as unclear professional and personal boundaries, issues related to confidentiality, and some of the more general issues facing rural communities and rural education were raised.

### 5.13.1 Characteristics of rural contexts

Rural communities were described in the data as having unique characteristics and strengths. Evonne described the community of Robinleigh as ‘community-minded’.

I think it’s better for informing the whole child. Getting to enjoy their successes at school, but also celebrating if they played a football grand final or cricket grand final on the weekend, just knowing that bit more about them, which sometimes in a bigger school you can miss. (Evonne)

She continued by remarking that smaller communities can facilitate the building of relationships that have a deeper connection, and promote the growth of a child in a more holistic sense.

If a kid has had a bad day, kind of knowing that perhaps they might have been at Dad’s place or Mum’s place on the weekend. I really like working in rural education because the relationships are just so much more pure, so much more beneficial in informing the whole student, rather than just their academic side. (Evonne)

Another educator referred to Robinleigh’s ‘sense of community’, which provided opportunities for engagement from families with the school. Kayla described how, in her experience, families who were engaged with the school were willing to support other families.
I think an advantage is that our parents can park, they can come in, they can hang around the playground and have that kind of opportunity. I think like in any rural community on the whole, you know when there is a need, our families rally together. We’ve had a few family crisis situations this year where some families have really needed support and our families have banded together and just helped those families out, bringing meals, taking children after school and all that kind of stuff. So I think that’s a real strength of rural schools. (Kayla)

Kayla also articulated a vision she thought was shared by rural educators working in small communities.

I think a lot of people who teach in this kind of setting have that…shared focus and drive to bind together as our own community in the school to make it better for students. I think we have that shared vision that we want it to be the best that we can. It’s empowering our kids through education and to be the best they can possibly be and to say to them just because you live in a little country town like Robinleigh…the world is your oyster and through education, so many doors can open up for you to do whatever you want to do in life. (Kayla)

Sophie reflected similar sentiments.

Everyone knows everyone, and develops a sense of community, that sense of belonging for children and for families, that they will support their communities, they will come back to their communities as they get older if they have a really good sense of belonging to that community when they’re young. (Sophie)

5.13.2 Familiarity with people

Familiarity with people was regarded as one advantage of rural communities. Knowing people well, and knowing about them, was seen as helpful for understanding
circumstances and informing professional practices. Michelle referred to this in her comments about health care.

Nurses who live in their own do know a lot of background information about families and family’s histories which a nurse in a very busy suburban practice won’t know. Because everyone knows everyone’s business in a small town. So I think that gives the nurse the advantage of having that family history knowledge. (Michelle)

At the same time, issues can arise with confidentiality. While there is the potential for gossip and rumour in all communities, this can be exacerbating in rural communities and deciphering fact from fiction can be difficult for professionals.

People will tell you things in the street about other people and how you handle that professionally, and whether that is an issue that comes under something like mandatory reporting where you must act, and you must document, or whether it’s something you tuck away in the back of your mind in case you need it later. (Michelle)

Kayla described something similar, referring to the potential for issues with confidentiality.

Living in the same town as them, in terms of student welfare…You have a deeper level of knowledge of what’s going on and I don’t want to label it as gossip but when you get stories back in, sometimes it paints a picture of why kids might be a little ‘off’ or what kinds of trauma they might have experienced. (Kayla)

The blurring of professional and personal boundaries can be challenging for those in small communities.
I think that sometimes that can raise issues around deciding where your professional boundaries lie, when you’re meeting people every day in the street and in the supermarket, who you’re also caring for. (Michelle)

Michelle observed that in her experience, in larger centres, there are often protocols around professional and personal boundaries, but in rural communities that is much more difficult.

Those same boundaries don’t work in a smaller rural setting, because you can’t not see people socially. I know that some nurses live and work in the same town, you know, they will be at basketball with clients, or they will be at a town meeting with clients or whatever, so they’ll be mixing and socialising and going to barbeques and things with the clients they’re caring for. There’s a need to decide whether they are going to completely separate work from their social life or how they’re going to manage those boundaries. (Michelle)

### 5.12.3 Issues in rural education

Data suggested that staffing and workforce characteristics may look different in rural areas, compared to larger communities. For example, there may not be a need for full-time professional positions, so part-time and casual employment may be more common. Staff may have to be flexible in their work hours, changing to meet the needs of the community. Relief staff may be needed to cope with unexpected absences, or fluctuations in work. However, there is not always an adequate supply of relief staff, or those staff have other casual employment, and may not be available when needed.

Sometimes we’re not able to cover shifts. Most nurses have several different casual jobs, or some permanent and some casual, and many of the relievers might be only available on a Friday or only available Monday, so yeah, it’s difficult. (Sophie)
Isolation, or the distances to large centres was one theme to emerge from the data. Network members acknowledged that there were certainly challenges as a result of living in rural areas. For example, planning excursions for children can be prohibitive because of the distances and subsequent costs involved.

Yeah, you can’t just jump on a train and zip to the Zoo, or you know, go to ScienceWorks and go to the Art Gallery and all those things. (Lauren)

I suppose if you’ve always worked in a rural community, you’ve always got to travel and that’s just part of the deal. I mean, from a staff perspective, you could PD wherever you wanted to be, as long as you’re prepared to travel, but it’s harder to move 110 kids to get somewhere that’s going to involve three hours travel. That’s probably the biggest hurdle …and the cost factor that goes with that. So from that perspective there are disadvantages. (Lauren)

You’re not so small you can just pile everyone in. (Julia)

Kayla voiced similar concerns, noting that being so far away from places can be a disadvantage for children growing up in rural communities, compared to children in urban areas.

You know, isolation from…just exposure to stuff in terms of giving our students opportunities and exposing them to things. I think the city kids often have more things right at their fingertips that are easy to access that cost a lot of money for us to take kids to, and the time it takes to get there. (Kayla)

Kayla explained that despite the challenges of organising extra-curricula activities for children, educators were committed to providing children with as many meaningful experiences as possible.
We take our kids to the theatre, which we’ve done for the last two years to see live theatre. For a lot of families they would never think…would never, ever do that with their children. So I think we have an obligation to our children to provide them with as much as we possibly can, given the setting that they are growing up in. (Kayla)

Having to travel for meetings was also a consideration for educators.

For us, because of the diocese thing, we’ve got lots of meetings in [regional town], well [regional town] isn’t that close to Robinleigh! (Julia)

For students at high schools, small rural communities offer minimal subject availability, limiting the study choices for students. This has further implications for employment opportunities once students finish school.

In high school…the amount of subjects was very basic. I tried to do an English Literature course by distance, and as a 17 year old, I really struggled. (Evonne)

Accessing health services also emerged as being relevant for the community of Robinleigh. Many health professionals work in larger centres, and community members must travel for appointments. Sophie noted that some families do not like leaving their community, others do not drive, and therefore accessing services is more difficult.

It’s the lack of services and the lack of choice of services. There’s a lack of choice locally and we have to travel outside our communities and often outside of the Shire to access those services, so that’s a challenge for families. (Sophie)

While living in a rural community posed a number of challenges for the network members in Robinleigh, including issues of isolation and staffing, the community found a number of ways to be innovative and resilient in the face of these challenges.
5.14 Chapter summary

This chapter presented the results from the Robinleigh site. Information around the context of the community and network, as well as network visits and follow-up interviews was included. The chapter then presented the data under each of the main categories and sub-categories developed from the data analysis. The main categories were: About the network, leadership, reciprocal understandings, relationships, professionalism, sustainability of the network, goals for transition and rural contexts.
6 Chapter Six – Results – Westhill

6.1 Context of community

Westhill is a small rural township located in New South Wales. The town has a population of approximately 2,900 people, around 15% whom are Indigenous Australians (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017). The area surrounding the town is predominantly agricultural land. Agriculture provides the greatest source of employment for the community of Westhill and is vital to the infrastructure of the town. The SEIFA Index score for Warren in 2011 was 938 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011b), somewhat lower than the mean score of 1000.

6.2 Education services

Two schools service the town of Westhill and surrounding areas - a government school and a Catholic school, as well as a preschool and long day care centre.

Westhill Central School caters for students from the first year of school [Foundation] to Year 12 with approximately 195 students. Approximately 40% students identify as Indigenous Australian students (Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority (ACARA), 2017). According to the information provided by the school, it aims to provide students with a stimulating and caring learning environment, improve student outcomes and wellbeing and foster a sense of pride in the school and community.

St Martha’s Primary School is a Catholic school catering for students from Foundation to Grade 6. It has an enrolment of approximately 110 students. Nine percent of
students identify as being Indigenous Australians (ACARA, 2017). Promotional information lists the aims of the school as nurturing individual minds and spirits through the teachings of Christianity.

Westhill also hosts a not-for-profit preschool, providing education for 300 children aged three-to-five years old per week. Information provided by the preschool states the overall aim of the setting as providing a high quality early childhood program for children and families in Westhill. A long day care centre also operates in Westhill catering for 46 children per week aged from birth-to-five years old.

All of the educational services in Westhill draw children from the township and the surrounding rural areas, from up to 100km away.

6.3 Network context

Westhill has a small transition to school network involving one staff member from the central school and two staff from the preschool (see Table 8). St Martha’s Primary School was not part of the network. Staff at St Martha’s did not respond to invitations to participate in the research. Therefore any reference to ‘the school’ in this chapter refers to the central school.

The long day care centre did not respond to invitations to participate in the research. One possible explanation for this was that the relationship between the preschool and the long day care centre was not a positive one due to perceived competition of enrolments.

While the three members of the Westhill network meet regularly, these are most often informal meetings, taking advantage of spontaneous opportunities to ‘catch-up’ to discuss
issues or concerns. However, there are occasions when the network members meet more formally in pre-organised meetings such as staff meetings. This is possible in part, due to the locations of the school and preschool, which are across the road from one another. The network members described how easy it is for them to meet both formally and informally with one another, because the sites are so close. The school and preschool also participate regularly in conjoint activities, providing further opportunities for discussions between members.

At the time of the research, the network has been operating for a number of years. It was initiated by the school principal, who contacted the preschool director after the school was awarded some funding for collaborations. Both the principal and the preschool director agreed it would be worthwhile to form a relationship between the school and the preschool in order to support children and their families as they started school. While this principal was no longer at the school, he was responsible for initiating the release of the Foundation [first year of school] teacher for two days per week at that time. The preschool director remained the same. This provided the impetus for the building of relationships and communication between the school and the preschool, which has continued in this community.

Table 8: Westhill network members

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Connie</td>
<td>Preschool Director, Westhill preschool</td>
<td>Leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lena</td>
<td>Preschool educator, Westhill preschool</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jenny</td>
<td>Foundation educator, Westhill central school</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
6.4 Network visits and follow-up interviews

Due to the informal nature of this network, and some restrictions around the timing of research visits to the network, network meetings themselves were not recorded. This is due to the difficulties of attempting to align the spontaneous meetings of the network, with the availability of the researcher. Rather, interviews were conducted with the network members over two separate visits to Westhill.

The first visit and interview was in July, 2015 and involved Connie, Lena and Jenny. The interview went for approximately an hour. The second visit and interview was in February, 2016 with Connie and Lena, and went for approximately one and a half hours. Jenny was on long service leave at the time of the second visit, and was not available. During the first visit and interview, Jenny was noticeably shy and reserved and as a result did not contribute as much to the conversation as Connie and Lena. As a result, her voice is not as prominent in the following results.

6.5 Leadership

It was clear from the interviews that the preschool director, Connie, was the leader of the network. She was responsible for organising meetings – both formal and informal – between the network members, was the key contact person between the members and demonstrated a strong focus on goals for the network. She also exhibited enthusiasm, positivity and encouragement through her interactions with the other network members. Other network members were clear in their identification of Connie as the leader.

I call her ‘oh fearless leader’. (Lena)
Connie acknowledged that, while she held a leadership role currently, her plans were to support other network members to increase their responsibilities and ultimately take on the leadership role.

Lena is growing…she’s stepping up one day. And I put her up - she says ‘put me back down!’

It’s a growing thing. (Connie)

While Connie described the possibility of changed leadership for the network, and saw part of her role as supporting a new leader, it was also clear that she was well entrenched in that role.

Connie had been living and working in the community of Westhill for many years, making her a familiar face both personally and professionally in the community. In her role as director at the preschool, she was already positioned as a leader. During one of the network interviews, Lena reflected on Connie’s leadership towards her staff members at the preschool, and how this had fostered a culture of ‘give and take’ within their setting.

Lena: Connie is VERY understanding. If the kids are sick…Family comes first, and if you need to duck out for an assembly at school, not a worry. And in saying that, we go above and beyond for her as well. We stay back late, and we will come in through the holidays if she needs us.

Connie: It’s all give and take.

This, alongside her relations with the community may have some bearing on her nomination, formal or otherwise, as leader of the network.

As well as leadership within the network itself, the importance of leadership from others outside the network was noted in the data. Several years previous to this research project, Connie and the school principal at the time agreed to initiate a relationship between
the school and the preschool with goals of improving the transition experiences for children and their families, as well as improving the relationship between the two settings. Connie noted that while she had already been involved at the school in various ways, it was this coming together of the leaders of both the school and preschool that facilitated the development of the network.

We had a relationship and it was really good and I was in the school council and we used to go up there for Book Week and things like that, and that started that relationship going. And if I remember rightly, we’d been talking about transition to school, and some funding came out through National Partnerships, and he [the Principal] called me up one day and said ‘Connie can you come and have a yarn to me’…anyway we sat down and we talked about it. So it was actually him that instigated it to start with. (Connie)

It was as a result of this initial contact and communication that the leaders of the school and the preschool were able to identify some common goals and aspirations.

We talked about how we wanted to get more involved, and how we wanted to get these kids into school and my aim was to get every child in Westhill into preschool before they went to school. (Connie)

To assist in working towards these common goals, the principal elected to allocate some of the available funding to release a teacher over two days per week to focus specifically on working with the preschool on transition to school.

And so from the National Partnership money, and our conversations, he was the one that said ‘I will release Jenny’ and it was for two days a week then, when she first started. (Connie)

In this example it is clear that the decision-making power of leaders was instrumental in the beginnings of this network and for its success. In Westhill, leadership from both the
prior-to-school setting and school setting was required in order for the network to become operational and effective.

6.6 Reciprocal understandings

The network members described how the effectiveness of their network was, in part, due to the shared understandings that existed between them. In particular, having understandings about children were pertinent.

People with similar values, as far as the children go. (Jenny)

6.6.1 Building understanding

The network members described how, in some instances, reciprocal understandings did not exist between themselves and other professionals in the community. This was the source of some tension when different understandings and priorities clashed. One example involved working closely with an occupational therapist, who held different understandings about what skills were important for children in the preschool.

Connie: We’re very lucky to have one [an occupational therapist], she’s actually coming out in the next few weeks

Lena: Yes, but looking at the whole picture rather than…

Connie: We get a bit cross with that, she looks at how they hold their pencil.

[laughs]

Connie: Who cares that they can’t use scissors.

Lena: They can’t sit still and listen to a story!
Connie: Yes, let’s work out what they need to do before they can do that. She’s that sort of person.

Another example relating to the importance of building understandings was identified in a discussion from network members around *Best Start* (NSW Department of Education, 2018) assessment. In New South Wales, where this network is situated, the assessment is used to “identify each student’s literacy and numeracy skills at the beginning of Kindergarten” (NSW Department of Education, 2018). The network members from the preschool felt that if the school placed more importance on building understandings about children guided by what the preschool already knew about them, testing like Best Start would not be necessary. Some of the members reflected on past experiences where school educators blamed the preschool for not adequately preparing children for school. It is important to note that the following comments were made in the absence of the school educator.

Connie: He [the principal] more or less said it was our fault, and I was livid, because to me, that wasn’t what the important thing is for children.

Connie: It happens with…Best Start…little babies going in to school…And he [the principal] said to me ‘oh it’s just so we know where…[sic]’ it’s how they are going to base their programs. It took a couple of years before he realised I wasn’t very happy about what he’d said to me.

Lena: But if they had a fantastic transition to school program they wouldn’t need Best Start testing, because they would know their kids before they get there!

Connie: They know where they’re going with them, so they shouldn’t have to worry about Best Start.
In this instance, network members experienced some frustration towards lack of reciprocal understandings between the school and preschool in relation to the preparedness of children for school, and what is expected of them.

6.6.2 Communication

Network members described having opportunities to meet and discuss issues that were salient to the network and the importance of these for improving understandings between the members.

There is always a way to fix it, and sometimes you just have to sit back…we do a lot of talking in our staff meetings. We have staff meetings every week. There is always a way isn’t there? You can always do something. We’ve had some interesting challenges in the last few years and you never stop learning. (Connie)

The notion of reciprocal understandings was considered as fundamentally important to the network members. Both the importance of possessing reciprocal understandings, as well as the desire to build and strengthen those understandings was outlined by the network members. One way that this could be achieved was through effective communication among network members.

6.7 Relationships

Various relationships were described in interviews with network members. These included relationships: between different settings; with children and families; and with the community. Data suggested that not only did the network facilitate the strengthening of
relationships between a range of stakeholders, but that stronger relationships facilitated greater reciprocal understanding and respect between people, and therefore enabled more effective transition practices.

6.7.1 Between settings

Members described how the network offered many opportunities to strengthen relationships between the preschool and the school. One example referred to how it was now easier to visit the respective settings.

We just roll on in the building down the hallway and they don’t mind at all. They stop whatever they are doing, it’s a bit like here, you’re able to go and visit them anytime, so that’s nice. (Connie)

Another example reflected on how relationships between preschool and school educators have changed over time, and have become stronger as a result of the network.

I’d say our relationship has gotten stronger. When I first started, to now, the number of teachers and the relationships between the teachers I reckon has gotten broader and stronger. There were some teachers when I first started that I didn’t have a lot to do with, but I think they’ve come to respect what we do more. (Connie)

One network member commented on the potential difficulties of building relationships between settings, citing that both have different priorities and agendas which can hinder the process. She suggested that someone needs to be proactive and not assume that things will just happen without conscious effort. In addition, the members articulated a belief that preschools were in a position to stimulate this process.
Connie: I think it’s up to the preschool staff I suppose to make that initial advance towards the schools, because they are so set in their ways that they have orientation one day, or two days a year and that’s it. And that’s the way it’s always been. So I think personally, that preschool staff need to get on board and think that bit bigger picture, and do the approaching to the school, to talk about these programs and how it can work better.

Lena: Preschools are pretty good at being flexible so I think we are the ones that have to take the step.

Connie: I think we have to, be the ones to take that step, and we need to flexible with them if we want what is best for our kids.

Connie elaborated further that it was necessary to think beyond what is already happening, and for mindsets to be altered in order for positive changes to occur.

You can’t just expect…I can probably see how a lot of early childhood people would resent the fact that schools don’t…But they’ve got to. You’ve got to think outside the square.

(Connie)

Network members continued to explain that once initial contact had been made, relationships were able to develop from that point with greater ease.

Lena: We’ve already had teachers down…They’re coming from school to build those relationships.

Connie: It’s so nice to see that. And that’s probably it, it’s about relationships, and it’s about building those positive, secure relationships, and I think other places could do it if they talked to their schools, and talked openly.

Members articulated the evolutionary nature by which relationships were developed, and how this was enhanced by time and commitment by those involved.
If you build those relationships with the schools, then you get invited to their assemblies and award ceremonies…Friday is the swimming carnival so off we’ll go up to the swimming carnival. You just need to be a little bit more flexible and open it up, for it to work. You can’t just rock on in there and have this program because it won’t work, unless you’ve got those relationships first. (Connie)

Despite staffing changes in the two settings over time, in the view of the preschool educators, open communication had continued and contributed to ongoing relationships. The incorporation of social media meant that communication was not limited to usual working hours.

It’s gone like a generational thing…From ours, now to you and the [Foundation] teacher but we’re getting the same effects. And it’s still the same open communication. (Connie)

We’ve chatted over Messenger about what’s going on, and who is turning up (Lena).

Effective communication between educators can facilitate the sharing of information about children and their families across settings. The preschool educators saw the sharing of information as particularly advantageous for school educators.

I suppose she sees us as an information source for her children. We’ve had them for the last two years and know the families really well. I think that is something we do really well is knowing our families, and she gains information that way, it makes her job easier. (Lena)

6.7.2 With children and families

Members argued that educator relationships with children and families could also be established and enhanced through the network. This was particularly the case when parents
had not had positive experiences of school or were hesitant to approach the school. Connie saw it as part of her role to act as a mediator in such situations.

Once they hit that school situation, the parents become a bit more hesitant because of the experiences they’ve had at school before. I’ve found because of the bad experiences they’ve had, they won’t go into the school. As much as it’s taken us a lot of years to get them to come here, and come in, or for me to go out, or to just say ‘how are we going?’, they get to the school and ‘bang’, up goes that wall. So now we’re trying to break down that wall, with Lena’s help. If the [Foundation] teacher can get that information from us, that will help her then. So it doesn’t sort of stop when they go to school. (Connie)

The positive relationships that had been established between the preschool educators and children and families were often long-lasting. Sometimes, families in Westhill relied on the trustful relationships they had built with educators to help manage later educational situations.

Lena: Quite often Connie will have parents whose kids have gone on to [Foundation] and further, ring up if they’ve got an issue.

Connie: Yeah, I had a session with a parent during the holidays about their children, and so they still do [come to her] and we still have input into, even high school kids sometimes, and when they’ve left school we have their babies.

This suggests that relationships with children and families extend beyond time spent in a particular setting, and that family members still consider relationships with educators an important support system.

Educators in the network have found innovative ways of connecting with families to strengthen the relationships with them. One example involves the use of social media such as Facebook. The preschool educators favoured this as a means of connecting with families
outside of preschool hours, and as an opportunity to glean how they were perceived by families.

Connie: And social media, I know it’s not a real good thing, but we use it to our advantage. Just saying how proud I was of them, and how wonderful the parents were and how grown up the children are, that helps those parents.

Lena: I think it makes us more approachable too. I’m not very good with face to face conversations, so being able to speak to somebody on social media, it’s maybe not as intimidating.

Connie: It works, and we get little inbox messages.

Lena: And you’ll get a ‘like’.

Connie: And they know that you care. I thought, how many more of these pictures are going to go up with these kids going to school!

Lena: You’re interested in, invested in…I mean they know we’re here for their kids, but if you show that you’re interested not only within nine to three, if you’re still thinking about them outside of hours.

Connie: They might have gone to school, but they haven’t really left us.

The preschool educators reported that building relationships and communicating with some Aboriginal families had taken time and required the educators to take the initiative and use some innovative approaches.

So we try our very best to go out, and we’ll talk to them on the bus. When we first started we couldn’t get the Aboriginal parents in, and now they’ll come in and they’ll talk to you down the street. They’re a lot better…Building up that trust I think. (Connie)
Rather than expecting families to come to them, the preschool educators take turns riding on the bus with the children. This gives educators opportunities to go and visit families who would not ordinarily visit the preschool, and talk with them in an environment that is more comfortable and familiar.

Lena: We’ve got a preschool bus.

Connie: And Lydia our Aboriginal educator goes on it, and we swap around, so all the staff get to go on it, and that shows them where we come from too.

Lena: And the parents get to see us too.

Connie: We go out and talk to them. One little girl here has autism and wears a headband because she’s a head-banger and breaks windows and doors, so [one of our aides] goes out and talks with her, because she won’t come in, so she’ll go and sit on the verandah and just have a yarn. We all park ourselves on the verandah. So we adapt quite well.

The willingness of educators to go out and meet parents has had a positive impact on the relationship between families and educators, with the consequence that families are coming visit the preschool more often.

As soon as the parents realise that we’re not here to judge, we’re here to support, then they feel much more confident in coming in. (Lena)

In considering their relationships with children and families, network members reflected that strong relationships came down to respect, and the respect given to families regardless of their circumstances.

It is respect. We might not be the same, but we respect everybody, we respect and value their opinions and their lifestyles. Doesn’t matter who they are…We might not agree with some of the things that happen, but that’s not our decision, so we respect what they do. (Connie)
The importance of relationships with the community was discussed by network members. For Connie in particular, an ongoing presence allowed her to develop relationships with many members of the community, both within and beyond the preschool. Being a familiar and approachable member of the community, she considered herself well-placed to assist children living in her community.

I said to someone last night…We had a little episode of domestic violence…it takes a community to build a child, and look after children, and we’ve proven that here tonight. We take these kids from when they’re little, and then they’re still ours even when they’re in high school, and we watch out for them. We have our child and family support meetings, where someone comes from both schools and all the other agencies around and we all come together and we talk about any problems that we’ve got with the kids. (Connie)

In summary, data relating to relationships revealed that the network has contributed to the enhanced relationships between the preschool and school. An important part of these relationships was the ability of network members to communicate effectively with one another. Also noteworthy were the relationships with children and their families that have been strengthened through the network. Educators can serve as a link for families and their children as they make their transition to school, and remain an important source of support into the future. Building positive relationships with all families, including those who may be disinclined to approach educators, requires a range of strategies. Working collaboratively can help not only to identify, but also to implement these. Relationships with communities are also important for fostering an environment of support for children and families across sectors and agencies.
6.8 Professionalism

The theme of professionalism encompasses issues related to professional regard and professional support for one another, as well as professional beliefs about pedagogy and continuity of learning.

6.8.1 Regard

Jenny articulated that one of the reasons they believed the network was successful was due to the professional regard in which they held one another.

If you respect where they’re coming from, and their treatment of the children, we all want to give them their best life. (Jenny)

These comments suggest that professional regard is not something that is actively or deliberately spoken about in the network. However, it is a vital component for the members working together effectively.

It was noted that professional regard was not always present between educators in Westhill. Rather, it had evolved over time as a result of working closely with one another. It was noted that previously there had been a lack of regard for the educators working in the preschool from the school educators. This seemed to have been based on a perception that the work of the preschool educators held less educational value than that of educators working in a school.

Lena: There were teachers when I first started that have come to respect what we do more…they value what we do more, and see us as education providers rather than just…

Connie: Babysitters.
Lena: Looking after the kids until they get to the ‘real’ [uses hands to indicate inverted commas] job of learning.

Connie: And it’s interesting because one of them is now the AP [assistant principal] and she was the [Foundation] teacher when I first came here and she was very rigid…and I never thought we’d crack that egg!

Lena: But we did!

An example of the professional regard that had developed as a result of the network and collaborative work between the preschool and school related to the professional advice given by the preschool educators about whether some children should commence school, or remain in the preschool for another year. It was evident in the re-telling of this incident, that the preschool director was physically moved by the memory, and the significance it held for her as a professional.

God I’ve got goosebumps. We had a couple of children that we really strongly felt that they shouldn’t go [to school] because we didn’t want them to fail. I never thought I would see this lady say to them [the parents] ‘oh no, no, no you need to listen to what the preschool teachers are telling you, they know what’s going on, they know what they’re talking about’. It’s amazing, she’s an old school type teacher, who is actually really valuing…and she proved it in backing it up with these children. And it was more than one so I was amazed. So it must be working, it must be working from their end. (Connie)

These comments from Connie suggest that from her perspective, professional regard has been achieved, at least in part by the ability of the other educators to witness the successfulness of her professional judgement.
6.8.2 Support

The importance of professional support for network members emerged from the data. Members of the network reflected on how it provided a platform to attend professional development together and to expand on their professional. In one example, the preschool staff invited the school Foundation teacher to accompany them to a professional development session designed for early years educators.

We went to, a couple of years ago now, an early years thing that you took me along to.

(Jenny)

The strategy of joint professional development contributes to the building of professional respect through accessing different professional worlds, enhancing understandings across different settings.

Within the network there were efforts to provide professional support by providing feedback and encouragement for other network members. During one of the interviews, the preschool educators complimented the school educator on her high standard of professional work, and the value they attributed to this.

Connie: She’s a good teacher. I think sometimes they get too wound up in you know, turn to page 24 and do exercise B or whatever…Jenny isn’t like that. There is always time for music and there is always time for other things besides sitting down and forming letters and numbers.

Lena: The children come first with Jenny, you go above and beyond for those kids.

Connie: I would like to see more teachers like you!
The often informal nature of the network, where educators were getting together regularly, provided many opportunities for this type of feedback.

The forum created by the network facilitated reflection upon and discussion of the professional practices and beliefs held by the network members. Members described the stimulation that occurred when working collaboratively, and as part of a team, to tackle some of the issues they faced as educators. A phrase used consistently by the network to describe their approach was to ‘think outside the box’ or ‘outside the square’. In one discussion, educators reflected on the changing nature of children’s needs.

Connie: I think it’s happening, but not as much as it could, with these kids, getting them outside that box.

Lena: I think we’ve got more and more kids coming through with higher needs, additional needs that would benefit from a more relaxed approach.

Connie: A more relaxed atmosphere and more about looking at why, why this is happening, not just because they can’t hold their pencil or cut with scissors.

Jenny: Or why they find it hard to sit.

Connie: To look a little bit deeper than what people are doing now. We can’t help it, we look outside the square.

Strategies to support children’s continuity of learning could be supported as they transition to school featured as a topic of discussion within the network. Connie described her image of continuity as promoting ‘flow’ from one setting to another. She regarded the same concept as relevant for all educational transitions, not just the transition to school.
We were talking earlier about the transition to school times from preschool to school, but also 2-3, 6-7, 11-12 they are huge things, so there needs to be that continuity between those years, so that children can just flow I think, flow through to that next stage. (Connie)

This perspective was consistent with a focus on learning as a continuous process, sometimes impacted by barriers that were potentially disruptive for children.

Connie: I think it has to be continuous, so that there’s no walls or barriers, or sudden stops that makes them take off. I wonder sometimes with the problems they have gone through, if something has happened, that’s stopped them, and they’ve thought well ‘F this’ and they’ve taken off on that other path which has got them into all sorts of trouble. Whereas if the schools look at the curriculum…

Lena: Yep, and take into consideration outside factors like family.

Connie: Yeah, look at the outside environments, see what’s going on, ok what can we do about that, to help that child continue learning?

These data indicated that these network members held strong pedagogical beliefs about children and continuity of learning. One educator argued further that children must be considered on an individual basis in order to meet their educational needs.

Every child and every family and every child within that family is different and an individual, and they all need different things, they all have different values. Don’t put them all in the one box, you can look at that in your own family…(Connie)

Elements of professionalism were referred to in the data. These included professional respect for one another – in particular how this had been enhanced across the prior-to-school and school settings through participation in the network. Members also described how the network provided opportunities for professionals to support one another. In addition,
professionalism was also referred to from a pedagogical perspective as network members reflected on their professional pedagogical beliefs around continuity of learning in particular.

6.9 Sustainability of the network

Despite opportunities to comment on the future of the network, very little discussion occurred around this issue. One example that did acknowledge some forward planning for the network was referred to under the category of leadership, where the current leader of the network was purposefully tasking one of the younger members with greater responsibilities. This could be interpreted as a deliberate action by the leader to ensure that the network had another person capable of assuming a leadership role in the future, suggesting that the leader of the group was thinking about the longevity of the network and how it would be sustained.

The lack of data around sustainability could be a reflection of the nature of the network. Considering its informality and the flexibility and convenience with which it operated, it may be that, after the establishment phase, the effort required to participate in the network was minimal, therefore reducing the likelihood of members withdrawing from it due to commitment and time constraints. Connie’s long tenure in the role of preschool director and her continued presence in the community may also have contributed to the sense that the network would continue.

6.10 Goals for transition

Goals for transition emerged as a key theme from the data, particularly pertaining to transition goals for children, families and educators. In addition, network members discussed
the different activities and strategies implemented during transition, some of the issues faced around transition, catering for children with diverse needs, and working with the curriculum documents.

6.10.1 For children

The Westhill community had a high proportion of Indigenous Australian families, many of whom were identified as living in low socio-economic circumstances. In some instances, this contributed to the labelling of these families as ‘at risk’. Network members indicated that the number of enrolments of Indigenous Australian children was growing both in the preschool and the school, in part because of concerted efforts by educators to engage with families. Educators explained that by actively campaigning for Indigenous Australian children to attend preschool, they hoped for better outcomes for these children.

Connie: When I came there wasn’t a lot of Aboriginal children, and we thought we needed to do something about this because a lot of the kids our here are low socio-economic, you have a lot of diverse cultures and very diverse backgrounds. And now, our numbers are climbing and climbing to well over a third of our enrolment.

Jenny: My class is 50/50.

Connie: We wanted to allow these children to come more than one or two days a week. So many of our children that we feel are at risk, or we feel that they need more experiences; we try and get them here five days a week.

Efforts to increase the preschool enrolment of Indigenous Australian children were seen as important, despite the additional pressure placed upon the preschool.
It’s funded by us, we are funded for 15 hours a week, so the rest is…I had to write a budget out, and a lot of the time fees don’t get paid, but you know that’s beside the point, as long as they’re paying some. (Connie)

Educators believed that the benefits to the children by offering increased days at preschool were significant and greatly improved the children’s ability to make a positive start to school.

Because we feel that it’s more important that they’re here, having lots of experiences and lots of hands-on experiences so that when they go to Jenny they’re a lot more prepared than what they were. And I think looking at it, since we’ve started working with Jenny and had our program going and we look at the children that have gone through school, there doesn’t seem to be as much trouble in that primary area. (Connie)

Both Jenny and Connie emphasised the link between attendance at preschool and the transition to school.

Connie: When we look at them, especially the guys you [Jenny] had this year that are giving…You know still getting in trouble, they would be REALLY badly off if they didn’t go…If we didn’t have that [transition program] wouldn’t they?

Jenny: I see one particular little one I’ve been having a lot of trouble with, I think he only had about two or three visits down there…I don’t know whether it was because it wasn’t his normal day [at preschool] or…

Lena: Yep, and didn’t want to go…We did try to speak to them [the parents].

Connie: So you notice that difference.

As noted previously, one of the main issues of contention around the transition to school for the preschool educators in the network was the benchmark assessment of children.
Connie and Lena expressed great resentment over the *Best Start* assessment. They remarked on the pressure and expectations placed on preschool educators by school educators to prepare children for meeting the demands of the test and noted that, in the past, the school principal had blamed the preschool for the poor performance of children on the test. Again, it is important to note that the school educator was not present when these comments were voiced.

Connie: He [the Principal] was most upset, because he reckoned that a lot of our kids were on nought and evidently that’s not good.

Lena: He blamed you.

Connie: These kids, when they were here, they were grabbing the alphabet out and of course we’d just put it there, if you want it, there’s your words, there is your letters, do whatever you want…Here’s some numbers, if you want to make it up…And they were doing simple maths and they were doing pre-reading and on their own bat, we didn’t even teach them. And then they go up there into this school situation and…they’ve got a test.

Lena: Yeah, and that’s their first experience.

Connie: First day, they’ve got a test.

Lena: It’s pressure to perform isn’t it? Because there’s no pressure here, there is no pressure to perform at preschool.

Connie: They perform really well. He only did it to me once, because then things started to lift up, but he tried to take the credit and I wouldn’t let him [laughs] but he more or less said that it was our fault…and I was livid because to me, that isn’t what is important for children. …And then he said to me ‘oh well it’s just so we know where they are’. It’s how they’re going to base their program, and it took a couple of years before he realised I wasn’t very happy about what he’d said to me, and things changed.
These preschool educators clearly felt that the school’s focus on benchmark testing was in complete contrast to their focus, and felt significant professional angst as a result.

The three network members identified some general aspirations for children as they engaged in transition experiences. They noted the importance of children participating in the transition program that connected the preschool and the school, regardless of which school they were likely to attend, and the opportunities this provided to build familiarity with a school setting and the expectations of teachers.

…but just the familiarity with me, but with the school. Knowing where the toilets are, knowing where they sit for lunch, where everything is, all of that. (Jenny)

And they’ve got an idea of the expectations that the teachers will have behaviour wise and that sort of thing as well. (Lena)

The educators in this network held a variety of aspirations for children. These centred on meeting the individual needs of children, especially those from Indigenous Australian backgrounds, who educators believed often faced more complex challenges than other children when making the transition to school.

6.10.2 For families

While not as prevalent as the data around children, network members acknowledged parents and families in their comments about transition. One of the points highlighted the impact that parents’ own experiences at school can have on their ability to interact with educators and educational settings.

Once they hit the school situation, the parents become a little more hesitant because of the experiences they’ve had, at school before. That’s what I’ve found because of the bad experiences the parents had, they won’t go into the school. (Connie)
In expanding on this, Connie noted the importance of being familiar with the families, understanding the needs of each family, and the different perspectives they may bring.

It’s about knowing your children and knowing your families. And I don’t care how many you’ve got, you can know your children and know your families. I had 300 and something, and I knew my children and knew my families. You have to, otherwise you can’t help them. They can’t grow and they can’t learn effectively. That’s how we are. (Connie)

6.10.3 For educators

The majority of data relating to goals for educators during transition to school has been outlined in the preceding sections around reciprocal understandings, relationships and professional support and respect. There were some additional comments made by network members regarding the benefits of effective transition practices for educators, as well as some of the challenges faced by educators during transition.

One comment related to an educator’s emotions associated with being recognised and appreciated by children.

And it was good my end too, because you’d walk in and they’d be like ‘Mrs…!!!’ (Jenny)

This suggests that it is not only children who appreciate praise and positive reinforcement from others, but that educators too enjoy receiving positivity from children about the work they are doing. Another comment referred to educators’ preference to feel prepared, and to understand what is required of them.

And it’s good, you get a feel for the kids that are coming in…by closely talking to staff, knowing what to have ready. (Jenny)
Educators identified that one of the persistent challenges for them during transition to school was to reach agreement with the school educators and parents concerning decisions on whether a child should start school or not. It was noted that consensus among educators had improved over time, alongside better relationships and understandings between them.

Connie: That’s another thing that works with the school too, I had a meeting with the AP [Assistant Principal] up there and Elise [new Foundation teacher] and they were talking about the children and they were really happy. They value our opinion. If we don’t think they’re ready, and they’re young, they said keep them back. So that’s good.

Jenny: We tried hard on that one!

Connie: So we’re really aware of the need for them to be ‘ready’ to go, to be able to fit in with the rest of those children.

The data indicated that while it was predominantly goals for children that dominated the thoughts of network members when considering transition, goals for families and educators were also evident. Most notable across the aspirations for these groups was the idea of acknowledging and understanding the needs of individuals, and how that information can be used to promote positive transitions.

6.10.4 Activities and strategies

Some strategies utilised by the network to enhance transition to school experiences have been described earlier. The network meetings themselves, both formal and informal, and the practice of educators communicating with one another on a regular and ongoing basis are all examples of strategies for enhancing transition.
Reciprocal visits between the preschool and school are one such strategy. Visits between the preschool and school are not exclusively conducted for ‘transition’ purposes, although they are credited by the network members as being beneficial for transition, further enhancing the familiarisation and relationships between the preschool and the school. During the entire year, the preschool is invited by the school to participate in events that are happening at the School. These include events such as Book Week, NAIDOC Week, as well as visits from special guests or performers. The physical proximity between the settings is clearly advantageous.

We can just walk down there whenever we need. The school has a special presentation on this year for ANZAC Day and we do get invited to any special thing that’s on up at the school.

(Lena)

These visits occur on a regular basis, therefore preschool children and their families become used to visiting the school as part of their normal experiences. School-aged children also visit the preschool for a range of purposes including literacy (reading to young children), role modelling, assisting with works around the preschool, and work experience. In addition to these visits, the network also initiates visits by the Foundation educator (Jenny) to the preschool for the first two terms of the year. During this time, she spends time engaging with the children, getting to know them and reading to them. During the latter half of the year, the preschool conducts weekly visits to the school, where they spend time in the Foundation classroom and have their lunch with the school children. Therefore, reciprocal visits are not confined to the end of the year, but rather are conducted throughout the year.

Another strategy utilised by the preschool to help prepare children for school involves adoption of some of the day-to-day practices that are used in the school classroom.
We do group time, like we’ll often do an activity and come back down to the floor sort of mimicking what will happen at school so they get used to transition from sitting and listening to going off and doing an activity. I think that helps a lot. (Lena)

Another school practice adopted in the preschool was a behaviour management strategy.

You do it at preschool, the five ‘L’s’. And they have it, that’s how they sit you know…’legs, lips, listen…’ and they know. You say 5 L’s and they know straight away. (Jenny)

One of the issues that the network had identified was around children not being present at preschool on the days children visited the school. The preschool coordinated measures to alleviate this issue.

It’s happened before, there are children who don’t come to preschool on that particular day that we’re going up, 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 to go around and pick them up and take them up, and take them home. We feel it’s really important that they don’t miss out. Some parents will take them, some won’t. (Connie)

This is one example of a strategy that had developed out of an issue faced by the network. It has now become part of their transition program.

Various strategies are implemented by the network with the aim of improving the transition to school experiences for children and their families. These strategies appear to centre on close relationships and flexibility between the preschool and the school, allowing activities to occur throughout the year, and are designed to meet the needs of children, their families, and the educators themselves.
6.10.5 Curricula

In general the network members (both preschool and school) responded positively to the recent introduction of the new Australian Curriculum. The Foundation teacher noted that in practice, she did not feel there was a significant difference between the new curriculum and the previous one.

We’re following the new curriculum this year, in English and Maths…I probably haven’t…I probably stick to old ways a little bit. There’s not a great deal of difference, with the reading and the writing and that sort of thing. (Jenny)

Jenny explained that for her it was more meaningful to focus on her teaching practice, rather than the documents themselves.

My teaching methods for reading and writing are based on the L3 course…and it’s so fantastic, it’s what is pushing these kids’ reading and writing levels up. But it fits in nicely with the new curriculum, you know it cross-matches, this fits in and that fits in. (Jenny)

Some of the educators commented that they had hoped with the introduction of the new Australian Curriculum more traditional teaching practices used in schools would be challenged.

Connie: I had hoped that the Australian Curriculum would change a lot of them, and their way of thinking, but I don’t think it has.

Lena: We were hoping they would go back to more play-based in [Foundation], instead of sitting at the desks.

Connie: More family-oriented.
Lena: That they’re allowed to learn through play, more hands-on…Maybe to cater for a wider variety of learning needs, rather than trying to fit them all into the one box.

Connie: And a bit more parent input.

Network members reported that they thought that the Early Years Learning Framework and the Australian Curriculum fitted well together. However, they concluded that it was the educator’s responsibility to interpret and understand the curriculum, and implement it in a meaningful way.

I think it’s about how you interpret it, the Early Years Learning Framework and the Australian Curriculum, if you interpret it the way I would, then it is like a continuous line, and the children need to keep going don’t they? If you look at children they never stop learning, so it’s a lifelong process, and if it’s not done in the correct way, if people don’t understand the curriculum or they don’t interpret it the right way, then that sets the kids off on this other path. (Connie)

Network members highlighted that the links between the Early Years Learning Framework and the Australian Curriculum were enhanced by the complementary teaching practices enacted across the settings.

Lena: Jenny’s room is set up like two rooms. One is with the tables and the blackboard and the smartboard, and the back room is similar to a preschool room, she’s got blocks and the children are able to go…I think it’s so fantastic that she gives those children the opportunity to still be children and play.

Connie: And explore maths and everything else through play.

Lena: The same as we do here.
Jenny: They love play, and with the L3 you actually have learning centres and there is a lot of play involved in that.

Connie: And Jenny is very open to that, and that’s one of the things that we’ve always noticed, that she’s very open to the way we do things, and she does things very similar in her situation.

Jenny: Because you see what works.

Lena: And values play as part of children’s learning which I think can be lost a little bit in primary school maybe…

Educators did not mention the Early Years Learning Framework in the context of it being new, suggesting that it may be a mainstay of their practice. Data suggested that the network members had responded positively to the introduction of the Australian Curriculum. Educators noted the compatibility of the curricula, explaining that continuity of practice across settings provided a scaffold for interpretation of the documents. It was also noted that the introduction of the new curricula had not necessarily changed the practice of school educators, and this could be perceived as both an advantage and disadvantage.

6.11 Rural contexts

Data generated from the interviews revealed a number of key points in relation to rural contexts. Some of the challenges associated with living and working in a rural community were around professional boundaries, and the issues faced by education services such as changes in population, staffing and isolation.
6.11.1 Characteristics of rural contexts

Key characteristics of rural communities, as highlighted in the data, were community strength and inventiveness. One example of this can be observed in the tendency of the Westhill community to work cooperatively to achieve a task, or to tackle an issue. Gaining access to essential services, such as travelling health professionals occurred as a result of combined community focus and resourcefulness.

We’ve got a Childhood Family Support Group which is the schools, myself and the health nurse, [non-government organisations]…So we work together, and really push. That’s how we got both the dentist and the paed, and actually the bus [for the preschool], we worked on that. It took ages and then of a sudden it was here…Yes! (Connie)

Educators also acknowledged the unique skills and abilities that people were able to contribute to a small community, and how valuable these were to the overall strength of the community.

Lena: I think we pick up on each other’s strengths as well. We’ve all got something to bring to the party.

6.11.2 Familiarity with people

Educators described the challenge of being new to a rural community, particularly as familiarity was something that people in rural areas considered important.

You don’t fit in because you weren’t born here. (Connie)
As a new person it can be difficult to establish your role within a small community. Connie explained that making a positive impact in the community contributed to the perceptions of the professional.

I think in our position here, at the preschool, probably because of what we’ve done, and how we’ve done it, we’re really well respected now. (Connie)

In some cases, familiarity with people was a disadvantage.

Lena: Yeah it can be a positive and a negative thing, it can be hard to be seen as anything other than the preschool teacher.

Connie: I found it very hard at first, because I didn’t want to be the principal, I wanted to be the same as everyone else, and I still want to be the same as everyone else.

Connie recited an incident that had occurred just the evening before the research conversation where she became involved in a domestic violence episode involving children from her preschool. After learning of the situation, and before police had arrived, she visited the address and attempted to remove the children from a violent and volatile environment by negotiating with the parents of the children. She described being able to do this only because of her standing in the community, and the relationships she had created with that family as part of her role as director of the preschool.

I felt like I’d done something for these children, and I said to the neighbours, you know it takes a community to build a child and to protect a child, and we’ve done that here tonight.

(Connie)

The complexity of the professional identity of educators can be seen in this example. While educators have personal lives outside of their professional roles, they remain perceived
as members of the community who are trusted and respected, with the best interests of children at the fore.

6.11.3 Issues in rural education

During the interviews several issues were identified that related to providing education in rural area. Among these were changes to population, access to staff and other professionals, professional development, poverty and the challenges of geographical isolation.

Educators described Westhill’s population as being highly transient, making it difficult for education services to make firm decisions around staffing. Some sudden increases in population were attributed to the provision of Aboriginal housing in the town.

Connie: Westhill is an up and down town as far as population goes.

Connie: I keep saying ‘where are all these children coming from?’ You know we’ve got 109 enrolments at the moment, that’s a lot of children for a little town!

Lena: The cost of housing is quite low. There was housing getting sold off for under $30,000 and I think they were taking the opportunity to take advantage of that.

Connie: At the beginning of the year we were thinking ‘oh dear, we might have to cut back staff’, but we will work at this, we will be alright and now we’re going ‘oh dear, where are we going to put these children?’

Accessing and retaining qualified staff is also an issue for education in rural settings.

That can be a real challenge. We are fortunate here because we do have three Uni trained teachers here. All of our others [staff] are Diploma trained. But then if you look at the long
day care centre across the road, they haven’t got a leading teacher, which is really sad. I was fortunate because I head-hunted these girls. (Connie)

After significant campaigning in the community, the town had secured regular visits by a paediatrician, however her visits were now becoming less frequent, despite increasing demand.

We finally got a paediatrician coming, it took us a long time and we did it as a group. Of all the services she was coming once a fortnight, then she was coming once a month, and then she was coming every second month and now I don’t know how often she comes, but she does come, she’s very hard to get into. (Connie)

Professional development was mentioned by network members as being a challenge in rural communities. Often, the nearest provider of professional development is some distance away, and it requires significant planning by educators to organise attendance.

That can be a detriment in a rural setting like this…is keeping motivated through professional development and that sort of thing, because it’s all offered east of the mountains. (Lena)

Preschool staff referred to some upcoming professional development that they would be attending together.

We are going to Sydney, the whole lot. If we want to do a big conference like that, then we all go, so no one misses out, it’s quite difficult to get professional development here. I’m closing the preschool down on a Friday and a Monday. (Connie)

Despite the inconvenience posed to the community by closing down the preschool for two days, educators felt resolute about their commitment to attend professional development for the benefit of their growth as professionals, and for the community.
Connie: It’s hard to keep us motivated, but the community keeps us going, because we do those little things, you think ‘oh yeah, that’s what we’re here for’. Otherwise I think you get isolated and bogged down.

Lena: And burnt out.

Connie: And I think some people can do that on their own, if they’re too rigid in their beliefs and teaching.

Another challenge identified by the educators was around working with children and their families who are coming from backgrounds of poverty and socio-economic disadvantage, often coupled with additional learning or behavioural difficulties. Educators noted that this type of challenge was particularly difficult to deal with due to the complexity and the severity of the issues.

Connie: Sometimes the children can get you really frustrated and down, and it’s their life experiences and it’s a generational thing that’s going on in families, and it gets quite challenging. So we really have to think, and work together. Whether it be from drugs or alcohol or domestic violence or lack of life experiences of whatever it is.

Lena: Undiagnosed.

Connie: Undiagnosed and there seems to a lot more diagnosis coming in with autism, and lots and lots of behaviour problems. And the parents don’t want to hear it, and we work really hard, especially with the Aboriginal community because they’ve had such a hard life themselves, that we have to convince them that the life that their children have got in the education system is a good one. Some little guys are really struggling at home…we’ll be doing the nit challenge or giving them vitamin tablets because they’re underweight.

Lena: Not enough food in their lunchboxes, some of them don’t come with any food so…
Connie: Giving them breakfast in the mornings.

Remoteness is an influential factor in the Westhill community. As mentioned previously, some children travel distances of up to 100km to attend preschool and school. This distance places pressure on families and children to find modes of transport to travel and reach services, including education services. Westhill has a school bus that runs to collect these children, although school aged children are given priority, preschool aged children can also travel on the bus, which they do regularly.

They drop them here [at the preschool]. In the afternoon they’ve got two or three buses where we actually walk them up to the school, they get on the bus with the big kids. (Connie)

Isolation from large regional centres can create complex circumstances. For example, the network members identified that there were significant issues in the town related to drug and alcohol abuse. One explanation for this was the isolation:

Connie: As with everywhere we have a lot of drug and alcohol problems here, and I asked ‘why’ and it’s because we are off the main road, we are off the beaten track and so they tend to come here, it’s easy…

Lena: It’s a hideout.

Connie: It’s easier to hide in places like this.

Lena: And they tend to draw each other in…If you get one family moving in and then…

A number of significant challenges were identified within the data around living and working in a rural community. These challenges impacted directly on community members, educators, children and their families. Despite these challenges, rural communities were characterised in terms of their resilience and strength, and were seen to draw people together to find resourceful ways of addressing issues and problems.
6.12 Chapter summary

This chapter presented the results from the Westhill site. Information around the context of the community and network, as well as network visits and follow-up interview was included. The chapter then presented the data under each of the main categories and sub-categories developed from the data analysis. The main categories were: Leadership, reciprocal understandings, relationships, professionalism, sustainability of the network, goals for transition and rural contexts.
7 Chapter Seven – Results – Blacksmith

7.1 Context of community

Blacksmith is a rural Victorian town with a population of approximately 10,500 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017). It is surrounded by extensive farmland and many smaller townships for which it is a vital service centre. In 2011, Blacksmith rated 941 on the SEIFA Index of Disadvantage (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011b), somewhat lower than the mean score of 1000.

7.2 Education services

In Blacksmith, there is one government Foundation [first year of school] - Year 12 college comprising two junior schools, a middle school and a senior school. There are two junior schools catering for children from Foundation – Year 4 – Avon Street, (approximately 125 students) and Waller Street (approximately 250 students) – located on opposite sides of Blacksmith, providing access to families across the township. According to promotional material, Blacksmith F-12 College believes that personal growth is defined in specific stages and that the school structures provide for students across these stages.

Blacksmith also has two non-government primary schools: Australian Christian College (Foundation – Year 6) and St James’ Catholic school (Foundation – Year 6). The Australian Christian College is promoted as a small school that aims to support children to thrive across all aspects of their development. It also hosts a co-located preschool, which provides preschool program for children in the year before school (four-year-olds). The preschool program is specifically designed to facilitate a positive transition to school. St
Joseph’s school offers a Catholic education to the families of Blacksmith. It currently has an enrolment of approximately 335 students. St. James’ has similar aims to the Australian Christian College, although these are expressed in terms of the underlying Catholic beliefs imbued by the school.

The educational context of Blacksmith also includes a Catholic secondary school and an independent specialist (catering for students with intellectual disabilities) school. Blacksmith also has several early childhood services. Bright Eyes Preschool, Rose Gardens Preschool and Moon Avenue Preschool are all preschools with the stated aims of providing quality preschool education for three-to-four-year old children. In addition to these, Great Minds Childcare Centre is a long day care centre which includes preschool provision.

7.3 Network context

Blacksmith has a substantial early childhood education and care network, involving members from all three schools that cater for primary school aged children, three of the early childhood services, and a community organisation (see Table 9).

The organisation of the Blacksmith network is quite formal. Scheduled meetings are held throughout the year, usually once every school term. The meetings take place most often at a neutral location (not on the site of any of the members). The network meeting that was attended during the research was held in the city library. The last meeting of the year, held in Term Four, is usually held at one of the educational settings, because this is when network members exchange and discuss transition statements.

The network has been in operation for approximately eight years. However until the last couple of years, it has operated on a mostly administrative level, serving mainly for
educators during the latter half of the year to agree on dates and times for orientation visits. More recently, the network has shifted its focus to extend beyond administrative tasks to thinking about how to build stronger relationships between prior-to-school and school settings, and how better to cater for children and their families starting school. Members described that the impetus for this came primarily from the results of a report entitled *Dropping off the edge: The distribution of disadvantage in Australia*, originally released in 2007 (Vinson, Rawsthorne, & Cooper, 2007), and again in 2015 (Vinson & Rawsthorne, 2015), that identified the community of Blacksmith as one of the most disadvantaged communities in Victoria.

Action was taken by a community organisation (referred to here as the Clear Horizons Foundation), supported by philanthropic funding, who conducted their own research on how to improve outcomes for communities, and through this, identified education as one of the key areas to target for effective change. A number of programs and initiatives were implemented, including a community education program for parents of children starting school. In developing this program, Clear Horizons built relationships with the early childhood services and the schools in the community.

The principals of the two junior schools also identified the results of the recent reports as the impetus for them to consider what more could be done to improve outcomes for the children in their community. Their response was to allocate funding each year to release their early years unit leader, Kim, to spend dedicated time planning and developing strategies to enhance the transition to school experience for children and families. It was this funded time release that allowed Kim to implement a number of strategies, one of which has been to reinvigorate the network by offering some leadership and focus.
Despite its existence for several years previously, it has been within the last two years that the network has changed direction and focus, and this has been a result of commitment and drive from key organisations, both community and educational.

**Table 9: Blacksmith network members**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Notes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kim</td>
<td>Foundation teacher, Unit leader at one junior campus, Blacksmith F-12 College</td>
<td>Leader/organiser</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jemma</td>
<td>Principal, Blacksmith F-12 College, Junior school</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen</td>
<td>Principal, Blacksmith F-12 College, Junior school</td>
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<tr>
<td>Charlotte</td>
<td>Foundation teacher, Blacksmith F-12 College</td>
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<td>Melanie</td>
<td>Foundation teacher, Blacksmith F-12 College</td>
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<td>Nila</td>
<td>Foundation teacher, Blacksmith F-12 College</td>
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<td>Carly</td>
<td>Clear Horizons Coordinator</td>
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<td>Leanne</td>
<td>Preschool teacher, Director, Bright Eyes Preschool</td>
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<td>Meredith</td>
<td>Preschool teacher, Moon Avenue Preschool</td>
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<td>Tarryn</td>
<td>Preschool teacher, Director, Rose Gardens Preschool</td>
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<td>Brenda</td>
<td>Preschool teacher, Australian Christian College</td>
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<td>Sienna</td>
<td>Foundation/1/2 teacher, Australian Christian College</td>
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<td>Piper</td>
<td>Foundation teacher, St James’ Primary School</td>
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There was not an official ‘list’ of network members in Blacksmith. These are the network members who attended the network meeting during the data collection. The network members were still in the process of determining whether all relevant educators and practitioners in Blacksmith had been invited to participate in the network. It was not clear why some early childhood centres operating in Blacksmith did not attend the network meetings.

7.4 Network visits

During the research, one official network meeting was attended, and audio recorded as data. There were 13 members present (those listed above). The meeting was held at the town library in August, 2015, and went for approximately an hour and a half. At this meeting, the network conducted its regular business.

While transcribing the audio recording from the network meeting, it was sometimes impossible to tell which of the participants was speaking. These instances are indicated by (network member) in the data.

7.5 Follow-up interviews

Follow-up interviews were conducted via phone with Kim, Jemma, Helen, Charlotte, Carly Leanne, Tarryn and Brenda in the month following the network meeting.
7.6 Having a purpose

To a large degree, the network was driven by the knowledge that the social outcomes for children in Blacksmith were statistically amongst the lowest in the state. The most recent Vinson report from 2015 (Vinson & Rawsthorne, 2015) indicated that little had changed in terms of the outcomes for children since the previous report (Vinson et al., 2007).

The gap is just widening between the haves and the have-nots...these little kids are up against so much, and the majority of our kids, or two thirds of them are coming from SEVERE disadvantage. (Helen)

Network members articulated that it was because of the results of the reports, that they felt compelled to support the initiatives being developed and noted that the network could be one way to achieve this.

We had a staff meeting that presented the [report] data and it was so low … and even statistics like we’re the fifth in Victoria on the list of kids who have witnessed domestic violence, and I think it’s so important to make kids happy and safe…So I think that was a big driving force, that our kids are so low in Blacksmith, so we need to do everything we can. (Charlotte)

That was probably the watershed for us, the Vinson Report. It was around that time that we thought we needed to start looking at how best to support kids in their transition to school. The Prep [first year of school] teachers would lament the fact that the kids were coming in underdone, they might have been signed up for [preschool], but they didn’t attend much, or they hadn’t been to [preschool], we hadn’t picked up on any special needs kids prior to coming to school, so it seemed they would get to their first year of formal education and have to start all over again, we felt we were missing opportunities further down the line when intervention is much more effective and because we weren’t working closely together; the
right hand didn’t know what the left hand was doing. We were replicating a lot of stuff, and we were wasting a lot of time. There was a sense of urgency that hadn’t been there before and we had to deal with some issues. (Helen)

Helen’s comment outlines several areas where the network members felt they could improve their practice. This in turn, gave some direction and purpose for the network in terms of how they might plan to achieve some of their goals. In Helen’s view, it was necessary for educators to look beyond primary school education in order to meet some of the challenges facing children.

I think that’s a realisation from teachers, the teaching profession, that education starts way earlier than the first year of school, and if we have any opportunity to influence what happens prior to that then we need to be front and centre…We can’t let any opportunity go by where we’re not maximising and enriching the experiences they’re having, to help them be successful ultimately. (Helen)

Carly echoed the idea that the network provided an opportunity to promote some of the strategies designed to improve outcomes for children in Blacksmith.

And building those relationships with the schools, and with the other players…and one of the big focuses of the early year’s network is that every child in Blacksmith starts school, is ready for school, so we’re very strong on that…that’s ultimately what we all want to see. (Carly)

Network members made it clear that the results of the reports provided impetus and purpose for the network.

The community of Blacksmith, including the local council, education services and community organisations responded to the negative community reports by implementing a number of strategies to tackle some of the identified issues. Some of these strategies related to education, and included early intervention and supporting children and families through
early childhood and into school. Initially, efforts by various stakeholders were being designed and implemented in isolation from one another. The Clear Horizons Foundation had been instrumental in implementing a raft of programs targeting families and children at various stages of their childhood and education. One of the areas targeted by this organisation was the transition to school, with a specific focus on supporting both families and children during this time.

Originally, the organisation had developed its own program designed to support parents during the year prior to their child starting school. Children were also invited to attend the program, where they participated in play-based activities during the sessions. The Clear Horizons Foundation reported success with their program, based on feedback from the families involved and as a result, shared some of their experiences with Blacksmith F-12 College. The school expressed interest in the program being offered through the Clear Horizons Foundation as a way to support families and children during transition. It was decided that the school and Clear Horizons programs would merge to form one, more holistic and collaborative transition program for families and children. Through this, the community organisation became involved in the transition network. One member identified that the involvement from Clear Horizons Foundation had been pivotal in driving the network.

And that’s why we’re involved too, because of the [report] data that Clear Horizons Foundation said we need to do something too, so we can pick up the gap, or fill in some of the gaps, in transition to school. [This program] was something that evolved out of wanting to help set parents up to support children’s learning, so that’s how we became involved.

(Network member)

The clear sense of purpose derived from negative community reports has been an integral factor in bringing this network together.
7.7 Leadership

Leadership emerged as a prominent theme from the data. There was variance between the network members regarding the leadership of the network. Despite Kim clearly being identified by some network members as the leader of the network, she did not perceive herself as the leader in any permanent capacity. Kim articulated the leadership of the network was undecided and that her role was more organisational, explaining that the task of regenerating the network had been allocated to her by her principals as part of her role as the first-year-of-school coordinator.

So I’m sort of…I set goals for the team, I think the part that we’re struggling with at the moment is there has been a big push from our school to have these meetings, and so I’ve chaired a couple and organised them and I suppose I’m wondering where to next year? Because I think it will be great to share that role around. We talked about having one letterhead with all our school logos and things like that…So I think next year I’d really love for all of the schools and all of the [preschools] to take on board setting meetings, and taking minutes and organising agendas and things…(Kim)

It seems that Kim felt uncomfortable with her nomination as leader of the network, and was keen to distribute the leadership amongst the other represented schools and prior-to-school settings. While she acknowledged the role of her school – the Blacksmith F-12 College – in reinvigorating the network, Kim did not consider that this gave her or her school any greater status in the network than any other member. Helen and Jemma, the principals of the F-12 College, echoed the idea that there was no formal leader of the network, noting that any leadership that existed may have come from the Clear Horizons Foundation.

Jemma: We haven’t got a leader within the network have we?
Helen: It’s flat leadership, it’s not someone who is heading it up, but it’s participation I guess, maybe one agency that takes more of a lead, would be Clear Horizons, they’re very proactive.

Another network member from the F-12 College identified Kim as the leader, on the basis that she assumed much of the responsibility for the network.

My [Foundation] unit leader has been really influential in setting it up and getting it back. She does a lot of work for this, it kind of falls on her shoulders, rather than being shared around.

(Charlotte)

Other network members also referred to Kim as the leader of the network.

At the moment someone from the F-12 College is actually in charge of running the group.

(Brenda)

One member referred to Kim’s leadership during a network meeting, citing how she had provided impetus and momentum for the network.

Kim, this year you’ve been a driving force in getting people together. (Network member)

Kim assumed many of the tasks usually carried out by the leader, such as organising meetings, communicating times and locations with the other members, being a contact point for other members, and chairing the meetings. She was also was responsible for setting goals for the network.

Despite Kim’s reticence, some network members held strong opinions about the influence of the F-12 College in the network. There was evidence of some resentment towards the College around its leadership and subsequent control over the focus of the network.
It’s more one-sided, so it’s mostly a conversation between the [preschool] teachers and the primary school teachers from that public school about those children and the events they do. (Brenda)

One member questioned the relevance and benefit for other schools from Blacksmith to be involved because she felt the network’s focus was being driven by the College, to establish their own transition to school practices.

What’s the point in having them [the other schools] there if there is nothing going forward? If it’s just information sharing then great, but was it a waste of their time to be invited along? I don’t know what they got out of it [the meeting], because it was mostly F-12 centric. (Carly)

Another member noted some subtleties existing in the network that projected bias towards the F-12 College, causing other network members to feel less important.

All the handouts and things are actually all covered in the logo of the public school and don’t really say much about private schools. (Brenda)

Brenda proposed that the issue of leadership bias could be overcome by appointing a neutral person to the role of chair of the network.

I think if it were to move forward, getting someone who isn’t going to bias it towards the public school, getting someone who isn’t even part of one of the schools to be sort of the chair, and then just have us all there, to have an open discussion about everything and even running events, like at the town hall, rather than at the hall at the school. (Brenda)

Brenda continued by explaining that having weighting towards a particular school was exclusionary not just for fellow network members, but also for parents who enrolled their children in different schools in Blacksmith.
So that parents who are going to a private school or are from our [preschool], which is attached to a private school don’t feel intimidated going to the public school, even though they know that’s not where they’re going. I know a few of the parents have said to me ‘this sounds really good but I don’t feel comfortable to do it’ so I think we could make it a more inclusive environment. (Brenda)

The question of how the network could work to serve a number of schools and prior-to-school settings with different agendas or priorities was identified as a challenge by some, but not all, of the network members.

It was apparent that there were some tensions in the network around the issue of leadership. It did not appear to be something that the network had addressed directly, or attempted to negotiate. Some network members held concerns about the position of power of the F-12 College, and its ability to influence the focus and direction of the network. It was also clear that the current leader was aware of some of these tensions, and as a result, was somewhat uncomfortable about her role. In addition, the principals of the F-12 College did not consider themselves to hold positions of leadership within the network, contrary to the beliefs of some other members. Further to this, the principals were perhaps unaware of the viewpoints of the others, and the opinion that the F-12 College was dominating the network to a degree.

In addition to the leadership within the network, the data also pointed to leadership outside of the network itself. One example of this is the leadership shown by the principals of the F-12 College. They made a clear and conscious decision to support Kim to build stronger relationships with the preschools in Blacksmith, through reinvigorating the network. This was enabled by the allocation of school funding to release Kim from her teaching responsibilities.
It was clear that the principals considered this a major priority for them, and were prepared to use their decision-making privileges to enact the processes required for this to occur.

We asked our [Foundation] coordinator [Kim] to have more of an input into our transition and building relationships with preschools and so forth, [it] was a big ask, so we’ve actually allocated leadership time, which is time from face to face teaching to devote to building those relationships and making it a more effective transition in Blacksmith. That’s leadership leading, we can’t get out and build relationships with the [preschools] ourselves but we can actually facilitate that, it’s budget allocations, coming back to dollars in the jar…what do you see as a priority? (Helen)

Another colleague from the College reflected on this, noting that while Kim had been designated a greater workload and responsibility, she had been supported by her own leaders.

Our principals and leaders are pushing transition, and the importance of it…so they’re pushing for positive relationships with [preschool]s and things, so I think it fell on Kim’s shoulders for that reason, but they are supporting her by giving her time and money to do it well. (Charlotte)

Decisions around the allocation of funding, and the release of teachers can only be made by those in positions of power. It was evident in this example that the decisions made by the principals had a direct and considerable impact on the network.

7.8 Reciprocal understandings

The importance of reciprocal understandings across different settings was identified by the network members, particularly in relation to educators’ professional practice and beliefs. Network members made comments indicating that there were marked differences in
the professional understandings between educators working in prior-to-school settings and those in school settings. One network member highlighted some of the differences relating to pedagogy, curriculum and expectations for children between prior-to-school settings and schools.

I think one of the challenges is quite often the schools say that children need to be ready for school, whereas I think it’s really important too that the schools are ready for the children, and where they’re at, and I think some conflict arises around [Foundation] being such a more formal classroom now than it ever has been…benchmarks to be reached so quickly once the children start school, and I think that does our children a disservice. I think especially when they’ve come from a preschool curriculum that’s emergent, and it’s based on the children’s meaningful interests and needs…there can be, sometimes to the detriment of the child, a really big gap from the early years, preschool environment that they’ve come from and stepping into such a formal environment. So I think we see that big jump from preschool to school, probably more than the primary school teachers see, and I believe the principals are…they see benchmarks and the need for academic success really early, whereas our goals for a school child settling in in Term 1 focuses a lot on belonging, that sense of trust in their new school environment, building that warm relationship with their teacher, their peers, learning the routine so that they’re feeling secure about what’s coming next, so there is that really big step from [preschool] to school. (Tarryn)

Tarryn continued by lamenting the lack of understandings between educators working in different settings, citing lack of experience by school educators as being problematic in understanding the perspectives of prior-to-school educators.

I feel there are some early years or junior school teachers who know exactly what we’re saying as preschool educators, but there’s also some who just haven’t…may not have had any early years’ experience so they don’t get it, they don’t get the importance of that play-based learning. I don’t think principals fully understand the Framework, and our emergent
curriculum and the desperate need for play-based learning to continue into the early years of primary school. (Tarryn)

In this comment, Tarryn identified the lack of understandings around the prior-to-school curriculum and early years learning philosophy from school educators and principals as being particularly problematic. Tarryn elaborated further, expressing her frustration and strong opinions about a perceived culture of readying children for the next stage of their life.

I feel too as a society, we’re hell bent on preparing our children for that next step in life, rather than letting them be in the space they’re in, and just allowing them to ‘be’, without having to prepare them for what’s coming next, and our whole [preschool] year is a year preparing our children for life, and learning those life skills, not so much a year of teaching them to be ready for school. (Tarryn)

Another network member also held very strong beliefs towards the role of preschool, and the importance of preschool in preparing children for school.

The one thing that sticks in my head and sticks in my craw was a comment from a [preschool] teacher at a meeting, that [preschool] is not about preparing children for school, it’s about preparing children for life. And I think that is the biggest load of bullshit that I’ve ever heard! I mean we’re all about preparing children for life, whether they’re at Bright Horizons, or [preschool] or school, but [preschool] is the pre-year to school, so if they’re not preparing them for school, then who the hell is?! I don’t get that at all, I find that a bizarre statement…So we’re preparing babies and kids for school, but you’re not? It seems a really odd attitude, and I was so shocked by it, that I went back home and I Googled some of the websites for the government, about what [preschool] is, and to be honest they actually look like they’re saying similar sorts of things and I find that really strange, that there is this attitude that [preschool] is not about preparing children for school! Like, are they just there to have a bit of fun, and go off unprepared? I’ve heard that from another [preschool] teacher too,
who wasn’t from around here, with the same sort of attitude, that we don’t want transition to school time encroaching on our [preschool] time, and I think well, why? Why wouldn’t you want to help these children in the environment that they’re going to be spending the next 12 months in? …And I wasn’t heartened by what I read, because it almost looked like the Department was trying to tow the [preschool] party line, they were being very careful about how they worded it, and I thought, this is bullshit. (Carly)

It is clear that Tarryn and Carly hold very strong, opposing views on the function of preschool. Both appear to hold great conviction towards their professional understandings and beliefs about preschool, and its role in children’s education, yet these understandings are in antithetical. It is relevant to note here that Carly’s position in the network was as neither a school or prior-to-school educator, but as the Clear Horizons representative. Given the role and influence of Clear Horizons in the network and the community, these conflicting viewpoints present an interesting challenge for the network. The differences in views suggest that there is not a shared conceptualisation of transition to school and the role of preschools in that transition, among members of the network. If not negotiated, they have the potential to cause friction between the network members, and have a direct impact on the network’s ability to function effectively.

Carly made further comments about her views on preschools, indicating that the independent nature of preschools and their management committees meant that schools had little influence over them. She voiced a belief that while there were separate bodies that managed schools and preschools, and different priorities, there could not be a smooth transition between prior-to-school and school settings.

I would hope one day it [transition] would be a seamless line, I don’t think it’s going to happen though. Our local [preschool] are all on independent sites and I think until schools are responsible for not only the locality of [preschool] but also the [preschool] teachers, and we
get rid of these bloody committees of management, I think nothing is going to change. I think that’s where the change is going to have to kick in, because [preschool] teachers have a lot of pressure on them from their work. They don’t have anyone to support them in their work really, but they’re getting the pressure from the committee who, in most cases are not educators, whereas if they were part of the school community they would have the principal and other support staff around to be able to do PD [professional development] and do all sorts of stuff, but while it’s set up with committees of management I think we’re doomed to have that segregation forever. (Carly)

7.8.1 Building understandings

In acknowledging some of the disparities in the understandings, and the consequences of these, a number of suggestions were made by network members around how reciprocal understandings could be strengthened and promoted. One network member proposed the concept of reciprocal visits by leadership, as a way to build understandings across prior-to-school and school settings. Tarryn’s comment reflected her concern around the lack of understandings from principals about the needs of children as they prepared to make the transition to school.

I’d love to see the principals come around and just plonk a spot, for a session and just watch what we do. I think it could make a difference if they came into our preschool environment and actually sat and watched what we do. And to see those slow-to-warm-up children who are still coping with transitioning from say, outdoor to in, who still need support to pack up, who still need support about how the day looks, who are still watching and looking at their peers and not being prepared to step in to that play, who are still being supported to enter their peers’ play and to know which words to use, and how to negotiate with their peer – they’re all very real Term Four issues. (Tarryn)
One of the school educators also supported the idea of reciprocal visits by educators to help build greater understandings of the professional practice in the different settings. She also offered some explanation for why this might present as a practical challenge for educators.

I have suggested for a number of years that not only should we visit [preschools] with the children, but we should as teachers go, and see what happens at [preschools]. No amount of PD [professional development] would be as good as getting in to a [preschools] and experiencing firsthand what happens. I feel like that is what is missing in our network. And vice versa, [preschools] teachers visit our classrooms. It would be great to visit [the community organisation transition program] sessions as well. This would give us all an appreciation of what we all do every day and how it works. The reason this hasn’t happened yet I feel is all down to money, replacement teachers, and time. (Melinda)

During the network’s planning around transition, and in particular the scheduling of the transition visits for children during Term Four, some disagreement arose between educators around the preferred duration and number of visits. Some of the prior-to-school educators held strong opinions about the preschool year not being encroached upon by too many transition visits to schools during the latter part of the year. The negotiation of the duration of the transition period from prior-to-school to school settings became a major issue for the network. This issue is explored in more detail later, however it is relevant to highlight here, as it could be argued that at the core of this issue is a lack of congruence between the understandings of prior-to-school and school educators. School educators held a perception that the earlier transition commenced, the better; prior-to-school educators believed that the preschool year ought to be just that, and not viewed as a platform for preparing children for school.
There was a bit of a watershed moment with our network when we met, and talked about this, because there was a bit of a pushback from our [preschools] who felt that it was an imposition on their [preschools] program and it was going too long and da da da. And it was dragged out and unnecessary and they were saying the [preschools] year is a standalone year. We said look, in the scheme of things if you’re looking for a continuum of learning from birth to the grave, lifelong learning, the first eight years is designated early years, so that will cross over from day care, three year-old, four year-old [preschools], [Foundation] and so on. So we had a little bit more push to make it happen. So as a consequence, we all now run a six week transition program, in conjunction with Clear Horizons Foundation. (Helen)

In her comment, Helen described the reasoning that she offered in response to the concerns of the prior-to-school educators. Here she referred to the first years of school as being part of the ‘early years’, suggesting that the needs of children this age could be just as well catered for at school as they are in prior-to-school settings. This view signals a divergence from the concerns of prior-to-school educators regarding the formality of school and the focus on academic achievement.

The data showed some examples where efforts had been made by the school educators to implement pedagogical practices in the school classrooms that were in line with those used in the prior-to-school settings. Primarily, this took the form of offering play-based experiences for children during the first term of the year.

Term One does look very different from the rest of our school year. It’s very much a blend between [preschool] and school. We start the mornings with the kids coming in doing play-based activities at the tables and then move on to more sort of lesson structure but we definitely have lots of play in the afternoon…we call it developmental play where we have rotations and they go off and do different activities, very much aiming to promote fine motor development and social skills and things like that. I know at [preschool] they have like two
and a half hours of play where it’s free choice play, and they can move to different areas
where we don’t necessarily so that I suppose in Term One, but we try and make it available to
them in some part of the day. (Kim)

Kim’s comment suggests that while some genuine attempts had been made by her
school in attempting to implement some of the pedagogical practices used in prior-to-school
settings, such as offering play-based activities, there appeared to be a lack of understanding
around how such activities were implemented in a meaningful way for children. This is seen
in the identification of rotating activities at tables as being play-based.

A discussion about the types of activities children enjoy most in prior-to-school
settings took place during the network meeting. Prior-to-school educators gave feedback to
the school educators from their discussions with their children about what they would like to
see in the school classroom. Prior-to-school educators emphasised the importance of children
having access to familiar activities where they could enjoy some confidence and competence
at those tasks in a school environment. Kim acknowledged this feedback in the following
comment.

Well I know from our chat today, we will definitely be making sure we’ve got things like
playdough and easels and things set up as soon as they walk through the door, try and make it
as familiar as we can, to ease them in. (Kim)

Another network member also made the suggestion of common or reciprocal practices
across settings, to provide some continuity and stability for children. Carly suggested that
examples of these practices could be taken from both prior-to-school and school settings and
implemented in the respective settings.
I heard them talking at the meeting about ‘we do this…or maybe we could do this at school as well’ but I think there needs to be a bit more reciprocal…Maybe some of the stuff they’re doing at school they could be doing in [preschool] too. (Carly)

In another example, a prior-to-school educator reflected on her lack of knowledge of the school setting, in particular the demands on school educators to have children reaching certain standards by a particular time of the year. She further noted the potential usefulness of transition statements, in providing school educators with as much information as possible about children in order to assist them in their responsibilities.

Hearing about what you need to do by May and June I didn’t know that…Because I haven’t come from a primary school, so to hear what you have to do I think ‘oh wow’ so maybe the transition statements are actually, hopefully giving primary school teachers a bit of a kick-start and a head-start, rather than starting from scratch? I hope. (Network member)

The concept of reciprocal understandings was evident, both in terms of the importance of having reciprocal understandings across different settings, and also how the network could go about building and strengthening those understandings. It was also evident that there were some significant barriers to the effective development of reciprocal understandings between the prior-to-school and school educators, because of disparate understandings and beliefs about the role of preschool in particular. While the network had provided an opportunity for some of these concerns to be raised, and strategies to overcome them offered, there appeared to remain some strong and persistent divisions between network members.
7.9 Relationships

The theme of relationships refers to the relationships of network members across different settings, as well as relationships between the network members and children and families. In many instances, the concepts relating to relationships between educators and other professionals also related to reciprocal understandings. Network members gave examples referring to the importance of relationships between educators across different settings as enabling reciprocal understandings. In this case, the notions of relationships and reciprocal understandings are closely aligned, yet it is useful to explore them both separately.

7.9.1 Between settings

Kim credited one of the successes of the network as its ability to promote relationships between prior-to-school settings and schools. Opportunities such as attending professional development as a network were one example of how the network was achieving this.

I feel like this year I’ve really got to know the [preschool] staff quite well and we also attended a PD [professional development] together after hours…and there was a couple of [preschool] staff that went to that so I think it’s good to be doing some things together and be on the same page a lot more rather than just setting dates…The reason that that’s happened is my [principals] asked me to do it. That was one of my job descriptions, was to try and improve relationships by meeting regularly with [preschool] staff and working and focusing on different things. (Kim)

Another member noted that developing relationships with other educators had contributed to the perceived success of the network.
I think it’s successful because it allows that opportunity for us as educators, of primary and
[preschool] to all get together, and become familiar with who is teaching in Blacksmith.

(Tarryn)

Helen noted that the relationships that emerged between educators in the network had
extended beyond the network, with educators electing to meet with one another outside of
their professional time.

They [the educators] meet up down at the coffee shop, are meeting for coffee, not for an
agenda, just to meet and say ‘Hi and how are you and what’s happening?’ (Helen)

This suggests that the educators had developed relationships with one another that
were sufficiently meaningful and beneficial to them to invest their .time out of working
hours.

Network members highlighted effective communication in as a key element in
positive relationships between educators and other professionals across different settings.
Network members observed that through improved relationships with other educators, they
felt more comfortable in engaging in communication with those educators around issues
relating to their professional practice.

What was less clear was the nature of the directional influence between relationships
and communication. It was not apparent whether the opportunity the network provided for
more direct and effective communication between educators enabled the development of
relationships, or, that through the evolution of relationships, better and more effective
communication was facilitated. It is possible that the two were mutually dependent.

Having that communication open with the school…that’s one of the reasons we have our
transition group with the [Foundation] and [preschool] teacher in Blacksmith, so that we can
keep those channels of communication open…The group being established quite a number of years ago now has enabled that communication to happen more easily and also in a group setting. (Leanne)

I think the biggest thing is it makes for a very comfortable work environment. I feel quite happy to ring a preschool teacher and if I’ve got a child, or got some concerns I feel quite happy to ring a [preschool] teacher and say ‘hey can you tell me a bit more about this student,’ or ‘what did you do to deal with this?’ So I think that’s one of the biggest positives, you have a great connection with the [preschool] teachers. (Charlotte)

The tensions between network members around the number of transition days were initially explored in the preceding section on reciprocal understandings. This issue is referred to again here, as Charlotte described how effective communication and the value placed on fostering positive relationships between settings enabled this particular issue to be addressed.

We’ve had a few issues with how many transition days we should have and it affecting their [preschool] year, so we’ve been working through them this year, and hopefully next year we’re going to have one less transition day so it doesn’t affect the [preschool] program as much, so I think that’s been a big relief to them, because it will show that we’ve been listening to their concerns. So I actually think that’s positive that committing to airing our concerns quite openly and without judgement and things like that. It’s all about communication. (Charlotte)

7.9.2 With children and families

Charlotte described the importance of building relationships with family members, noting that meaningful relationships required time and investment in order for them to be effective.
The other thing that’s really important is making those connections with the parents as early as you can, and making those positive deposits in the piggy bank so to speak so if there are some issues at the start of the year, you have a positive relationship to fall back on with the parents. (Charlotte)

During a network meeting, members reflected on an example which they felt was a success story for the network, where educators worked together to support a parent who needed additional support during the time her child was making the transition to school. The members noted that this scenario was successful due to the collaboration and communication of the network members.

We did have an incidence with one child, where going through the [preschool] process and the [community organisation transition program] that you were really able to hone in on where she was at. The whole thing was just lovely the way it worked out, and it was delightful because the family needed all the help they could get, and she needed to be really comfortable at school, and she’s doing a great job now and I think if it wasn’t for all of us working together, and helping Mum to get us on her page, it wouldn’t have worked, she wouldn’t have settled.

She wasn’t going to go to [preschool], she was going to home school, that’s where we were at two years ago…

And this particular mother is now part of our parents and friends group, cooks soup every Wednesday for the kids, makes free coupons to give out to kids who couldn’t afford to buy soup, she is amazing, she is so involved in the school and I think it’s because we just did little bits every transition visit and lots of conversations…

She was a real collaboration wasn’t she?

I think it’s a good example of why a network like this is needed
One network member commented that schools could do more in terms of providing opportunities to build relationships with parents, and that transition was an opportune time for this.

Generally schools don’t take advantage of having parents, in that they want them to come and join parents clubs and that, but they’ve got to engage them earlier, they’ve got to start getting them in the door. Their parents and friends group needs to be active during the transition time in engaging families into a cup of tea, and tell them what they do…during the seven weeks of parents coming in and out of the school, and engage them in their child’s learning and with the school from the word go, so that they’re actually comfortable coming into the school from the beginning. And they would probably say that we do that, but if you’ve got a transition program then make the most of it. (Carly)

These data suggested that the network provided an opportunity for educators to come together, and from this, develop and strengthen their relationships. Integral to the development and improvement of relationships, was effective communication between the network members. With positive relationships and effective communication, came improved reciprocal understandings. It can be concluded that these elements are mutually beneficial, and even dependent on one another. The network also provided valuable opportunities for network members to work collaboratively to develop relationships with children and families.

7.10 Professionalism

In this network, references to professionalism related to the concepts of professional regard, professional support for educators as well as professional practice particularly relating to pedagogy and continuity of learning.
7.10.1 Regard

One network member articulated her belief that the network fostered professional regard between educators and professionals. In this example, professional regard for one another can be noted in the freedom and confidence of network members to contribute their ideas, and know that these are valued by the other members.

I think if everyone can be there and have their voice, have their say, that’s something that makes it more successful. And I also feel that we’re valued and listened to. I think that everyone’s contribution is equally valuable and that can be tricky at times, but I think the group works quite well, we do value everyone’s contribution. (Leanne)

Another example of how network members showed professional regard for one another could be identified during a network meeting where the members were organising their final network meeting of the year. It was decided that this meeting would be held at one of the preschools. Although the reasons for this were not discussed, it is possible that holding this event at the preschool was a demonstration of the professional regard for the preschool.

7.10.2 Support

Brenda indicated that a strength of the network was that it offered a professional support structure for its members. Examples cited by the network members referred to support as including opportunities to work through complex issues, ask questions and to share understandings.
Just to, you know, have someone that you can say ‘I’m stuck on this, can you give me a bit of a hand, what do you think about this?’ and just really collaborating those sort of ideas and questions and things just to form that more supportive network outside of the actual meetings. (Brenda)

Opportunities for professional development was another example cited by network members as a way the network facilitated professional support for its members.

Last year the [preschool] and school teachers in our transition group attended four PD’s [professional development] in [regional city] after work. These were run by OT [occupational therapists] and speech therapists. We wouldn’t have attended this together if we didn’t have our transition network. (Melinda)

Network members indicated that they would like further opportunities to engage in professional development. At the time of data collection, the network was exploring options for professional development, but there were some challenges in locating suitable options.

I’ve had no luck with looking for some PD [professional development], I’m going to get Helen and Jemma to give me a hand, we were thinking of trying to organise some PD for the early years teachers in Blacksmith, looking at either the Early Years Framework or social, emotional development, so I shall keep searching and hopefully we can organise something for early next Term, so I will keep hunting. (Kim)

Organising professional development demonstrates a commitment to the professional growth of the network members. Through participation in joint professional development, network members can strengthen the professional respect for one another by sharing understandings and engaging in professional learning together.

A preschool educator reflected her feelings of professional isolation and the importance of professional support within the network.
We’re all very busy and we can be quite isolated and separate from the schools at times. Each centre can be quite isolated, because you don’t have a lot of contact, say for example with the other [preschools], so we’re sort of self-contained if that makes sense? So sometimes we might do some professional development and we did used to have educator meetings with other centres but they seemed to have fizzled out, and that was just between the [preschools], not with the school….I think it can be quite isolating because you’re in your own little bubble in your own centre…it would be nice to have more contact and more support with each other. Again it comes down to time, it’s not even like we have the factor of travel, like that’s not isolating…it just seems to be the way it is. That’s one reason why I attend [the network]…having that support from the other colleagues. (Leanne)

7.10.3 Pedagogy

From the data emerged notions around professional pedagogies, and in particular, the continuity of pedagogical practices across settings. Network members reflected on how the professional practices identified in the prior-to-school and school settings were different. In her comment, Helen observed that this was an area the network was yet to explore.

I think there is a disconnect, between the pedagogy of preschool and school and I don’t think, speaking from our network, there has been a great deal of focus on that and that’s something that we need to consider in the future and pay more attention to. I think thus far we’ve been breaking down a lot of barriers and building those relationships so that we’re able to work more professionally together, but to be honest I can’t really comment further than that, because I don’t think there has been a great deal of work done on the two frameworks. (Helen)

Helen’s comment suggested a belief that the network first needed to focus on elements such as relationship building and collaboration before it was able to address more
complex issues such as pedagogical practices and how these could be promoted across different settings.

During some discussion about whether continuity in pedagogical practices across settings was important, Helen and Jemma suggested that it was not.

Helen: Some experts might say differently, but my personal opinion is no. I think if a child is happy to come to school, and is curious and has been prepared well, then the learning will take place regardless of what frameworks we decide are the most wonderful an need to be used right now. If you’ve got a child who is well, excited, curious, who has a feeling of confidence and looking forward to the next adventure, I think the Prep teachers can take that child down any path that has been provided by the system, and that’s the sort of thing that changes frequently. This sounds a bit cynical I know, but if you’ve got a really committed, dynamic teacher, they will take the child where they need to go, regardless of what the framework is saying.

Jemma: I’d have to agree with that, and the tricky bit is our teachers have to report against our curriculum and the [preschool] teachers have to report against their curriculum and at the moment there is a disconnect.

These comments point to some interesting conclusions. While there was an identified ‘disconnect’ between the prior-to-school and school curricula, and an acknowledgment that this ought to be an area for consideration for the network in future, there was also a belief that curriculum documents were not of critical importance for children’s continuity of learning.

One of the preschool educators reflected on her experience teaching in a primary school. She described how the pedagogical practices associated with prior-to-school settings had been successfully implemented in the school she was teaching in at the time. She
highlighted how play-based pedagogies could be used effectively in a school classroom and indicated that this was something she hoped the network would strive for.

I’ve worked in a school where they taught investigations every morning, the first two hours of learning for the day was an investigations team-teaching and that involved play-based learning which can still teach all that academic stuff, the literacy and the numeracy…it just worked really well in the junior school and the kids were still ticking the boxes, play-based learning can still tick the boxes for literacy and numeracy and those key learning areas…I just see such a strength in that inquiry-based learning where the children are choosing what’s interesting and meaningful to them, it can be done. (Tarryn)

A number of concepts relating to professionalism emerged from the data. Professional respect referred to how the network fostered regard and value for its members. Members also articulated how the network provided a system of support for them as professionals, offering opportunities for professional development. In addition, network members also reflected on their professional practice and pedagogy, noting the pedagogical ‘disconnect’ between prior-to-school and school settings.

7.11 Sustainability of the network

While the network had undergone significant recent changes, compared with previous years, by becoming more organised and focused, the network members identified some ongoing challenges for the network moving forward. These challenges centred on the ability of the network to set goals, leadership of the network, commitment to the network, and the competing professional priorities of the network members.
7.11.1 Goal setting

Some of the network members commented that it was necessary for the network to set some goals in order to progress forwards.

As far as the actual network is, we need to know what the purpose of that would be, going forward, and whether or not it was useful for the other players. (Carly)

While this comment suggests that both the purpose and the benefits of the network were unclear to all members, a later comment from Carly suggested that differences in personal style may have contributed to this perception.

It’s more of a personality thing, people being a bit disorganised and not really sticking to the plan that we had, so I was a bit peeved but we got there in the end. (Carly)

When considering future plans Tarryn looked to building an extended and more inclusive network.

We could probably improve it, in terms of inviting some of the outer-lying schools to our network so that they were more involved. I think probably since regeneration started a couple of years ago, we’ve had more and more families look at the real possibility of their children being educated in smaller, outer-lying schools and I know that our enrolments this year and last year, we’ve probably had the biggest numbers of children going to smaller, rural schools within half an hour of Blacksmith. (Tarryn)

Tarryn’s comment reflects her perception that the network should serve the children and families of Blacksmith, and possibly the surrounding smaller communities, rather than particular schools or services.
7.11.2 Leadership

The leadership of the network has been discussed previously. Some of what has been discussed is also relevant to consider in the context of the sustainability of the network. There was some ambiguity around the actual leader of the network, and while many members considered Kim to be the leader, she suggested that leadership of the network could be shared around in the future. This was not something that the network had actively addressed. There was evidence of some resentment towards what was perceived as leadership bias, and indications that this could impact on future decisions on leadership. However, this had not been discussed openly in the network. It was evident that issues around leadership were pertinent to the network, but there was a lack of forward planning on these issues.

7.11.3 Commitment

Another challenge that was likely to impact the long-term sustainability of the network was commitment from the members.

The main challenge is that everyone is so busy and it’s hard to find that time to meet, and stay committed to meeting. We try and meet three times a year, ideally once a term but it often doesn’t happen once a term. That’s the hardest thing, finding a time and a day that everyone can attend…That’s my biggest concern, and a lot of people work part time too. I know of two of the other [preschool] teachers in Blacksmith don’t work full time, so it’s got to work in around other people’s work times as well. That seems like a fairly practical thing, that being the biggest challenge, but I think it is. (Leanne)
Leanne’s comment was a reminder that sustaining the network took commitment and investment from its members. Even seemingly straightforward tasks such as scheduling meeting times presented challenges that needed to be overcome.

7.11.4 Different priorities

Network members also cited differing professional priorities as a potential barrier to the future of the network. Some network members described how schools held different priorities, particularly around transition compared with other schools, and this meant differences in what was considered important. Kim commented that the clientele within specific schools had an impact on how transition to school was considered and planned for.

Another challenge we face…we’ve got a lot of children coming in who are emotionally and socially vulnerable and we’re trying to do a lot to change our transition and our Foundation year to try and assist those kids and I don’t think the other school settings see that as much, they have a different clientele…our transition program this year has been quite lengthy compared to other schools, and I think that is a challenge for our group, because we’re trialling different things. (Kim)

Other network members cited the competitiveness between the schools, and favouritism towards schools as potential barriers to the ability of the network to remain neutral. There was some concern by members that the network was not inclusive to all schools in Blacksmith.

Some barriers have been that some particular preschools are feeders into schools and a lot of it is to do with location, and I don’t know this for a fact, but I think there is some [preschools] that favour particular schools, and pushing particular schools, and it’s really hard to make
sure that the transition network stays neutral, and that it’s about the kids of Blacksmith and what works for them, not pushing one school’s agenda or one [preschool]’s agenda. So we have to be really careful that that doesn’t happen. (Charlotte)

I think it’s got a lot of potential, but at the moment because the group is mostly from the public school that covers a lot of Blacksmith…They don’t necessarily cater for the private schools, which makes it a little less beneficial but I feel that if they were to be more inclusive um, practice and made it open to everybody and on neutral ground rather than always holdings things at the public school it could be quite beneficial. (Brenda)

The ability of the network to be inclusive to all schools and services in its membership has implications for the sustainability of the network. If members feel they are not valued and included in the network, they are unlikely to continue their involvement.

A range of potential barriers and challenges to the long term sustainability of the network were cited by network members. These included the importance of setting future goals for the network, some concerns around leadership, commitment of the members as well as the impact of competing professional priorities.

7.12 Goals for transition

Network members referred to their goals for transition in a variety of ways. The people involved in transition – children, families and educators were referred to in terms of the goals held for them, and how transition could be improved and made more effective for them. Much of the data relating to transition related to the planning and implementation of activities and strategies. As well, the data from the network meeting and interviews highlighted particular transition issues in transition, the use of transition statements and
referred to both the Early Years Learning Framework and the Australian Curriculum and their relevance for transition.

7.12.1 For children

One network discussion focused on what members believed was important for children during transition to school. The prior-to-school educators in particular had made it part of their practice to ask the children questions during and after transition visits to gauge what was important for them.

Network member: I think play and friendship definitely come up as a theme and I think there is an expectation that there will be some easel painting and playdough, and maybe that would be a great idea to have that for some children, just to ease them into that because I think some children think it’s all about recess and lunchtime and they’re forgetting about that chunk in between – the learning and sitting down at desks, I think that’s a bit of a shock sometimes.

Members agreed that it was very important to listen to the feedback from children and attempt to address some of the expectations through the transition programs.

When asked what was important for an effective transition to school, network members responded with a range of comments relating to the aspirations they held for children during transition. Comments referred to acknowledging the learning, abilities and interests that children bring with them to school, and the aim to foster these once the children started school. Other elements related to children’s adjustment to school, social and emotional readiness, as well as meeting the individual needs of children.

From a kid’s point of view they need to be feeling safe and happy with their environment…In order for them to feel happy they need to feel that they’ve been successful at something when
they come to visit so having something set up that they know how to do, and do a job that they like, and feel good about it. (Kim)

I think preparing the children socially is critical, so being able to relate to older children and not being intimidated by having a Grade Six come up to them, is definitely important. Obviously the ability to sit down and listen for an extended period time and go off and complete a sit down task where they have to do some writing or colouring in or something rather than go and play with play-dough or blocks straight after having that extended listening period. I think it’s important that they have the fine motor control that they need to complete the tasks they do in primary school, so doing lots of activities like gluing and cutting and drawing and encouraging that correct grip with a pencil. (Brenda)

The opportunity for play-based learning initially at primary school, the opportunity for dramatic and role play is important for our pre-schoolers stepping into their school environment, participating in some activities that they’re really familiar with, some play-based activities that they have been doing at [preschool], because if they’re doing familiar, secure activities once they start school that helps them settle and build that sense of belonging and trust too, having an opportunity for some relaxation time, some children really need that opportunity for movement, and maybe not sitting at a desk for half an hour at a time, they need to get out and move. (Tarryn)

Our focus is probably mostly on social and emotional well-being and being able to separate from Mum, being able to speak for themselves, being able to modify their own behaviour to get along with other kids so it’s a lot around that social-emotional stuff. We encourage those pro-social behaviours right from birth through our programs, so that they can slip easily into the [preschool] or day care environment which slips them easily into the school environment. (Carly)

I find being a [Foundation] teacher one of the biggest things for these kids coming to school is their lack of language and literacy skills, so they come to school and they won’t know the
names of things, or they haven’t had a thousand books read to them, or they can’t complete a full sentence, or they can’t use their imagination and be creative, so as a prep teacher we do a lot of that in the first six months, because they just don’t have those skills, and they’re not willing to have a go, so we have to work a lot on being ok with making mistakes and being able to calm yourself down because they come from a house where that’s not in their environment…So I find sometimes my job as a teacher, I am sometimes a cook, a nurse and a psychologist and all the rest. (Charlotte)

I think it’s really important that we try and get it right for children. I think that transition is so valuable for the children, and we really want to them to get off to the best possible start. So if we can put things in place, at [preschool], at school, in partnership with the families then I think that’s the most worthwhile thing that we can do. (Leanne)

It was evident that network members held a range of goals and aspirations for children during transition to school. It was notable that these goals and aspirations centred around the importance of meeting the needs of children and supporting social and emotional wellbeing, with less emphasis on academic abilities and skills.

7.12.2 For families

Network members also cited a number of goals held for families during transition to school. A common thread throughout these comments was the importance of engagement and effective communication with families. It was evident that the network valued the involvement of families in the transition to school process, as some of the transitions to school sessions offered as part of the transition program were specifically designed for families.
I think really open communication with families about the importance of transition. That includes things like the formal transition program at the school…I think that’s really vital that the families realise the importance of that, and that they try and attend as many sessions as they can. (Leanne)

The feedback we’ve had from parents has been very positive, to the point where the parents have said ‘can we keep doing this, even though the kids are at primary school? We’d like to keep participating and can we have some information on how to help kids with their reading or maths…’ (Helen)

Network members reported that effective communication with families allowed them to generate feedback around how successful the transition programs were for families. One network member described a strategy used by Clear Horizons to encourage family involvement in the transition to school parent sessions.

I believe all the kids are invited, and it’s up to the parents if they want to participate in the transition program, so it’s advertised across town and most of the families…attend the bulk of the sessions. The other thing that Clear Horizons did was they offered an incentive if the parents attended the four initial sessions, the parenting ones, then they got a uniform voucher, a $50 uniform voucher, which was very powerful and it got parents in, and they came for all the sessions then and the kids did too. (Jemma)

The value attributed to parental involvement during transition was demonstrated in the description of the parental sessions offered. The sessions were purposely designed to meet the needs of parents and family members, and support them in order to support their children during transition to school, and in other transitions, such as to preschool.

We do a session which was how can I help prepare my child for [preschool], so actually a transition to [preschool] discussion with our parents. We talk to them about what a
[preschool] day looks like, we invited a [preschool] teacher to come to at least one of those groups and answer questions they might have, and what they want to see in the children and to emphasise that they’re not expecting children to be literate or numerate and know all their shapes and colours, it’s actually more about whether they can sit in a circle, listen and take an instruction and get along with the other kids, so that’s our emphasis. (Carly)

Kim noted another example of how network members planned to support families during transition to school by providing them with information and including them in the transition program, enabling them to feel included and confident during this time.

So we have this wonderful flyer and we thought it was good because it’s very structured but it’s also something that can just go on the fridge and so parents don’t have to worry about ‘now when is transition?’ We’ve got the venues, what we’re focusing on…we’ve also put the children’s activities in as well, so that when the child goes home, the parents will be able to say ‘oh this is what you did today’. (Network member)

Information sessions for parents were discussed at network meetings. One discussion debated the merits of having an additional parent information night. Some members proposed that having a parent information session for the parents of Blacksmith, separate from any particular school would give parents an opportunity to ask more general questions about children’s readiness for school, as well as direct questions towards particular schools if they wished. Other members disagreed, suggesting that most parents had already decided which school they would send their child to, and would prefer to seek information from the school’s own transition sessions. In the past, a similar open event had been organised, however it was poorly attended by parents. It was resolved not to offer an additional session. Rather, prior-to-school services committed to providing needs-based information throughout the year to support parents making decisions about which school their child would attend. In addition, school educators agreed to provide opportunities for parents to ask specific questions during
the planned transition programs at each of the schools. This example demonstrated that parents were regarded as important stakeholders in the transition to school.

It was clear that the network members considered families as an important element of their planning around transition to school. A number of strategies were employed in attempts to meet the various needs of families, and engage them during the transition to school.

7.12.3 Activities and strategies

Some of the transition strategies implemented by the network have already been considered. Examples of these are the actual network meetings, as well as the efforts that were made to improve reciprocal understandings and relationships across prior-to-school and school settings to enhance professional communication.

The collaborative transition program offered as a joint initiative between the Clear Horizons Foundation and the F-12 College has already been described. Much of the network focus on transition activities and strategies related to the planning and fine-tuning within this program. Early in the new school year, network members were in the process of reflecting on the current iteration of the program and assessing its effectiveness by seeking feedback from the children, families and each another. Over the preceding two years, the network had experimented with the nature and number of visits the children made to schools as part of the transition program, and there was still much discussion around this and any future improvements that could be made. Network members were working through a variety of logistical issues, attempting to address factors around staffing, timing, regulating the numbers of attendees at the sessions, as well as being clear about the focus of the sessions for parents.
Sometimes it’s not until you’re actually in the situation that you’re like ‘actually that’s what we needed to do’. (Carly)

In addition to discussion around the transition program itself, network members also acknowledged a series of strategies that were identified as being important for an effective transition to school. The point of focus for these strategies was to promote children’s familiarity with the new school context.

Trying to get a lot of things that they would see at preschool, so we try and have lots of activities that they’ve done before…playdough, peg boards etc, and an opportunity to sit down one on one with the teacher so put them at ease a bit, definitely an orientation around the school…and a bit of exposure to what next year is going to be like…like a craft activity at the tables. (Kim)

Transition is certainly one, other siblings who already at the school, that can be a help, having a buddy system, the [preschool] kids talk a lot about buddies when they’ve built that relationship with their buddy. (Tarryn)

Some of the things we’re doing is a lot of getting to know you, circle time, and songs, a tour of the school and some things in the art room, introducing them to their reading buddies, so trying to get a lot of the things that might be a shock to them in Term One already happening in transition so it’s familiar and they feel comfortable at school. (Charlotte)

One of the educators from the Independent College gave an example of a strategy that was being trialled by her preschool, where the aim was to prepare children for school by making the play environment less stimulating and more like school.

I think something important that was done this year was to take away all of the toys outside so we’ve just got the bare necessities just like they do at school. They don’t have bikes around the place, so giving them a chance to be a bit more creative with their play rather than
focusing on toys that we have available for them here, is really important and just really helping them build a positive perception of what school is. So we’ve done a few things similar to that, to make [preschool] a bit more like school would be, obviously we’re not changing the whole program…but we just thought because the kids do tend to rely a lot on playing with dolls or using the bikes or playing with the fishing ropes in the water, we thought we’d take it all away and see how they would cope in that sort of environment because that is what they’re going to have at school. We thought we would trial it during the transition program, so obviously when they first come at the start of the year they need the toys because they are so young, but slowly throughout the year putting out less and getting them to be more creative in their play. (Brenda)

This strategy was described during a phone interview, rather than during a network meeting. Recalling previous comments from other preschool educators about the importance of play-based programs, it is likely that this would be regarded as a controversial strategy. In this example, the focus of the educators is to adjust the preschool environment to be more in line with the school environment, rather than making provisions at school to be more like preschool. While Brenda reported that the children had responded well to this change, by ‘showing more creativity’ in their play without play resources, support for the strategy was not tested within the network.

Tarryn highlighted reciprocal visits as an important transition activity. She argued for the importance of such visits throughout the year, not just in the designated transition program. .

I believe that reciprocal visits right across the year is a really important and effective strategy for transition…in past years and this year we had Grade Six students from the local primary school come…here as part of their community service, but we’ve also had children down at Easter time and do some Easter activities with our children. We’ve had a Grade One and Two
choir come down and sing and perform for our children, so they are little examples of what I believe are really lovely reciprocal visits that don’t only happen in Term Four during the structured, formal transition period…Some of our [preschool] children from last year have come back this year in Term Three, and read to our [preschool] kids. Another strategy that I believe works really well is having most of the children transitioning on the one day…that was an advantage. (Tarryn)

Brenda worked in a preschool that was co-located on the school grounds. She saw advantages of this for children’s transition to school.

A good thing about us being attached to a school is we can have a year-long transition for the children, because we are a small school and a small [preschool]. The [preschool] kids are able to play in the school grounds, have lunch with the school children and form those relationships with the children without becoming too intimidated…which really helps when it comes to that time of the year and they’re actually having to do that for different schools that are even larger. If they’re coming over here well they’re already settled. In the bigger scenario in terms of the continuity between [preschool] and school, in our situation with the [preschool] being on school grounds…the continuity is supported throughout the year, through many activities, being at the back of the school ground, they have to walk past the school so get to know the area so when it does come to school it’s not a brand new freaky thing, they’ve got the continuity of the environment. (Brenda)

A final strategy observed by the network was the speed dating event that network members participated in towards the end of the year. This event was planned as an opportunity for prior-to-school and school educators to get together in the one room in a speed dating format, having conversations with one another about each of the children transitioning to school that year. Educators used this opportunity to pass on transition statements that could be discussed during this time.
Meeting with the [Foundation] teachers when we pass the statements on, I think that’s quite a valuable experience too, because we get to have face-to-face contact where we can have a quick chat about particular families or particular children and the challenges…things like that. And sometimes we can’t always write everything in the statements, and obviously it’s a strengths-based document but it’s good to touch base with the teachers when we do pass them over so that they have that further information, which I think is good. (Lena)

Across the network several strategies were used with a view to building more effective transition to school practices. There were clearly different interpretations of how this could be achieved best. It was evident that practitioners were willing to try different strategies in order to best meet the needs of children and families, as well as better inform themselves, to ultimately improve upon their practices.

7.12.4 Identifying issues

While network members were in agreement about many elements of transition, appearing to have similar philosophies and goals, there was also evidence of disagreement regarding the format of the transition program, in particular the number of transition visits that were to occur. Exploration of this issue revealed some key philosophical differences between the network members around the role of preschool.

…I got up on my soapbox a little bit and talked about how eight or nine transition sessions in Term Four is just way too many. My argument for that was it really interrupts our Term Four curriculum at [preschool], especially for those children who are slow to warm up, and are just really kicking off in Term Four, it can take that long for some of our pre-schoolers to really step up, and then that transition begins, it can really upset them emotionally…I feel too, school has school children for 13 years, we have our pre-schoolers for one year and the way
some of the school transition programs, especially the ones running across eight or nine
weeks of Term Four, they’re really encroaching on our curriculum and things that we have in
place, some children are missing out because they’re heading off on their school visit.
(Tarryn)

[Preschool] teachers felt that to have any earlier transition was sort of impacting negatively on
their [preschool] year and because the governance of [preschool] is so different to the
governance of primary schools…When you’re the [preschool] teacher, you’re sort of the
master of the ship, and you’ve got your group around you, your committee…so the teachers
and the committee call the shots, and it was sort of almost like, and I’m saying empire
building because I don’t mean they were building an empire as such for any egotistical
reasons but they did have a little empire that they didn’t want to lose, so it was very much a
line in the sand ‘this is our [preschool], and you can have the kids for as little time as possible
at the end of the year, but please don’t impact on our whole year’s program’ and so we had to
be very careful. (Helen)

The timing and number of visits to schools were clearly issues that impacted on both
prior-to-school and school settings. Tarryn was adamant in her view that the visits were a
significant intrusion in the preschool program. Helen appeared dismissive of these concerns,
suggesting that the concerns were driven by other than educational reasons. While Charlotte
and Kim appeared to adopt conciliatory positions, the entrenchment of opposing views
suggested that reciprocal understandings of the different contexts, expectations and
approaches were not shared across the network.

There was an attempt made by the school leadership to understand the position of the
preschool educators, where the principals attended an early years leadership professional
development. The principals reported the following conclusions from their experience.
Helen: Jemma and I trotted off together and did an early years professional development in leadership of early years so we tried to expand our understanding, and part of our study involved us going and talking with [preschool] teachers, and we found that they were in desperate states, they were in lots of ways, holding up something that was almost a huge burden, and they felt they were holding it up themselves, and they really longed for more collegiate support, and we realised there was a big gap there in our town. They said to us ‘we want what your [Foundation] teachers have got, and that’s you’ because we’re in the firing line, and the buck stops with us, and we deal with stuff so that our teachers can teach, whereas the [preschool] teachers have [to deal with] everything, they have the committee to deal with, they are living and breathing that committee because their committee members’ kids are at [preschool].

Jemma: And the committee changes every year too. So they’re dealing with a new band of people most years. So they’d like admin support, principal support, yeah everything

Helen: It was a bit of an eye opener for Jemma and I, because one staff member burst into tears, we found they were under a heap of pressure and it’s a bit like a duck swimming across the pond…You’ve got to look as though you’ve got it all under control but underneath your little legs are going flat out, and it’s exhausting, it’s a ticket to burnout really.

Despite going part way to understanding the experiences of preschool teachers, it appeared that some of the conclusions made by principals regarding preschools were affirmed during their professional development session.

Recognising the diversity of views within the network, Leanne concluded that working with a number of people with competing priorities brought inevitable challenges.

I don’t think there is any right or wrong way. We throw around a lot of different ideas, there is a lot of different opinions, and that’s ok, and maybe not everyone is going to be happy all
of the time, and that’s ok too, that’s just part of the logistics of different people being in a group. (Lena)

It was apparent that the contrasting beliefs around preschool and the motives of prior-to-school practitioners was a source of friction for the network, manifesting in disagreement around the number of transition sessions that were appropriate. This example is pertinent to the discussion earlier around the importance of reciprocal understandings and professional respect between practitioners. In this case, the lack of reciprocal understandings and professional respect materialised into an inability to agree on a practical issue.

7.12.5 Transition statements

The effectiveness of transition statements was a prominent discussion in both the network meeting and follow-up interviews. There was diversity of opinion about the usefulness of transition statements. Several negative comments about transition statements came from the school principals.

No, they really miss the mark, I think they are really friendly and kind and positive and I think they’re written for parents. I think there needs to be another level of professional exchange, and that needs to be between our teachers, and that doesn’t happen. I think they’re a bit of a waste of time. (Helen)

Our [preschool] teachers certainly say that, they will tell us, ‘this is written for the parent’ and if I’ve got a student with a disability who may need some funding, then they will write a separate document for me and those sorts of things. They’re not useful at all. (Jemma)

Other network members described the transition statements as an extremely useful tool for communicating information between prior-to-school and school settings. Of note,
was the ability of the statements to record valuable information about children’s interests, strengths and particular needs.

We’ve got a lot of information about the children that’s included in the statements, that should be passed on to the school because it can assist so much with the transition, and with their planning and learning, particularly in those first few weeks. If the teachers are aware of what the child’s interests are, and their strengths and how they learn, and where they may require more assistance…we’ve got a whole year’s worth of knowledge, it may as well be passed on. And the transition statements involve the families as well, because they write a part, which is really valuable as well, because it’s their view on the child’s transition to school, and how they feel they will go, and what they feel they will enjoy, and what they might be challenged by, and some parents really enjoy writing their part…They see a different side to their child than we see, so that’s why it’s so valuable they contribute that part, because they’re the child’s first educator and children can be very different in their home environment to what they are at [preschool]. (Leanne)

We use the transition statements…when they say this child is really into cars, or loves painting or things…we use them a lot. So I think I need to remember that that child loves that, so if they’re having a meltdown I can give them some time on that. (Charlotte)

The wording is really good, it’s so great in terms of our transition statements, and it helps us to do so much more summative assessment too, and just using words from the Framework and I like that it’s really strengths-based, so when we’re writing statements, they’re strengths-based for the children as learners. (Tarryn)

Because we put them into our file, if we ever go after any diagnosis or funding it is really great to have that evidence from way back in [preschool]. (Network member)

They were very informative! I always go back and re-read them, a couple of weeks into Term One because a lot of it makes a bit more sense. (Network member)
Network members acknowledged the inclusion of families in the transition statements, noting that while in some instances obtaining consent from families to share the statements with the school was a barrier, their contribution to the statements was valuable and worthwhile.

As long as we get them too, that’s the other thing, parents have to sign the form to say they can release it to us, and if we don’t get that, then it definitely makes a big difference. (Network member)

I find the family section really helpful, I love reading the family section of the statements, they’re very insightful, and they’re hilarious sometimes! (Charlotte)

Tarryn’s strategy to overcome parental reluctance to share transition statement was Just to really talk about the value and importance of those transition statements. (Tarryn)

While the comments about transition statements were mostly positive, Charlotte recommended that there be provision for skills-based information for school educators, explaining that would be helpful for her.

I would prefer a checklist of some sort…that’s got left-handed, scissor skills, all that stuff, because in the transition visits I will go around and take note of who is left handed and who can write their name and things like that, because sometimes in the transition statements you have to read between the lines a little bit. (Charlotte)

7.12.6 Early Years Learning Framework

Network members referenced the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (frequently cited as the Early Years Learning Framework) during their
conversations about transition. Notably, school educators had taken recent interest in using the document to assist in their planning for children making the transition to school. This was driven by a need to support children who were identified as performing below the standards outlined in the Australian Curriculum (AC) (or Victorian Curriculum Foundation-10 in Victoria).

To be honest I had not had much to do with the Early Years Framework until last year. Last year we looked at the EYLF and [AC] and realised what a great resource this was for us as lots of our children were below the [AC] standards. We will use this Framework this year to help us work out where children are to move them onto their next point of growth. (Melinda)

The Early Years Framework, I remember getting it out and looking to see what we are doing from that, especially in Term One, just to sort of ease the kids in. We’ve sort of steered away from it a little bit now because developmentally they’re a lot further on but at the start of the year I think it’s really important to have that when you’re planning activities in your mind, because that’s where they’ve come from. (Network member)

It is relevant to note that the school educators took interest in the Framework because they were searching for a benchmarking tool for lower-performing children, not to use as a general pedagogical resource. This suggests that school educators were not aware that the document was designed to be applicable for children up to age eight, and was already relevant in the school context.

Tarryn was an advocate of implementing the EYLF in schools, particularly to support children who found it difficult to operate in a formal learning environment.

I’d like our principals to use our Framework more, because our Framework isn’t only for preschool, it’s for Grade One and Two as well, but those outcomes and that curriculum isn’t utilised as well as it could be in the primary school setting…I think that would allow a bit
more flexibility for schools to support those children who we recommend for a second year of [preschool]. I think the Framework would be really helpful in linking that [preschool] year to an early play-based [Foundation] year, because there is such a spectrum of readiness…There are children who aren’t ready for all that formal learning in [Foundation]. (Tarryn)

One of the challenges identified by the network members around use of the EYLF was a lack of familiarity by school educators.

…the only reason I got to read the Framework was because my best friend works at the Department [of Education] and she started talking to me about the Framework and I had no idea what she was talking about, so she gave me a copy of it, so that’s the only reason I read it…My principal has spoken to me about reading it, and using it more, but it’s hard because it’s very foreign to us. (Charlotte)

A further challenge related to inconsistencies in the professional language used across prior-to-school and school settings.

I think a shared language…Whereas in the early years we are using a different language and in primary school using a different language, now we’re trying to use the same language to describe the same things…When we’re writing a transition report and we’re talking about learning that we’ve seen happen in our class, and then when the primary school teacher reads it, they understand it a bit more, rather than talking about fine motor, gross motor where now we’re talking about wellbeing…So I think it’s more of a shared language. (Network member)

I don’t have a great understanding of what the schools are following, but my understanding is that they should also be using the similar documents to what we’re using…I remember we were at a transition meeting quite a few years ago and the [Foundation] teachers had never seen a copy of Belonging, Being, Becoming, or the Victorian Framework, they didn’t know what it was, and I thought ‘oh my, what are we doing?’ [laughs] so I think there is a LOT of work to go there, on both sides, I feel like I need to be educated about that, but I also feel like
the schools need to be as well, and for example when we write our transition statements, the
five learning outcomes are the areas we write about, and if the schools aren’t familiar with the
document they’re really…I don’t know how much they are going to [get out of it]. They’re
thinking ‘what is she really saying when she talks about a sense of identity’ or whatever, so I
find that that’s quite…bewildering for me. (Leanne)

They don’t look alike, and they don’t use the same language…it’s like they didn’t
communicate with each other when they did it! (Charlotte)

Some comments reflected a desire from prior-to-school educators for school educators
to be more familiar with the EYLF in order for communication between settings to be more
meaningful and relevant.

It would be ideal to do some shared PD or something like that, where that was that common
ground…because there isn’t that common knowledge that can be shared, I’m not sure…but
that would be a good thing, and that could be something that we could talk about at our next
meeting next year, and about the Framework, and the language in that. (Leanne)

Charlotte expressed interest in becoming more familiar with the EYLF, in order to
understand early years professional practice, and ultimately be better placed to plan for and
meet the needs of children in their classrooms.

I’ve got curriculum documents about what they should be doing prior to school, and it’s
completely different to the Early Years Framework, so we kind of need to merge them a little
bit. We find the feedback we get from students and [preschool] teachers is that they want to
do more of what they do in [preschool] at the start of school, so it’s a bit smoother for them,
so it’s about structured play and developmental play and stuff, it’s all through the Framework,
so we’re going to use that document to help us plan a lot of that stuff. But I remember reading
the Framework and some of it is really hard to get your head around…I thought ‘what exactly
do they mean by that?’ (Charlotte)
While network members perceived the Early Years Learning Framework to be a valuable and relevant resource, there were differences in how school and prior-to-school educators accessed and used it. Despite advocates for its use, some major challenges were identified in terms of understanding the document and interpreting the language used in the document.

### 7.12.7 Australian Curriculum

Common threads in discussions around the Australian Curriculum were that it was often an inappropriate document for teaching children in the first year of school, and that it put pressure on educators to have children performing at a particular standard.

Frustrated by the restrictiveness and standards of the Australian Curriculum, school educators had employed the use of an alternative curriculum document to guide their pedagogical practice in the first year of school. This was the *Pre-AusVELS (Victorian Essential Learning Standards)* (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2016) which was the Australian curriculum framework for children with disabilities and additional learning needs. This document no longer exists, and was replaced in 2017 by the *Towards Foundation Level Victorian Curriculum (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA), 2018)*.

Our curriculum is assuming that all of our children are coming in at zero point zero which is not the case, and having that Pre-AusVELS that we’re looking at now, we’re better able to place the kids…gives us a bit more clarity I think. (Kim)

The government keep changing the curriculum so that’s really annoying to get your head around one thing, and they change it to another….there are websites that you can go to where
they will give you examples of work, lessons, they will re-word what it says three different ways so you can hopefully figure out what it means, because most of the time you read a curriculum document and you go ‘I don’t know what I’m supposed to be teaching there’…I find being a [Foundation] teacher, and maybe society looks at it like they all start at a certain point, like they all start at zero…some will come in three, six, eighteen months behind, or three, six or eighteen months ahead so we find that what we’re going to do next year is we’ve got a pre-Australian Curriculum, we’re going to test all the kids that we’re worried about and see how far behind or ahead they are so we can gauge how much we need to add to their learning basically, and to make us accountable, so we can say ‘yes we are doing our job’.

(Charlotte)

School educators lamented that despite a desire to include the EYLF, and play-based pedagogy in their practice, they felt immense pressure to report against the standards set in the school curriculum.

It’s quite a difficult thing, because not only are we trying to incorporate that [the Early Years Learning Framework] there is also lots we have to have covered, and that we’re accountable for under [AC] by June, and that’s quite difficult because you start gathering that information in May, so you haven’t actually had the hours with them, but that’s more of an issue with [AC]. (Network member)

It appears that the performance requirements set out in the Australian Curriculum for children in their first year of school placed significant pressure on educators to reach those targets. This pressure was cited as one of the main difficulties in increasing the focus on play-based experiences and pedagogies for children in the first year of school.
7.13 Rural contexts

The follow-up interviews were the source of data relating to rural context. In their comments about the community of Blacksmith, network members described a number of characteristics of their rural community. Familiarity with people was highlighted as a positive attribute of a rural community, while violence and trauma were identified as community issues. The major issues for rural education in the blacksmith community were noted as workforce and educational access.

7.13.1 Characteristics of rural contexts

Network members reflected on the characteristics of Blacksmith as a rural community. Consistent threads in the defining features of rural communities were of community strength and working together. As an example, educators described how families from outer-lying areas came together to help negotiate challenges such as travel to and from preschool and school.

We have quite a few families that travel into Blacksmith for [preschool] attendance, quite a few farming families…there is quite a little network there where people carpool if they know each other, or they get to know each other through [preschool] and share things like drop-off and pick-up so they’re not having to travel in and out so much. (Leanne).

Charlotte reflected on the phenomenon of people who grew up in the community of Blacksmith returning to work there in their adulthood. She noted that several of her fellow colleagues had grown up in Blacksmith and there was a desire to return to the community and give back to it.
We have a lot of teachers who have grown up in Blacksmith, gone off to uni and come back to teach…I’m one of them. I went to the school that I’m teaching at…I find Blacksmith is really good like that. At one stage out of 110 staff there was about 20 former students…There is a stigma about that though – people are like ‘why would you want to go back and work in Blacksmith?’ and I’m like ‘because I love Blacksmith, that’s all I’ve ever wanted to do.

(Charlotte)

Brenda noted that rural communities often have smaller schools and smaller class sizes, affording greater opportunities to meet the individual needs of children.

Being in a rural area we’ve got smaller class sizes…I find that helps us to really focus on each child and really hone in on what they need help with, and focus on their individual learning.

(Brenda)

7.13.2 Familiarity with people

Another notion to be generated from the data around rural communities was that of familiarity with people. Network members highlighted how familiarity allowed them to develop meaningful relationships, particularly with children and their families.

I think I’m able to have a better relationship with all the families, because there are less of them, it means I can spend more time talking to all of them, and I’m not struck for time…I’m really able to be flexible with parents and they’re able to be flexible with me which is a great side to the relationship as well….Even just knowing all the names of the families…I think that helps make them more comfortable coming in…because they know I care enough to actually know their names. I’m sure in bigger classes that can get really difficult. (Brenda)
Leanne reflected on the advantages of being in a setting for long enough to teach several members of the one family, and how this was a further opportunity to build lasting and meaningful relationships with families and their children.

We see a lot of continuation of families in our service, so we might have had the oldest child eight years ago, and now it’s the youngest child of families of three or four, and that’s really rewarding, we really enjoy that, we have that continuity with our families, and I think you probably get that more in rural settings, because there is more choice of places to go in larger cities and people probably tend to move around a bit more, whereas they might stay if they’re established here in Blacksmith. Working with lots of the same families…that’s been a really rewarding part of working in this community. (Leanne)

Carly pondered whether familiarity with people was truly due to the size and context of a community, or whether it was related to the people in that community.

I think being part of a smaller community you do get to know people, that are in roles and organisations that you’re dealing with, so I guess there’s that familiarity aspect, but that can happen in larger communities too, it’s always the same people who come together. (Carly)

### 7.13.3 Issues in rural education

Several challenges were identified by the network members that related to the provision of education in rural contexts. One example related to issues around family violence and mental health. Members described the profound impact that this had on the community and the subsequent effects for children.

I think there can be challenges for rural areas because we sometimes get families that come, that are placed, from cities, coming to rural areas, particularly families who are experiencing
family violence and things like that, they get shunted off to the country, and they are often quite isolated so that can present challenges…Often they put them in public housing, which is quite a distance from town, public transport is always an issue and especially public transport that is responsive to [preschool] times, drop off can be quite complicated because of the shortened hours that [preschool] run for…just the isolation…When a woman has been beaten by a husband or a partner or threatened, they pack up that woman and the children and move THEM to these isolated locations away from their family, away from whatever they know…and that impacts on children’s transience in and out of schools and [preschool], it’s very disruptive and we’ve seen a bit of it. Often they don’t end up staying very long, so they don’t always make the connections they need to…setting kids up to fail. So that social isolation is worse in rural areas because when they come here, they haven’t got the services and things that they’re used to having in town, the trains and buses…and sometimes breaking into a smaller community can be tricky too, because people can be more…clicky…If you’re coming in the latter part of the year, and bringing a kid to [preschool] and then they’ve got to start again and make new friends, that impacts on children’s ability to transition to [preschool] and school. (Carly)

We have frightening numbers of domestic and family violence…a lot of our kids come to school having witnessed horrendous things on the weekend or in the morning, and a lot of kids come to school without breakfast or having a rough night’s sleep and we’ve got families living on or below the poverty line, but at the same time, some of them are the are the most supportive and amazing families who just do the best with what they’ve got. (Charlotte)

Another issue that emerged related to rural education was the consequences of public school amalgamations. Charlotte noted that many families were initially unhappy with the community’s decision to combine the public schools into Blacksmiths F-12 College, but were left with few options in terms of school choice.
When we merged…I was on the committee that went to visit schools in Melbourne that had become F-12 and if parents aren’t happy they can just take them to the next suburb…you can’t do that in Blacksmith, the only state school is Blacksmith F-12 College now…If you don’t want to send them here, you’ve got to send them to a Catholic school or in another town, so that was hard to deal with. (Charlotte)

Access to resources was also cited by network members as a potential challenge for rural education, although this appeared to differ across settings, with some schools having adequate access to resources, while others did not.

Next year our school is putting a lot of money into resources, we're getting a full time speech therapist to work in the two F- Grade Four campuses, I nearly cried with happiness when I found that out! With professional days and things like that, we’re pretty lucky they’re [leadership] fairly supportive like that, so I don’t find that’s a big issue, but it’s taken a couple of years to get to that stage. (Charlotte)

We are a quite small school, so we have limited funding which makes it difficult to get lots of resources that can help our program and get the equipment that we would like to really benefit the children. (Brenda)

One network member cited the lack of permanent employment, especially in the prior-to-school sector as a potential disadvantage of rural communities.

For some rural communities that would be a big issue, especially because most [preschool] positions are part-time, not full-time, so that makes it harder because some people aren’t willing to move to a rural area to gain employment if they know employment is only going to mean a certain number of hours per week. (Leanne)

Another disadvantage for rural contexts was the access to staff, and more specifically, relief teaching staff. Members described the challenges of locating replacement relief staff to
cover educators in their absence. In some cases, settings were forced to close due to being unable to find relief teaching staff.

We certainly have issues with getting qualified relief staff to come in and relieve when I’m away or other educators are away, but particularly with the teaching position, because you require a Bachelor-trained person to relieve and that can be really challenging. There just isn’t a great big pool of relief staff like there would be in larger areas. (Leanne)

To find [preschool] teachers is very difficult, they actually don’t have a back-up for me if I’m sick, so [preschool] can get cancelled unfortunately…so that’s an issue we have. (Brenda)

7.13.4 Isolation

While network members did acknowledge the geographical distance of their community from other larger centres, this was not referred to as a disadvantage; rather, members felt they had satisfactory access to everything they needed.

I like our position in regards to everything, like you’re [a few] hours away from Melbourne, you can go to [other regional centres]…I find Blacksmith to be in the middle of everything. (Charlotte)

In terms of having incursions and visitors come to us, our photographer comes to us from Melbourne, we had Museum Victoria here last week, so there are a lot of organisations who are prepared to come to us in a rural area…So I don’t believe that we miss out of any of those because we’re in a rural area. (Tarryn)

However, Melinda noted the challenges of accessing relevant professional development in this rural area.
I came from teaching in Melbourne where there is so much PD and my choice…here the PD is not my choice and not always the best. (Melinda)

Network members suggested that rural contexts were characterised primarily by community strength, and the coming together of people to overcome obstacles. Familiarity with people was identified as an attribute of rural contexts, and a method for enhancing relationships between people in the community. Several challenges of living and working in a rural context were outlined, and these related to access to staff and the issues faced by rural education, particularly family violence. Overall, isolation from larger centres was not considered a disadvantage.

7.14 Chapter summary

This chapter presented the results from the Blacksmith site. Information around the context of the community and network, as well as network visits and follow-up interviews was included. The chapter then presented the data under each of the main categories and sub-categories developed from the data analysis. The main categories were: Having a purpose, leadership, reciprocal understandings, relationships, professionalism, sustainability of the network, goals for transition and rural contexts.
8 Chapter Eight - Results - Fern Creek

8.1 Context of community

Fern Creek is located in central New South Wales and has a population of approximately 9,500 people, with around 10% of those being Indigenous Australians (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017). Fern Creek is a central area of primary production in New South Wales. It is also a popular destination for tourists. The SEIFA Index score for Fern Creek in 2011 was 953 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011b), somewhat lower than the mean score of 1000.

8.2 Education services

Fern Creek hosts two government primary schools catering for students F- Grade Six. Fern Creek Public School has an enrolment of 280 students, with approximately 15% of those identifying as Indigenous Australians (ACARA, 2017). School promotional material emphasises the school aim of fostering productive partnerships between the school, families and the community.

Fern Creek North Public School has a student population of around 300, 36% of whom identify as Indigenous Australians (ACARA, 2017). According to information provided by the school, the school promotes lifelong learning and quality teaching in a safe and caring environment. Fern Creek North operates an independently run transition to school program located on the school campus.
St Louis’ Primary School is a Catholic systemic school, catering for approximately 300 students, of whom 7% identify as Indigenous Australians (ACARA, 2017). St Louis’ statement of aims refers to creating a community where student learning is encouraged, guided by the Catholic faith. Fern Creek also has a high school, catering for students from Year Seven to 12.

Fern Creek Preschool operates in a new, purpose-built preschool catering for 75 children per day aged three-to-five years. The preschool statement of philosophy refers to learning as fun, and their aim to provide a stimulating learning environment, underpinned by high quality practice.

Fern Creek also has three other long day care early childhood services catering for children aged birth to five years. One community-run service offers long day care, preschool and after school care for 90 children. Two privately-owned long day care services cater for 75 and 59 children each day.

8.3 Network context

Fern Creek hosted a small network that focuses on improving transition to school. The network comprised of the preschool director, and representatives from each of the three primary schools (see Table 10). One of the long day care centres also worked closely with the preschool and schools (as identified by the other network members), however the representative from this centre did not respond to invitations to participate in the research. The other three long day care services described earlier were not part of the network. When asked about the reasons for this, the preschool director explained that while there had positive relations with these centres, the relationships with these centres were not consolidated. She
also speculated that recent staffing changes – which had resulted in staff moving from these centres to the preschool – as well as lower fees offered at the preschool had heightened competition between the early childhood providers. She articulated some hope that in the future ‘things will settle down’ and the centres would be able to establish a working relationship.

The organisation of the network was informal. The members had ongoing contact with one another throughout the year, but met more often towards the end of the year around the time of transition to school. The members met in both pre-organised meetings, with a particular aim or focus for that meeting, as well as more spontaneously during a reciprocal visit, or, when the need arose. The preschool and Catholic school are located very close to one another, enabling easy access for members to come together. The preschool participated in joint activities with all three primary schools throughout the year, which provided further opportunities for members to communicate with one another, and discuss any issues or concerns.

At the time of the study, the network has been operating for approximately five years, with the preschool appearing to be the driving force behind the development of relationships with all of the schools. The preschool was the common denominator in the network, providing a point of convergence for the schools. The director of the preschool noted that when she was first appointed, she made it a priority to visit each of the schools and introduce herself, and initiate relationships between the preschool and schools as well as with other community organisations. These connections have continued and have enabled the development of the network over this time.
Table 10: Fern Creek network members

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Notes</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>Preschool Director, Fern Creek Preschool</td>
<td>Leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patricia</td>
<td>Special education teacher and transition coordinator, St Louis’ Primary School</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nerida</td>
<td>Foundation educator, Fern Creek Public School</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Clarissa</td>
<td>Transition program educator, Fern Creek North Public School</td>
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As mentioned above, there was at least one other member of the network from a long day care setting, however they did not respond to invitations to participate in the research.

8.4 Network visits and interviews

Due to the informal nature of the Fern Creek network, and restrictions around the timing of research visits, the network meetings themselves were not attended as part of the research. This was due primarily to the difficulty of attempting to schedule the research visits with the spontaneous meetings of the network members. Instead, interviews were conducted with the network members over two separate visits to Fern Creek, and through follow-up phone calls.

The first visit to Fern Creek occurred in July, 2015 where the interview was conducted at the Fern Creek Preschool. Three of the three network members were present; Anne, Patricia and Nerida. Towards the end of the interview, two of the network members; Patricia and Nerida had to leave. The interview was continued with Anne. It is worth noting
that during this time Anne made some comments that she may not have made with the other network members present. Examples of these comments will be highlighted. This first interview went for approximately two hours.

A second visit to Fern Creek occurred in February, 2016 where two of the network members were available at this time; Anne and Patricia. This interview took place at St Louis’ Primary School and went for approximately one hour. Follow-up phone interviews were conducted with Nerida and Clarissa who were not available during this visit. Negotiating times to visit the network was complex. For example, Clarissa worked part time in Fern Creek, and spent the other days each week working in another town. Despite efforts to coordinate the research visits at a time that would suit all the members, and the researcher, this was not possible.

8.5 Leadership

Anne assumed many of the responsibilities of a leader including; initiating and organising meetings between members, being a central person of contact, as well as setting goals for the network. Anne also demonstrated leadership traits such as encouraging and supporting other network members, being optimistic and resilient, and being friendly and approachable. The leadership of the network itself was not something that the network members actively discussed in the interviews. This suggests that Anne's leadership within the network was implicit, and not something that required direct acknowledgement or attention. In her role as director at the preschool, Anne was already in a position of leadership, providing management, support and guidance to her staff.
Through her role as director at the preschool, Anne was a well-recognised figure in the wider community of Fern Creek. Anne described how when she was first appointed as director, she made several concerted efforts to improve relations amongst the education community. One example of this was her active campaigning for, and success in securing, a parent and community engagement grant to make preschool more accessible for families in Fern Creek. Anne described how receiving the funds allowed her to change the ethos around the preschool.

Six years ago when I lived here we probably had 20 children attend a day…you didn’t come here unless you had money….So we received $19,000 and it was purely so I could go out in the community and let people know who we were and shift the thought that you could only come here if you were someone. (Anne)

During this time, Anne’s strategy included making deliberate efforts to establish relationships with other educational settings and community services to improve the opportunities for children and families in her community.

I went and knocked on every principal’s door and introduced myself…just tried to think of anyone in the community that I could possibly develop a partnership with, early childhood nurses, occupational therapists, speech therapists…that worked really well…and we developed a program with a local Aboriginal community organisation that would pick up our kids, we reduced our fees to $5 a day for kids [of parents with] with pension cards or [who were] Aboriginal, we developed a lunch program…if you’ve got no food, it’s like shame and that was a bit of a barrier so we’ve wiped that as an issue. All the Aboriginal kids, things are changing now, we gave them all a shirt and a hat to start…employed an Aboriginal worker straight away…(Anne)

Through her passion and enthusiasm for connecting with the community and driving change, Anne had positioned herself as the network leader.
In addition to the leadership that occurred within the network, leadership beyond the network was influential. In particular, leadership from school principals had a significant bearing on the network and its membership.

The principal has to be willing to know that it’s important, that we do make that contact, and that’s a priority, so giving me the time to go to the preschool and visit and kids that might need that extra help - that has to be a priority as well. (Patricia)

Our principal does support it, very much so, and it does cost a lot of money, the cost of relieving teachers…We feel like we can just get started straight away, on that first day, bang. (Nerida)

Nerida acknowledged that there were sacrifices that were made from her school leader in order to support her participation in the network. In addition, she reported that support from her school principal allowed her to be more effective as an educator by making more productive use of her time, and therefore able to meet the needs of children.

Network members indicated that collegial support from principals for the network members working together across different schools alleviated tensions around competitiveness or rivalry between the schools. In this instance, the focus was on working collaboratively to meet the needs of children in the community, not for the benefit of individual schools.

Patricia: Our principal…we don’t feel like it’s one school against the other, and there is no tolerance for that. If that school is offering something for that child…and every child is different and maybe then can do something for that child and we can do something different.

Nerida: Yeah it’s about the child.
Patricia: …it’s not about the school, and who’s got the best this and who does this better…I think it’s accepted that every school has things that work and don’t work…

It was apparent that leadership both within and outside of the network had a direct impact on the functioning of the network. Network leader, Anne, guided the direction and focus of the network, forged strong relationships with the other network members as well as the wider community, and provided a central point of contact for the other network members. It was clear that without the support from leadership in the network members’ respective settings, they could not have been active and effective members of the network.

8.6 Reciprocal understandings

Network members emphasised the importance of reciprocal understandings between those working across prior-to-school and school sectors. Understandings around beliefs and pedagogical practices were highlighted particularly.

Anne: We naturally have that conversation and she has the same beliefs as me, so it’s really easy for us to have those conversations.

Patricia: I think it’s about being on the same page. Anne has invited the school to come to sessions that the preschool has held, which has probably made it a bit easier…it’s easier for us to go and join you guys, and we can bring the information back.

Anne: I feel like we’re all on the same level…like when we have the specialists come, and we’re all learning things together, so it definitely breaks down barriers…And we’re all learning the same thing, so we’re all doing the same thing for the kids.

Clarissa’s role as the coordinator of a standalone transition program operating on the campus of Fern Creek North School afforded a range of opportunities for her to build
understandings about transition. The transition program Clarissa coordinated had been established over a decade ago with the aim of providing a transition program for children who did not access any other early childhood education setting. The year-long program involved children attending sessions for two hours each week to build the skills necessary for starting school. Being located on the school campus, children also experienced a gradual orientation to the school environment. Sharing the school site also facilitated interactions between Clarissa and the school staff involved in transition. This helped develop reciprocal understandings between educators, enabling more effective communication and decision-making for educators in both settings.

I think we’ve both learnt things, like I’ve thought there are children that weren’t ready to go to school and the school has said well if they’re in an environment that is stimulating and they were receiving that sort of quality home life, then that would be fine, but if they’re in a situation where either Mum or Dad or both are having a challenging time and they haven’t got the time, sometimes they are better to go straight into the school system. So it was really good because we have both the early childhood focus and the primary focus as well…So that’s been another bonus of being in the environment together. (Clarissa)

8.6.1 Building understanding

The notion of building and strengthening reciprocal understandings between educators was given weight by the network members. In the context of building understandings, Patricia acknowledged the importance of recognising potential professional limitations, as well as embracing opportunities for working with, and gaining knowledge from, others.
It’s your ability to try and work on those things rather than going, ‘oh everything is perfect, we get things right every single time!’ because you don’t, you can’t. You can’t physically do that, everyone has the best intentions but we’re all human and we’re dealing with a whole range of different families with different complexities all the time. (Patricia)

Clarissa noted that consultation with other professionals around planning for transition was necessary in order to promote understandings, and avoid misunderstandings or conflict between educators in different settings.

One of the things we did first…I wanted to make sure that the other services didn’t think that we were invading their time and their children with enrolments and that sort of thing, because that is a factor in terms of transition programs…or it’s competition really…We didn’t want it to impact on preschool programs and things like that. So when I started in Fern Creek I went and talked to Anne…and the other services and made sure they knew what our intention was, so that was fine. (Clarissa)

The approaches described by both Clarissa and Anne suggest that deliberate efforts were made by the network members to identify and alleviate potential tensions.

One of the strategies identified for enhancing reciprocal understandings between educators was reciprocal visits. These visits provided educators with opportunities to observe the professional practices of their colleagues across settings. There were many examples of reciprocal visits occurring in Fern Creek. The preschool visited the schools regularly throughout the year, participating in special days and planned events together. Also, school children attended the preschool to build relationships with the preschool children. School educators also visited the preschool, mostly during scheduled visits to visit the children and the educators there. These examples are discussed in more detail later in relation to activities around transition to school. In one example, educators swapped settings and taught their
colleague’s group of children for a morning, providing opportunities to build understandings around what happened in that setting.

We’ve had, during Term 2, the [Foundation] teacher has popped in a few times, the ones who will be the 2017 [Foundation] teachers, just to say g’day so we just have an informal hello, and then at the beginning of this Term, I went over and taught [Foundation] while the [Foundation] teacher came over and taught [the transition program]. (Clarissa)

While this was one instance where network members had taken steps to understand what happened in the ‘other’ settings, this was not necessarily a typical experience. Anne made the following comment when asked about whether she perceived herself to be influential in the school settings. It is important to note that this comment was made in the absence of the other network members, and Anne may have responded if the other members had been present.

No! Especially not in one of the schools…I’d like to think so, but no. It does make me wonder…it makes me want to think I need to get in there…and it makes me wonder too – what is their interpretation of play-based learning and enquiry learning to what ours is?

(Anne)

In this example, Anne was eager to gain a greater understanding of the school’s interpretation of pedagogical practices, and how these might, or might not, fit with her own.

8.6.2 Communication

Network members utilised a number of opportunities to communicate with one another. Overall, communication among the group was regarded as effective. In the following
example, educators described collaborating to make decisions around the school readiness of particular children.

We have just had a [readiness] meeting with one of our children that’s going to school, and so then we sat down at the end of the meeting and went through all of it. I think we had seven kids that we were a little bit worried about, and I said ‘hey, look I don’t think this child is ready, I’ve told the parents but they’re not listening’ and they said ‘that’s ok, we will have a chat on our end…so we’re working together and giving the same message.’ (Anne)

Anne reflected that communicating with other educators from the school assisted her to make professional decisions, and that it was beneficial to have school educators who gave their support. Further comments from network members explained that educators were sometimes required to make difficult decisions that were in the best interests of the child, accentuating the need for effective communication between the professionals involved.

[with] some kids we have to decide if they are better off if they go to school because their home life…it’s going to be better for them at school sometimes. The school is pretty good at working together with that. (Anne)

And we link up with the school in many instances. Like we were working with a family whose child had issues with being overweight and we talked with the teachers in the school and they were going to help by monitoring the child’s lunchboxes, and support the family with that. So there’s that lovely continuation of that important stuff into the school. (Clarissa)

One of the strategies utilised by the network members during transition was to have informal meetings to discuss the children who were to start school the following year. Partly, these meetings were perceived as effective because of their informality.

Anne: At the end of last year we sat down and together with the [Foundation] teacher, very informal, we sat in our office with a cuppa and very informally went through my class list and
your class list and we just said ‘this is such and such’ even kids who didn’t have high needs, but ‘don’t put them with that child because they’ll bounce off each other’ it was really simple and the teacher wrote a few words about each child, and it was so simple and we went through everyone.

It was evident that the network members found it easy to organise and facilitate these kinds of meetings with one another and to exchange information. It could be argued that the ability of the network members to communicate effectively in this way was due to the reciprocal understandings that existed between the members.

Clarissa described a specific strategy devised by educators for communicating information about children.

I also do up a checklist, which goes to the head teacher…She was going to have a look over it, and make any comments, because we review it, the approach I’m using…it has all children listed with their number, colour, shape recognition, representational drawing and then just general comments – language, social confidence…those sorts of things. (Clarissa)

In this example, educators had identified a need for some basic information about children’s skills as they entered school. Educators worked together to develop a tool for communicating this information from the prior-to-school setting to the school.

Other network members noted that communication was important for throughout the year, not just during transition time.

I try and liaise with the preschool and the other day care centres throughout the year. (Nerida)

By the end of Term One we generally have a meeting with the school and they monitor my program and those sorts of things throughout the Term and say ‘well we are sort of targeting these children’ who may need extra support or they might already be attending an early
intervention or a speechy [speech therapist] or an OT [occupational therapist] or all those sorts of things. (Clarissa)

Clarissa remarked that the exchange of information across settings was somewhat common-sense, and that the sharing of information between educators had a direct impact on the child’s success at school.

…all of that information that we have that particularly, that if you’re not in a school setting that you want to share that, because it’s crazy having done all this work with the children and then schools starting with a clean slate, and not having any background that could put them so much further forward. (Clarissa)

Clarissa continued by explaining that the sharing of information can also help educators on a professional level.

One thing I would do is say ‘these are strategies that have worked for me’ if it’s a behaviour issue or something like that. (Clarissa)

The informal nature of much of the communication reflected the informality of the network.

I think we’re pretty informal…like even to organise Year Five are going to come and visit us in week nine or ten…but I just sent out a simple email, one sentence email…I don’t think we make it difficult. (Anne)

Network members highlighted the importance of reciprocal understandings. They employed a range of strategies to build upon the understandings across the prior-to-school and school settings. Effective and ongoing communication underpinned these strategies. Typically, the methods of communication were informal and provided genuine opportunities for the exchange of information.
8.7 **Relationships**

Discussion of relationships referred to those between the different settings, as well as with children and families, and community. In many instances, relationships appeared to evolve where there were reciprocal understandings between educators. Equally, reciprocal understandings were able to be built upon as a result of positive relationships. While data relating to relationships and reciprocal understandings are presented separately in this discussion, their mutual dependence is acknowledged.

8.7.1 **Between settings**

Network members described how opportunities for strengthening relationships between educators were afforded by the network. In some cases, this occurred when educators visited one another in their respective settings.

*We visit as much as we can, so that we’re part of that wider community with the school, and not just segregated preschool and school. (Anne)*

*We liaise with the local centres…Anne and I would have the most contact, in terms of observers. But the other centres have been really helpful too, when I’ve gone around to observe some of the children in the [transition] program just to get to a sense of how they function in the other services. (Clarissa)*

*We work closely with the preschool. I also find I get a great response from the other long day care. Myself and the other [Foundation] teacher go in and see the kids from preschool there because they don’t come for visits as such…like the separate visits that the preschool does and that’s a transport thing. It’s expensive to get buses in town. So we will go and visit them,*
and have a meeting with the preschool teachers about those children and what they find works for them and all that sort of stuff. (Patricia)

By physically visiting the other settings, educators were able to develop positive relationships with one another, work collaboratively and build understandings about each other’s practice. Patricia’s comment demonstrated an example where the network not only recognised an issue that was preventing the long day care centre from organising visits to the school and sought a solution, but also demonstrated a commitment by network members to maintain contact with that setting.

Clarissa commented on the enabling effect of educators possessing common understandings and beliefs around children and practice.

I think when you’ve got your eye very closely on what’s best for the child, then that will enable you to make the connections with the other people in the community who are working with those children…Over time, a culture develops where I see that the barriers aren’t there. (Clarissa)

Network members were able to recognise the importance of the role they played in fostering successful relationships with other educators. In particular, members identified that the attitudes of educators was a vital component of the development of positive relationships.

It’s really down to the people, that’s what it’s down to, the best resource we have is the teachers and…the attitude…it’s an attitude thing as well, because the more you work together and the more you work as a community and break down those barriers, the more productive it is for the children and for the professionals in different services. (Clarissa)

I think we try as much as we can, we’re pretty flexible. We can see the importance of working as a community as well. (Nerida)
One of the potential barriers to building relationships was competition between settings. While competition for enrolments was not perceived as an issue for the current network members, it was noted that it constituted a barrier to the network participation of educators in some of the other prior-to-school settings.

Sometimes people get that competitive thing happening…but we try to be really mindful of that. (Clarissa)

I think because the schools are welcoming in this partnership and they’re not competing against each other. (Anne)

While the majority of comments relating to relationships between settings were positive, there was one example where Anne expressed regret and frustration that in most instances, visits between the preschool and school were initiated by her at the preschool. It is important to note that this comment was made in the absence of other network members.

Sometimes I feel like we are constantly asking them; can we come to your school?...I feel like if we didn’t invite ourselves we wouldn’t get invited…they never ring and say ‘hey do you want to come and visit?’…they always say yes, but we always instigate it. (Anne)

Anne’s comments suggested that, while network members were able to value and develop effective relationships with one another, this was due mostly to the ongoing ambition and encouragement of one network member in particular. That she made the comment in the absence of the other network members could be an indication that Anne felt uncomfortable raising this issue with the other network members.

Members of his network indicated that, in order for strong, effective relationships to be built, and used to enhance the reciprocal understandings between educators, educators
must recognise the integral role that they play in that process. Potential barriers to fostering relationships were evident, which were acknowledged by the network members.

8.7.2 With children and families

Anne described how the preschool was actively looking for ways to improve the relationships between children and their families, and professionals. In the following example, she identified strategies that had been tried to bring families and professionals together.

We are just trying to close that gap…we have had open days with the early childhood nurses, and had barbeques but the two parents who don’t need to come, come [laughs] so we’re just trialling something else. (Anne)

We just want to start out on a really good foot, with open and honest communication about what’s happening for their child, which is hard to do, because we might be first ones to tell the parents that their child’s not progressing like we would like them to, and that’s confronting…the parents can take that as a reflection of themselves. (Patricia)

Patricia’s comment reflected a desire to build positive relationships with families in order to promote communication between educators and family members. She noted that communication with families can mean discussing sensitive and challenging topics, which can be problematic in the absence of a positive relationship.
8.7.3 With communities

Network members also identified the importance of having positive relationships with community members. In the following examples, Anne articulated the benefits of strong relationships with police and Aboriginal workers. Through these relationships she was able to communicate, seek professional support, and provide additional support for families who may need it.

It’s a nice little place…if we have a problem with a family or they’re not turning up or something…They have a family worker, so the families might be more comfortable to talk to her, than talk to me, or someone here…so our Aboriginal attendance is quite high at the moment. (Anne)

We’ve got a close relationship with [local welfare agency], with the policemen in town, so we try to have those relationships covered and be informal…So our children with vulnerabilities, ours have improved so much, and I hope to think that we access most of our vulnerable families in town. (Anne)

The value of relationships was evident through the network members’ ability to work collaboratively together, and build reciprocal understandings across settings. Central to the effectiveness of relationships appeared to be the ability of educators to identify the role that they played, as well as the impact of their attitudes and beliefs. Network members also described the importance of building relationships with children and families, and community members.
8.8 Professionalism

Network members’ comments reflected the theme of professionalism in their references to professional regard among network members, the professional support that was offered by the network, working with other agencies, and professional practice.

8.8.1 Regard

Anne commented from her position as the preschool director and early childhood educator about the professional regard between the preschool and the schools. She identified the reputation and professional standing of the preschool in the community as influential.

We’re quite well recognised in the early childhood field and I’ve written some things with [academic] and we’re quite out there as early childhood people. (Anne)

I do feel like here…I know listening to other directors they don’t feel like the schools appreciate what they do, or even that there is a link between the two. I feel like we do have that, like with all of the schools. I don’t feel like it’s isolated and we’re the preschool and they are the school and there’s no [claps hands]…I don’t feel like there is a barrier. (Anne)

In this example, Anne acknowledged that professional regard for early childhood educators does not always exist, but in Fern Creek she felt there was regard for her as an early childhood professional.

Anne felt a sense of professional regard when her professional opinion was accepted and valued by other educators working in the school setting.

I think they [the schools] value our opinion. I don’t think we’ve ever had anyone who would disagree with our opinion…so it’s been good. (Anne)
Clarissa described regard as mutual, generated when you demonstrate regard for others. In this example, being considerate and humble towards other educators was part of her repertoire for showing professional regard to others.

It’s down to people’s attitudes. I’ve been very fortunate when I have had to contact other services that people have been very welcoming to go into their service…and I try to be very mindful of the way that I approach stuff, because I don’t want anyone thinking that I’m coming in going ‘well this is what we do’, because that really annoys me. So you keep things at a very respectful, mutual, sharing sort of thing. (Clarissa)

Anne acknowledged that professional regard can be impacted by the perception of the educator of themselves, and the value of the work that they do. She emphasised the importance of exemplifying the regard you desire from others.

It’s getting better as I’m getting older…maybe it’s growth…preschool teachers sometimes feel like we’re just the little lowly…and feeling as a preschool we are still valued, and we’re not just there playing with the kids. Having that respect with each other. And especially with the principals at the other schools, making sure that we respect what we do, and that we advocate for what we do, and don’t dumb down what we’re doing. (Anne)

8.8.2 Support

Examples from the data indicated that professional support was considered important by the network members, and that the network afforded opportunities for professionals to support one another.

Anne described how working together as professionals made it easier for her to negotiate difficult conversations with families about their children. As well, Anne described
how having another professional working with a child, gave considerable support to her as a professional by giving credibility to her opinions.

…if there is a hard conversation we’ve got to have with a family, it’s good to have both of us having that hard conversation…it’s not just ‘well what do you know, you’re just the preschool teacher’ or ‘what do you know, you’re just a nurse’, we can sort of [work] partnership with that. It’s good to have ‘I’ve got this child, I don’t know I’ve got that gut feeling’ and then if they do too, then we can move them forward a bit. (Anne)

Clarissa noted that the network provided opportunities for sustained professional relationships and collaboration. As a consequence, educators felt supported in their roles and sometimes together were able to achieve more than would be possible on their own.

…you know how sometimes people have a thing where they don’t want to be seen that I can’t work this out myself? I’m not going to ask what anyone else thinks, which I think is a flaw because obviously we know that we’re more empowered when we work as a community and I think because there are groups of us…say I can contact Anne, and I come from a community-based background in terms of early childhood education, but I have lots to do with the commercial sector too, so that could be another aspect in communities like Fern Creek…I guess it’s the dropping of the barriers between different services and again, I think there is that professional valuing of what we do as early childhood teachers, of how we work with the children. (Clarissa)

Anne reflected on her role as director within the preschool and the opportunities that she was able to provide professional support for her staff.

We now have three Aboriginal workers at preschool, I think that’s made a big difference as well, one’s got a Diploma and two have got Certificate III…and we’re just trained them. (Anne)
We have low staff turnover…I’m the longest that’s been here, but it’s quite stable. A bit of a range of people, most of them are local, and there’s no reason for that, I haven’t purposefully done that. (Anne)

Through her professional support, Anne was able to offer opportunities for employment and further training to her staff, which in turn, created a stable workplace for the staff, and environment for the children who attended.

Another example of professionals working together was identified in the interagency support that occurred in Fern Creek. Anne had secured the services of some specialist health professions and was keen to promote collaboration not only between these specialists and her own staff, but also other educators in the community.

We have a speech [therapist who comes] once a week, and the OT once a fortnight…we’ve already done some workshops so the staff know, a bit of background about what is an OT and why do we need one, and we’ll work closely with the girls. We’ve got a new play and learning room in our new preschool and she will work from there. So she will see our kids and develop a program that all of the children will go to, not just those kids with sensory processing disorder or whatever…Then she’s also going to hire out the room once a week so then if the school want to come and see her, or a family, then they can…And we’re hoping that will help with the transition to school. (Anne)

8.8.3 Pedagogy

Network members made a number of references to pedagogical practice. This included reference to beliefs that educators had about their pedagogical practices, pedagogy and continuity of learning.
Network members reflected on their beliefs and perceptions about their professional practices. Nerida’s comment suggested she held positive perceptions about her practice.

We said after coming back from that transition conference, people were getting up and saying this is their transition program, and we were going ‘I think we’d better present next time’, because ours just seemed to put so much more time into it. (Nerida)

Anne described some of the beliefs she held about preschool, and the preschool program. She noted some positive feedback received from a school principal, and how that had reinforced to her that her practice is effective.

I asked one of the principals the other day how transition went and she said ‘I’ve seen a lot of [Foundation] starts and whatever you’re doing, keep doing, because they were so ready to sit and learn’. And I think that’s because we’re not doing the formal ‘ok at 10 o’clock we’ve got to do this’, we have quite a flexible program. By this time of the year our kids are ready to sit and listen and join in group activities because they’ve had that unstructured, unhurried time the majority of the time at preschool. In the past, when I first started here it was a really structured day and all the kids were inside at 10:30 we all had to have morning tea and at 11 we all had to do music and the typical sort of day. We did get a lot of backlash about it, a lot of staff left, and there was a really negative thing in the community, some kids left the service…it was ‘what’s that girl? She’s all about play, and what are they teaching our kids?’ So we had to do a lot of education with staff and families…we invited people to come and talk to the families about why we do what we do. It was really negative stuff, but it’s paid off in the long run…it’s important that the staff know why we do what we do so that we’re all giving the same message. We’re either all in, or let’s not do this. We have to be in it together. (Anne)

This comment from Anne highlighted how educators can experience doubt and uncertainty around their practice, particularly in the context of criticism from parents and
other educators. In this instance, support from Anne’s colleagues was instrumental in affirming her professional practice.

In another similar example, Anne and Patricia discussed beliefs around the role of Foundation and how differing beliefs among educators and families could be problematic, and cause tensions, particularly around transition to school. According to Patricia, educators can resolve some of these tensions when they explain their practice to parents.

Patricia: I think we worry a lot about things that we don’t need to worry about…because the [Foundation] is a transition year, that whole year, which a lot of people…and parents as well, we probably don’t explain that as well as we should.

Anne: Parents don’t want to hear that, they think they’re going to come here and learn to read and learn to write…

Patricia: Particularly that first term, they do a little thing and they play, then they do another little thing and then play…lots of lots of play, just being part of this group and learning how to stop and come to the floor, it doesn’t sound like much, but for little kids who’ve never had to do that before…I think [preschool] is very different to the rest of the school. You’ve got to be a certain type of person to teach [preschool].

Other examples also demonstrated network members’ reflection on their pedagogy, and their justifications for adopting particular pedagogical stances and approaches.

I think we’re taking a bit of a different approach to some of our main areas; literacy and numeracy, because we are getting kids, reflected in our data that are…we’ve gone back and are following more of a developmental pathway and giving teachers the permission to say ‘they’re not ready for that yet’, because if we jump, they’re never going to get it…We have to teach to where they’re at, and not where the syllabus says they should be. (Patricia)
Like stencils…I would steer away from them for the whole of a child’s educational life, because I just think they’re so stifling…that sort of mass-produced. I know that schools are moving away from that too to a certain extent too. Just that thing of celebrating children’s individuality and all of those sorts of things (Clarissa)

Network members also discussed ideas around continuity of learning. Patricia and Anne held different ideas about how continuity of learning could be promoted. In the following example, they discussed the usefulness of incorporating the EYLF into the school setting in order to help school educators better understand early childhood education.

Anne: I know some early childhood people are like ‘we need to get to the schools and talk to them about the EYLF’ and things like that…I’m not as worried, I think naturally we do anyway. Preschool is preschool and school is school, and we do have similar beliefs, but I’m not adamant that we need to get in there and start talking about the EYLF…

Patricia: I don’t think that would be the case for everyone. To be honest, for myself, I would like to understand a bit more about the early childhood framework, it’s not something that we are ever given or discuss, but it’s come up with one particular child, and the educational psychologist has suggested we go right back and look at the framework to help this child with a severe disability. So that’s something that now I’m trying to look for, and get my head around, because it’s very different…because they are quite different, for obvious reasons because we are in different places, and for different purposes, but getting my head around how they go together…Both our [Foundation] teachers are very good at doing the play thing.

Anne: See for me the EYLF, it’s a document, our documents have changed over time, it hasn’t changed what we do, it’s just we’ve got a new framework.

A number of different concepts around professionalism emerged from the discussions of network members. Professional respect was sought, and valued by the network members. The network offered its members a number of opportunities for professional support, from
other educators, as well as from professionals in other sectors. As well, network members discussed their professional practice noting the importance of sharing beliefs about practice and different pedagogical practices.

8.9 Sustainability of the network

Comments from the network members indicated that the network had existed in its informal state for some time. Even though several prior-to-school settings in the community were not a part of the network, there was no indication that this was likely to change or that the educators sought change. Indeed, there was a sense of comfort about the network in its current iteration.

Network members did not specifically address issues related to the sustainability of the network. Instead, they referred, multiple times, to the informality of their meetings, and the relaxed and spontaneous nature of their meetings. The ease with which the network operated may mean that members did not feel burdened by the commitment and time invested, and as a result, were likely to continue their involvement. The example mentioned earlier, where Anne was disappointed that others did not take a more active role in organising visits, may call into question the future of the network if Anne were to leave.

8.10 Goals for transition

In their comments about transition to school, network members focused on their goals for children, families and educators and the ways in which they thought they could improve transition experiences. A great deal of the data around transition to school referred to the
activities and strategies that were employed at the different settings. In addition, data also related to issues in transition, the use of transition statements, providing for children with diverse needs, and discussions around the curriculum documents.

8.10.1 For children

Network members outlined a number of goals they held for children as they were making the transition to school. Some of these centred around the idea of making the move from preschool to school as smooth as possible for children.

We are trying to do things at preschool to make sure they do have that smooth [transition]…we don’t want to formally teach them at preschool, that’s not what we’re about, but that they’ve got those basic skills, ready to sit still and attend…just making sure they’re ready to join that school formal learning. (Anne)

The connection with the school environment…being able to come in, and meeting the other kids, being away from their family…and then once that confidence is built up we can explore a bit more and go and visit the play equipment and all the other places in the school. And making those changes gradual. (Clarissa)

Nerida noted that time was an important factor for children starting school.

I think the length of time that children are there [at school]….and then when they do start school there is no tears because they are used to coming already. (Nerida)

Clarissa highlighted the importance of identifying the different needs of children, in order to be able to provide the necessary support for them.

Getting to know the children…getting to know where they’re at, but keeping a balance between cognitive and academic and gross motor and right up there is social and emotional because to me that social, emotional, if that’s not happening and it’s not well-developed then
the other skills are going to struggle because you haven’t got the application to be able to focus. (Clarissa)

And linking up children who need additional support, that’s a huge one (Clarissa)

Patricia identified that one way that the individual needs of children can be gauged is through gathering information from parents.

I think it’s that communication with, and getting as much information you can from parents, because you’ve got little people with lots of different interests or needs and the more that you know about them the better. (Patricia)

8.10.2 For families

Network members also held clear aspirations for families of the children who were starting school. A number of strategies were outlined by members that attempted to build relationships with and involve families in the transition to school. A prominent strategy involved the identification of the specific needs of families and attempting to meet those needs. Regular visits to the preschool from maternal and child health nurses were part of efforts by the preschool to provide easier access to services for families.

This is trying to get the children who don’t go there [to the maternal and child health nurses], or that don’t have transport. (Anne)

When you’re making connections with the family and you might be the only early childhood service that they attend, so you’ve got a professional responsibility to attend to the needs…Obviously in a very respectful and caring manner towards the family…and they’re already following up on that with a professional. (Clarissa)
Patricia identified the importance of educators demonstrating understanding and compassion for families in different situations, and the responsibility of educators to search for new and different ways to develop relationships with families.

The more information we have, to build that relationship with families really early on with parents is really important, that’s a really big focus for us. I think we do it ok, but we could get better…there are probably still parents who don’t think coming to school is a nice experience…it wasn’t a nice experience for them, so just trying to find as many avenues as we can, to make parents feel welcome, for some parents it’s a really big deal to come into a principal’s office…So we need to work out how many different ways we can get the information out there and include families. The transition to school is such a big thing, and they need to know the information. (Patricia)

So we have things like liturgies which is when two classes come together and there is a cup of tea after that…But then for working parents that’s hard, so you obviously can’t get everyone in one thing, but what can we do to catch as many as we can? (Patricia)

Clarissa also acknowledged that families had different priorities, and that sometimes those priorities were at odds with the priorities of educators and other professionals. She emphasised the importance of providing support and encouragement for families, rather than judgement.

Attendance is sometimes a query, so we try and contact families and check to see if things are ok, and try and encourage them to re-attend. (Clarissa)

We’ve got both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal families that are really passionate about their children being at [the transition program], or at school or wherever, and we’ve got others who, it’s just not a priority in their life. (Clarissa)
For us we say ‘how hard is it to get your child to an appointment?’ But it is, for some families, whether it’s a physical transport thing, or the whole confidence or mental capacity to do that…So what we do is that they come to the service…and have the consult with the child [here]. (Clarissa)

8.10.3 For educators

Nerida encapsulated the goals of the educators in the Fern Creek network in her comment:

We get to know the children and we get to know the parents [during transition visits]. We get to see if there is any medical issues or anything…So I think the time that we put into it, comes back and we benefit. (Nerida)

8.10.4 Activities and strategies

Many transition activities and strategies were identified. These included the meetings between network members, reciprocal visits, as well as the priorities given to improving reciprocal understandings, relationships and communication between all stakeholders. Some of these are mentioned again here in more detail.

Visits by the preschool to the schools, and from the schools to the preschool have been noted earlier, but they are an example of a specific strategy used by educators to help children prepare for starting school by building familiarity with the school environment.
We try and have little visits where they come down to the school, the preschool has more regular ones than the other day care centres…so that happens the whole year where they can come and visit and do activities in the classroom and the playground. (Nerida)

Each of the schools runs its own formal transition program, which looks slightly different in each of the settings. The transition programs ranged from several weeks to year-long transition.

We have the [transition] program, which is in Term Four, for the first five Tuesdays and that’s the three hours that the kids come, and that’s very much play-based, we do lots of things and there’s quite a few of us in the room looking for different things. (Patricia)

Starting in Term Three we have [transition program], that’s the beginning of our transition and it runs for five weeks, where the students come in for three hours in the morning and it’s more of a play-based theme happening. (Nerida)

[the] program is a year-long transition for children in the year before [Foundation]. Consists of two, two-hour sessions for children for the majority of the year…It’s a free service, it’s funded through the school, so it’s a fantastic investment on their behalf…Towards the end of the year the two groups of children combine, and spend longer and meet their other peers, and get to know them. So that increases their social and emotional confidence. (Clarissa)

The program offered at the Fern Creek North differed from the others in that it ran for the whole school year in a facility located on school grounds. As it was funded by the school there was no cost for families.

One of the major driving forces was that very gradual transition, where the children could have like an early childhood program within the school where they were going to attend the following year. And just to get people into the school…to come and see what we offered…we
are a really progressive school…we’re lucky to have really great primary schools in Fern
Creek. (Clarissa)

This program was a deliberate attempt to increase enrolment at the school by
engaging families in a preschool style program.

I think when I first went there, there was 13 children in the one [preschool] room and I think
that the school really wanted to boost its numbers and [as well as] opportunities for children
around the local area to return to the school. (Clarissa)

The network members had mixed opinions about the value of offering a year-long
transition program, and any potential benefits that may offer for children and their families.
The following comments are related to a conversation reported earlier around the role of the
first year of school.

Anne: Our speech therapist was saying how at [one of the schools in Fern Creek] they do their
transition program all year and she was saying how great it is. And this is my belief, but I
actually don’t agree with all year, I actually like that they only come for five weeks, because I
remember a principal saying to me when I’d just started, and I sort of got my back up, I said
‘why don’t you do it for longer than five weeks, why don’t you do it all year?’ and he said
‘well no because we treat [Foundation] as a whole transition year’. He was an older principal
and he said ‘[Foundation] is all about transition and play and you don’t need to teach them to
write their name or anything’…I think about that since he’s said that to me. Most of them do
learn to write their name, but that’s not what we’re about.

Patricia: Yeah more time isn’t necessarily the answer.

Anne: Because six weeks in a little person’s life is a massive chunk of life and they do a lot of
growing up in six weeks…
Patricia: We notice a difference between the end of that, and when they turn up at school, there is a big shift in the way they feel…it can be a big change over the Christmas holidays.

Several specific activities and strategies were described by network members. These included, a ‘buddy’ program between the Grade Five students at one of the schools and the preschool children which was reported as an effective way to help children build friendships with older school children.

Anne: The Grade Five class came up at the end of the year, so then they are buddies with the [Foundation] kids and sort of got to know them.

Patricia: yeah it’s good, the Grade Five’s get to know the little kids and which ones are coming to school, it works really well.

Other specific strategies employed in various schools involved efforts to engage families in the transition to school process, using those opportunities to gather information from families and build relationships. At one school, educators invited families to an interview.

All of our interviews with families are done in Term Three, so that we get a sense of where they’re at. (Patricia)

Consideration of the best times to schedule activities that involved families was also important for network members.

There are the orientation days for the families. There are some during the day and one at night time so that we can get families that work. (Patricia)

Schools also actively tried to plan activities that provided the type of information that families would be seeking around transition to school.
We have an orientation day…which is like an expo, so everything that’s involved with the school…like the bus company, the community nurse, our P&C [parent and community council], the local community dental people…We had the biggest roll up we’ve had in years for the expo. So we speak about the school and things like that, but also there is those local services that make the transition to school easy. (Nerida)

Network members explained that transition planning was not stagnant, and needed to be reviewed and modified to meet the needs of children and their families, as well as the educators.

…each year we might change it a bit, and add more to it [the transition program]. (Nerida)

I’m trying to constantly review the program, sometimes I think I’m driving myself crazy…and the school are becoming more and more involved with my program too, which is great, they’ve always been supportive but…But they are constantly re-engageing and re-evaluating which I think is a really progressive approach but I want to focus on that play-based learning but also improve concentration on set tasks within more of a small group work…so moving towards that. (Clarissa)

Patricia highlighted a strategy that she utilised for children who needed some additional support around transition time that involved a resource the child could take home to help build connections between home and school.

We also use, for kids that might need it… a storybook about the school that has all the pictures where everything is, who their teachers are and that can be something they can take home and read with their families. (Patricia)

Network members also described strategies implemented within the transition programs to help build children’s confidence, familiarity and understanding of what happens
at school. These included visits to specific locations within the school and follow-up activities to help children recall these,

We go the library, and the librarian will read a story and set up some dress ups, and we will go to the canteen and see what happens behind the scenes at the canteen…so the theory is when they do step in there they’ve touched base with those things…Also I create these stories, interest pages on our different visits and they take home like a journal at the end of the year, and in that they have pictures and a photo of when we went to visit the garden or the library so when it’s that school break the children can reflect on that again and have that social, emotional confidence when they step into the school. (Clarissa)

Clarissa also incorporated specific examples of teaching practice, such as behaviour management techniques and school rules, into the transition program so children could learn what to expect at school.

We do things that they do in the [Foundation] classroom like hands up, and the ‘five L’s’…Looking listening and that sort of thing…So we look at those expectations like they must wear a hat and those sorts of things…(Clarissa)

Some of the schools included the testing for Best Start assessment into their planning for transition. In this instance, educators described positive feedback from parents and the community around children coming to the school, prior to their official starting, to complete this assessment. Educators used this opportunity to have a meeting with children’s parents.

When we do our Best Start assessment we do that over the first three days of school, so the teacher is off class, the children’s actually haven’t started school, so they come in, they do their Best Start assessment and then the teacher actually spends 15 minutes with the parent after the assessment, just to say you know, this is what happened in the assessment and is there anything else you need to tell me that’s happened over the holidays or anything…and
then after those three days is completed, all the children then start school together, and that’s been really accepted by the community, it hasn’t been a problem. (Nerida)

8.10.5 Transition statements

Transition statements and their usefulness were interpreted differently by the network members. One network member acknowledged that while transition statements were new to their practice, they had been adopted for children whom they identified had additional or diverse needs.

We only started doing them last year…the Education Department transition statement…so we do that as well, but we only do that for the children from the inclusive education program, or children who we have our radar out for… (Clarissa)

Anne was openly negative about transition statements, and questioned the usefulness of the documents given the extent of existing communication among the educators. It was clear in this example that Anne could not see the benefit of completing transition statements for educators, and also raised concerns about the accessibility and value for parents.

We will NEVER fill one [Transition Statement] out!…the informal conversation we had with Patricia at the end of the year, just going through all our kids, some kids we spent 15 minutes talking about, some we might have spent two minutes, and I thought that was probably more meaningful…everyone has looked at the Transition to School statement and everyone was a bit stressed looking at it. They said ‘do we have to do it?’ so we’re not doing it. And we probably do it in our own way, other way…The public school did ask why we weren’t doing the Transition to School statements but we’ve got 110 kids and I can’t see it as a viable thing to do, I’d much rather have conversations and know which kids we need to do it for. The meetings are not as formal, not stressful and not as time-consuming. I just doubt that the
teachers are going to read it…There is the section for parents and that’s one of the reasons I probably didn’t like it as much was because some of our parents can’t read or write…and if you struggle to write and [there is additional] pressure of what do I say about my child…Patricia has developed a really simple little checklist I guess you’d call it, for the kids at transition and it was just so simple. (Anne)

8.10.6 Children with diverse needs

Some discussions of transition included reference to children with diverse needs. For example, the program offered by one of the public schools was specifically developed to target Aboriginal families, and especially children who were not attending preschool.

…The original focus was for children who weren’t attending any early childhood service whatsoever, and obviously children from an Aboriginal background as well, and then some children who attended other early childhood services…to give them the chance to be in the school environment for almost a school year… (Clarissa)

Network members commented on the increasing numbers of students attending school with diverse needs and the challenges that this presented for educators.

Patricia: It’s a big area that we notice kids are coming to school now with really low attention.

Patricia: Our special education [group] is growing every year, and we’ve got kids coming to school with more and more complex needs…12 of those students [are] on the spectrum

Anne: And it’s not just speech, we’ve got a number of issues with our kids, and their family.

Nerida: Definitely a lot of environmental issues coming through.
Anne: And our families have got so many more needs these days than 10, 20 years ago, don’t you think?

Patricia: Definitely.

Anne: There is so many more, not just one little thing here or there, it’s this big, complex…there’s everything.

Patricia: I wish I knew what the answer was, you’ve got those really highly distractible kids that who knows…I mean we think about all the reasons why, but at the end of the day we’ve got to cope with that, and work out what we can do, but that’s a great thing to help with transition because hopefully we can get a few of those skills happening before they come here.

Network members described a number of strategies that were being implemented in order to address these concerns. One example was proactively facilitating visits to the preschool from a maternal and child health nurse to perform regular health checks on three year-old children, in order to flag potential issues.

They’re assessing the three year olds today, so that next year when they come back to preschool, if they need to be at speech or OT it’s been addressed already (Anne)

Another strategy involved additional communication between educators across prior-to-school and school settings.

There is a lot of liaison between Anne and myself, with kids that may have complex issues so we can work with the families with that… (Patricia)

I do lots of visits to the preschool…if there are additional transition visits that need to happen, then they happen for the rest of that year. (Patricia)
Strategies around early intervention for children with diverse needs were evident. These included identifying children’s needs as early as possible, and recruiting the services of other professionals such as occupational therapists and speech therapists. Anne took responsibility for organising both therapists to spend time each fortnight at the preschool to make access to them much more straightforward for all involved.

We have a speech work a day a week at the preschool, so that we can alleviate all those things…or get them into programs before they get to [Foundation], and address any issues straight away…we find that’s been working really, really well. (Anne)

Network members reflected that sometimes planning and implementing strategies to meet the needs of children with diverse needs was challenging, and not always successful.

Anne: One little boy…we brought him for two extra visits [to school] by himself, we don’t know if we will do that again, the first time we brought him on his own, and this is a child with additional needs, it felt like when we brought him on his own, it was like singling him out, which, well, it was. It was the first time we’d done that.

Patricia: It was a bit of a trial to see how it went.

Anne: So the second time we brought him, I brought an aide from the preschool and another child from preschool who didn’t have additional needs so it just looked like we were coming for another visit, and it wasn’t just singling this one child out…that was probably a bit better, but I don’t know if we will do that again…we were both open to try new things.

Patricia and Anne acknowledged that educators needed to try different strategies and approaches, and learn from mistakes in order to improve the effectiveness of those strategies.
Network members referred to the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) in their discussions around transition. As an early childhood educator, Anne stated that while the document was valuable, she did not consider it fundamental to her practice, and identified a number of reasons why she believed the document should not take precedence over educator practice.

It sounds like I don’t value it, but I really do really, really value it….and the girls here know it off by heart, and they’re just recently studied too, and we have days and hours of staff meetings where we go through it and we talk about it, and we reflect on it, it’s up there on the wall…we’ve got a range of abilities here and from teachers to people who’ve got their Certificate III, who may have struggled to get that, so by doing it in our informal way, I think everyone can contribute and it’s just not just the teachers running the program…your educators can become stressed and worried about it, and then you can’t give the best to the children. I always say to the girls, you are looking after three to five year olds, your job is to play and have fun…We have so many children who have come from heavy domestic violence or drug and alcohol abuse in their family, our number one job is to make sure those kids feel safe and secure, or they’re not going to learn anything, so we probably concentrate on that a lot more. (Anne)

Anne was of the view that the philosophy of the Framework could be espoused through the everyday practice of educators, and that meeting the needs of the children, rather than following a curriculum document, was her main priority.

The school educators admitted to have little to no knowledge or understanding of the EYLF.

I’ll be honest, I’ve never read it [the EYLF]. You know it’s not something we’re even told about as primary, it’s not something that’s put on our radar anyway in any way, shape or
form. You probably have teachers that are interested in doing it for themselves, but it’s not something that we’re encouraged to do. (Patricia)

I’m only familiar with it because I’ve just had a child start [Foundation], so he was at a long day care centre and when this was all coming, and I was aware of it coming in, only because he was there. (Nerida)

While Nerida had limited knowledge of the EYLF, she noted that a recently graduated Foundation teacher had joined her school staff and had the permission of the principal to adopt play-based pedagogy that was partly guided by the EYLF in the Foundation classroom.

We have play based learning in the younger years, especially driven by one of our new [preschool] teachers who has only been teaching this year. I guess it’s come a lot from looking into the transition and the play-based from the Early Years Learning Framework as well…this has been her first year in Kindy and she has never taught Kindy before so she had to figure out what to do, so she’s gone with the current research. (Nerida)

In response to the conversation about school educators having little knowledge of the EYLF, Anne made the following comment:

On a positive note, I think that all of the schools still have the principles of the EYLF, it’s just not known that that’s the EYLF…we’re all still living and breathing the philosophy however you don’t know the document. And I think even in early childhood I don’t think our practices have changed in any way, shape or form because the EYLF has come out…even in what my educators do, and the way they write, I try and just embed it in what we do, and not be obvious that this is outcome one, da da da because I don’t need to have posters up that this is outcome one and this is outcome two like I have seen places do. I just think it’s who we are…and what we do, and you can’t see it on our walls…but it’s in who we are. (Anne)
This comment reiterated Anne’s view that the use of the EYLF did not determine her pedagogical practice.

Even though Clarissa had regular contact with the school, she indicated that there was no obvious influence of the EYLF on the school Foundation classroom.

The Early Years Learning Framework is the main document that we utilise, and it has been an interesting movement within the school because I was very….determined to make sure we had that balance of early childhood, play-based learning in a school environment and not having [Foundation] part-one, because I just felt that I’ve always been passionate about that being, belonging and becoming. (Clarissa)

Clarissa’s comments reflect her belief that despite the transition program being located on the school, and funded by it, the program focus was early childhood rather than school.

8.10.8 Australian Curriculum

Network members made comments around the Australian Curriculum and their practice had changed since its introduction.

Patricia: So for our school that’s been a big change in how we do maths…so kids are given time to discover their maths before we do explicit…There is lots of new, well it’s old research but maths I think as a whole over the entire state is a lot lower than the government expected generally and this is our way of trying to address that. It’s called Emu maths, it’s a different way to do maths and it’s been a big change for our teachers. It’s much more hands…it’s very different to how we would have done maths at school which is a big eye opener for our parents.
Nerida: We used to have textbooks but they’re gone. They’ve probably been gone for two years I think…

Patricia: Parents come in expecting bookwork like they did when they were at school and we just don’t do that with maths anymore.

Nerida: No, it’s a lot more hands-on, all on the floor together.

Patricia expressed uncertainty around the practicality of the AC and demands placed on educators to meet the expectations set out in it.

It’s about getting away from that formality and everyone’s got it written down, but are they actually doing it? Know what I mean? And we get bombarded with so much paperwork that you do forget…we just wish we could teach more if you know what I mean…(Patricia)

8.11 Rural contexts

A number of characteristics of rural contexts were identified. As well, categories around professional boundaries, familiarity with people and challenges of rural contexts were prominent.

8.11.1 Characteristics of rural contexts

Network members reflected on the characteristics of Fern Creek as a rural community. Consistent elements among the characteristics described were community strength and innovation.
Clarissa explained that the transition program she coordinated had been made available to children who were not going to attend that school. That decision was made by the principal, who was responsible for funding the program, on the basis that it supported children in the community. At the same time, it is important to note that the change to program eligibility did attract new families to the school and had the potential it increase enrolment numbers.

We had some children come in to the [transition] program, even though they weren’t coming to our school. Our principal at the time said it because they didn’t have a transition program it was fine for them to come with us until the end of Term Three, so I thought that was really proactive. And they [the children] had to come in a fair way, but it gave the children a bit more of an idea about what it was like going to school. (Clarissa)

Anne noted that a defining feature of the community was one of positive relationships. In the following comment she described how strong relationships between community members generated proactivity and mutual respect.

The relationships and the informality I think….it’s quite laid back. You just naturally know people…I know the principal of the high school really well and…it just feels like we are part of the community…and we are looking for extra money because the new preschool is costing more than we thought so we’re having a fair, one of the girls went through all the businesses and rang them and just our community is really respectful of who we are, and our local council are 100 percent behind us…I don’t know if it’s because we are building a new preschool and it’s such a big project in town, but there is a lot of respect for us at the moment. (Anne)
8.11.2 Familiarity with people

One advantage of living in a rural community identified by the network members was the degree of familiarity with other people in the community. Members explained that being familiar with someone made it discernibly easier to communicate with that person, and form a working relationship with them.

I think being in a smaller community too…like I can see Anne down the street, I know who she is, I feel comfortable to make a phone call to her…and to the other centres. (Nerida)

It’s nice to know you’re ringing…when I first moved here and I had to refer a child or something I didn’t know who I was referring to…and now it’s nice to know these people and be able to say to the parent’s ‘this is who we’re talking to, this is what they’re like’. (Anne)

Anne and Patricia described how being familiar with other community members made dealing with sensitive issues easier.

Anne: Another great partnership that we have, we will often ring Brant, the policeman.

Patricia: He’s the one responsible for managing between [welfare agency] and police.

Anne: So I’ll often ring Brant and say ‘Brant I’ve got this family…this is happening’ so it’s just all those little partnerships you have in a rural town.

Patricia: Yeah, you don’t get that in other places…

While familiarity was considered an advantage, it also contributed to the blurring of boundaries between professional and personal lives.

Patricia: Sometimes people think that at any time of the day or night they can ask you things about work…

Anne: And talk to other staff…
Patricia: It happens and lines between work and personal can get a bit blurred, and that’s really hard. Even a simple thing like being on Facebook, we’re not supposed to be on Facebook with any parent, but most of our friends are parents…So where do you draw the line? Because you live in the community, your kids go to the school, you’re part of the community…so that case pose issues.

8.11.3 Issues in rural education

Several issues were raised by network members in relation to providing education in rural areas. Anne recalled the challenges of being under-resourced in the preschool, and how she went about overcoming that challenge.

Our challenges were that we didn’t have places for the kids, so that’s when we went to the government and asked for some extra money to build a new preschool, and got it. And that was largely due to the fact that we tried to minimise any barriers and address issues with culturally and linguistically diverse, disadvantaged [families]… we got our funding as a preschool, so we are committed to seeing that through. (Anne)

Working effectively with Aboriginal families was also identified as an issue that had a direct impact on children’s education in Fern Creek

The hard thing for us is that in an Aboriginal community there is so much more politics and arguing amongst certain families and groups. If we had an Aboriginal worker on one day, another family might not want to come that day that that family’s there…We’re lucky our Aboriginal worker at the moment seems to have a good relationship with most of the community, but we’ve had in the past; ‘I’m not going if she’s there’. (Anne)

Patricia referred to the challenges of a small school enrolment numbers in rural communities.
Another element is classes and siblings and cousins, and this person used to be with this person and that adds a whole other element of deciding how classes are structured and who is in what and which teacher they’ve got, because you’ve got teachers who might be related, to teacher’s aides that have their own children…There is one class where 50 percent of the year are actually related in some way…which you don’t get in other places, it can cause social issues. (Patricia)

Clarissa also outlined a number of challenges faced by rural schools and early childhood centres. Among these were challenges around staffing, and access to professionals.

That would be one of the biggest issues I would say…there are issues with getting casual teachers, you’re probably right with permanents, but when you need casuals…obviously the larger the population base the more casuals you’ve got access to, and places like Sydney you’ve got huge organisations that organise your staffing. But in early childhood it’s a major issue because of the industrial issues and the pay rate…in some comparisons there is between 25 and 30% less early childhood teachers are paid, we have less bargaining power, and we’re not education department. So that is an issue, because we lose staff who go across to the school system. (Clarissa)

We do struggle with specialists, access to OTs, speechy’s….that can get really tricky…it will be great for ages, and then when they leave there is a real issue of trying to fill positions, and while that’s happening the waiting lists are increasing and while that’s happening there’s children who are transitioning to school and aren’t able to access that support or get the assessments they need. (Clarissa)

Despite the challenges faced by education services in their community, Clarissa identified a positive strategy to address these.

One of the Universities runs a program called community capacity growing or something like that where they came to visit here to expose those students to what’s available here, and they
brought some fantastic ideas too, like with research and observation through fresh eyes…it’s exposing them to a rural area and we’re getting feedback from people who are very current in their study too, which I think is really strengthening a community. (Clarissa)

8.11.4 Isolation

Network members identified several barriers related to isolation and distance. Characteristically, for each of the barriers mentioned, there were suggestions for solutions and alternatives. In the following example, travel to and from preschool and school was noted as a challenge for families.

The only hiccup is the bus travel…it’s been a bit of an issue for the safety of the children coming on the bus with their siblings because then they were predominately unsupervised until nine o’clock, so access was a bit tricky in that regard, but most of that was sorted out. (Clarissa)

It fluctuates more with families, in terms of their priorities, rather than their location. Some families come in quite a distance, and they are there every week, every week. (Clarissa)

We have a bus program, so our local Aboriginal service picks up our Aboriginal kids of a morning and an afternoon … The bus brings them here, and takes them home. (Anne)

A significant issue for the network members was access to professional development. Not only was distance of travel a factor, but also the cost associated with attendance and travel.

Being a rural setting too, it’s not always that easy to get to things…because it’s really hard. Professional development is hard, especially for schools, it costs us a fortune to get people
here, there, replaced, it’s big money, so we have to be…you can’t just go to everything. Even if you’d love to, so it’s great when you can do those things together. (Patricia)

Clarissa highlighted that while access to professional development was a challenge for the community, technology offered a viable alternative.

Technology has certainly opened up a lot of doors, in terms of professional training and things like that, and we have lots of people who travel out here for teaching but also webinars and those sorts of things, and access to resources…again because you can go online and grab so many things these days, that’s really opened up a big world for people, that definitely has an impact on rural teaching and education. (Clarissa)

Network members identified the characteristics of community strength and innovation in rural communities Familiarity with people was recognised as typical of a rural community. Several issues relevant to rural education were highlighted by the network members, including limited resources and access to staff. These, along with the challenges associated with isolation were acknowledged by the network members. However, for each of the identified challenges, solutions and alternatives were found, emphasising the resilience and innovation of the community

8.12 Chapter summary

This chapter presented the results from the Fern Creek site. Information around the context of the community and network, as well as network visits and follow-up interview was included. The chapter then presented the data under each of the main categories and sub-categories developed from the data analysis. The main categories were: Leadership, reciprocal understandings, relationships, professionalism, sustainability of the network, goals for transition and rural contexts.
Chapter Nine – Analysis and Discussion

This chapter provides analyses and synthesises the results presented in the previous chapter with reference to relevant literature and the theoretical underpinnings of the research. The chapter is organised according to the contributing research questions for the study:

1. What pedagogies of transition are used by educators in rural contexts to promote effective transitions to school?
2. What, or who, influences these pedagogies?
3. What influence, if any, does rurality have on these pedagogies?
4. In what ways have pedagogies of transition in rural contexts changed as a result of the new curricula?
5. How do pedagogies of educational transition in rural areas inform the development of a theoretical model?
6. How can this model inform the ongoing development and implementation of policy for transition to school in rural areas?

Once consideration of these contributing research questions is complete, the overarching research question for the study is addressed:

How are pedagogies of transition enacted through educator networks in rural areas?

Discussion of the results and relevant literature in this chapter is underpinned and framed by the theoretical framework adopted for the study, namely, Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model of human development, through its four principle components: Person, Process, Context and Time (PPCT).
Consideration of the terms ‘pedagogy’ and ‘pedagogies’ is guided by the definition of pedagogies of educational transitions, outlined previously in this study. Pedagogies of educational transition are:

the interactive processes and strategies that enable the development of opportunities, aspirations, expectations and entitlements for children, families, educators, communities and educational systems around transition to school, together with the theories, beliefs, policies and controversies that shape them.

A note about units of analysis: Throughout this chapter, units of analysis vary; for example: ‘some network members’, or ‘educators’, or an individual participant. The variation in units of analysis is deliberate and reflects a focus on the issues or topics that were raised, not on how many participants mentioned these, or how often. These data were important because they were mentioned by participants. Emphasis is on the particular points illustrated within a particular site.
9.1 Question 1: What pedagogies of transition are used by educators in rural contexts to promote effective transitions to school?

As an introduction to this section, a review of the terminology and concepts underpinning this study is provided. In this study, ‘pedagogies’ refer to the ‘interactive strategies and processes’ that are used by educators in their practice, ‘together with the theories, beliefs, policies and controversies that shape them’. These enable the development of opportunities, aspirations, expectations and entitlements for children, families, educators, communities and educational systems around transition to school. ‘Strategies’ and ‘processes’ are acknowledged as being different, although recognised as equally important.

Positive experiences for children starting school utilise specific practices, which enhance the relationships and connections between children, families and educators (Dockett & Perry, 2014a; Education Review Office, 2015; Lillejord, Borte, Halvorsrud, Ruud, & Freyr, 2017; LoCasale-Crouch, Mashburn, Downer, & Pianta, 2008). The use of a range of transition practices has been shown to improve outcomes for children starting school, especially those who may be considered at risk (Ahtola et al., 2011; Entwisle & Alexander, 1998; Schulting, Malone, & Dodge, 2005).

The bioecological model refers to ‘processes’ as the complex interactions and interrelationships between individuals and their environment over time (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Current conceptualisations of transition to school emphasise the importance of relationships between people and contexts over time. They focus on the interconnected and interdependent nature of children, families, schools, and communities, and consider ways that these components can align to support children’s transition to school (Einarsdottir, Perry, & Dockett, 2008; Perry, Dockett, & Petriwskyj, 2014; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000).
Given the complex and interrelated nature of both strategies and processes, together with the theories, beliefs, policies and controversies that shape them, it is not always possible, or useful to distinguish between these. Therefore, for clarity and consistency, these are referred to hereafter as ‘pedagogies’.

In this research, a range of pedagogies were used by educators with the aim of promoting effective transitions to school. These pedagogies were identified as; networks, school visits, information nights, speed-dating, reciprocal visits, buddy programs, classroom practices, ‘all about school’ books, and transition statements.

9.1.1 Networks

Among the key pedagogies used by educators in this study to promote effective transitions to school were networks of educators. Networks can be conceptualised as a pedagogy in themselves, but also as an enabler for other pedagogies to be implemented. Through their continued participation in the networks, it was clear that educators perceived them to be a worthwhile strategy to enhance transition to school experiences. This has been supported through literature drawing attention to the potential opportunities provided by purposeful coordination between prior-to-school and school settings as a method for both maintaining and improving outcomes for children (Ahtola et al., 2011; Bogard & Takanishi, 2005; OECD, 2006).

All the networks in this study were educator-initiated and operated on an ongoing basis. In keeping with the elements of effective transition practices identified by Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta (2000), they were all proactive, intense in their focus, and well-timed. The networks offered a space for educators to come together and work collaboratively with
one another with the specific aim of promoting positive transition to school in their communities.

Network members offered a number of examples of how the networks achieved this aim, including: opportunities for professional collaboration; sharing of information; improving communication and reciprocal understandings; building relationships; and fostering professional support and respect for one another. These benefits of educator networks and the opportunities they can create are supported by the general literature around networks (Niesz, 2007; Schiff et al., 2015) and the particular literature around the potential benefits of educators across prior-to-school and school settings engaging in collaboration around transition (Chan, 2010; Karila & Rantavuori, 2014).

The networks were different across the four sites. The networks at Robinleigh and Blacksmith were considerably more structured than those in Westhill and Fern Creek. The networks in Robinleigh and Blacksmith had more members, and included many more schools, prior-to-school settings and other professionals. As a result, the meetings required greater organisation to coordinate larger numbers of people at a convenient time and appropriate locations. Organising meetings to suit everyone was sometimes a challenge. The larger, more formal networks were also more structured in their operation. They often had an agenda that was circulated prior to the meetings, minutes were taken, and meetings had a pre-determined start and finish time. In contrast, at Westhill and Fern Creek, network meetings were sometimes pre-organised, but more often network members would meet spontaneously, or have incidental meetings when they saw one another. The meetings themselves were also less formal and varied in length depending on what needed to be discussed.

Niesz (2007) described the structure of effective networks as needing to be flexible, allowing for greater autonomy over their direction. While each network in this study operated differently, according to the network members, each was effective in its own right,
highlighting the notion that networks need not follow an exact formula in order for them to be successful.

Irrespective of their nature, each network had a number of key characteristics that appeared to be vital for effectiveness and sustainability. These characteristics included leadership, commitment, and the ability to set goals. Network members identified that when any of these characteristics was lacking, the ability of the network to move forward posed a considerable challenge.

In all four of the sites there was a clear leader, or leaders, of the network. The role of the leader varied from site to site, but included tasks such as: organising meetings, guiding the direction of the network and facilitating future goals, as well as providing a central point of contact for the network members. Without leadership, the network can lose its focus and organisational structure, potentially jeopardising its continuation (Lieberman & McLaughlin, 1992). Members in all of the networks acknowledged the importance of having a leader, although such leadership was not always straightforward. In Blacksmith, the question of leadership caused some friction between network members. The leader of that network, Kim, voiced her discomfort about being considered the leader, saying that she considered her role temporary, and that she hoped the responsibility of being the leader would be shared among the members in the future. Other members were concerned that Kim held a position of power and was able to manipulate the direction and focus of the network, suggesting bias towards her school and fulfilling its needs above the others. The issue was not discussed during network meetings, suggesting that network members felt uncomfortable about broaching it. This presented a challenge for the network moving forwards supports the conclusions of Earl and Katz (2007) that leadership in networks can take many forms and is sometimes challenging.
Educators identified the importance of positive leadership for the sustainability of the networks. Specifically, the networks required leaders to provide ongoing direction for the network, and to support the network with time and resources. The investment of resources such as time and finances are crucial for the sustainability of networks, as well as being a reflection of the value given to networks by leadership (Black-Hawkins, 2004).

Networks require ongoing commitment and investment from their members (Niesz, 2007). Without the commitment from the members – to attend meetings and contribute to the network, the network cannot exist. Network members in this study noted that without the commitment, or ‘buy-in’ from members, the networks would lack cohesiveness. Network members commented that commitment to, and participation in the network required an investment of time, and this was acknowledged as a challenge. The persistence and motivation of a person was identified by Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006), as a force characteristic that impacted on the different experiences of people. Coordinating different network meetings with a range of working hours and other commitments was often problematic for the members. Therefore, it was vital that network members could see the benefit in participating in the network, to encourage ongoing participation.

Goal setting is also a characteristic of effective networks and is important for the continuity and sustainability of the network. All four networks cited their key goal as improving transition to school in their communities. There was evidence of minor goal-setting as well. Goals are set according to the common interests and objectives of the network and provide the network members with a sense of purpose and focus for the network - without clear goals the network may no longer be effective (Lieberman & McLaughlin, 1992). Setting goals for upcoming meetings and planning for what would be discussed was important for coordinating a large network. For example, in Robinleigh and Blacksmith, meeting times were scheduled ahead of time and an agenda was circulated to the members.
prior to meetings. In Robinleigh and Blacksmith, educators identified the setting of goals as being a reflection of the network’s aspirations to move forward. These goals related to setting clear transition goals for the network, the expansion of the network, exploring possibilities for funding, and goals to improve the effectiveness of the network itself. This is consistent with research that suggests that clear goal-setting is a characteristic of effective networks (Bell et al., 2006). Educators noted that the goals for the network were inherently linked to the commitment to the network by the educators. In other words, educators needed to see how the network was beneficial to them, and this could be achieved partly by setting clear goals.

Through participation in the network and the opportunities afforded by it, educators were effectively able to implement a number of more specific strategies designed to improve transition to school experiences for children and their families, as well as educators in the community.

9.1.2 School visits

A key pedagogy used by educators to support transition to school involved visits to school. In this study, school visits refer to the period of time when prior-to-school children and/or families visited primary schools they planned to attend the following year. Usually, these visits were planned for the specific cohort of children attending the school the following year, as part of an organised transition to school program. Visiting the primary school has been identified as one of the most common and effective activities for children making the transition to school (Chan, 2010; Margetts, 2007).
School visits varied significantly in nature and length across the four sites. Some school visits in Robinleigh, Fern Creek, and Blacksmith followed a traditional pattern – occurring over four or five weeks, usually in Term Four, where the children attended for at least part of one day each week. Other, more informally organised visits to school by prior-to-school children and educators did occur at other times throughout the year, and these are discussed later as part of reciprocal visits. In other examples, organised visits to school spanned a longer period of time. In Westhill, weekly transition visits occurred throughout the second half of the year, while for one school in Fern Creek, visits to school ran throughout the whole year. Both these communities have a high population of Indigenous Australian children and a low SEIFA score and these were identified by educators as influencing the number and length of the school visits. (Margetts, 2007); Schulting et al. (2005) have reported that the more transition activities, including visits to school, that occurred earlier in the year prior to school, the greater the academic results during the first year of school, especially for children from low-socioeconomic backgrounds. As a result, transition activities implemented early in the year before school could act as a moderator between poverty and outcomes for children.

The importance of the length of time for school visits is accentuated by Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) who emphasised the need for repeated experiences over a period of time. Providing children with opportunities to attend the primary school over a period of time has been shown to increase children’s independence and confidence (Dunlop, 2002).

Educators described how schools were constantly adjusting their planning for school visits to meet the needs of the children, their families and the educators. To assist with this, one of the schools that belonged to the Robinleigh network implemented a feedback survey. This was designed to gather feedback from parents about their perceptions of the
effectiveness of the school visits and other pedagogies (such as information nights). Educators hoped that parents would provide feedback about the pedagogies were useful for them, as well as where improvements could be made. The results of this survey were not available at the time of the data collection. However, the survey itself reflected a valuing of parents’ experiences during transition, as well as the experiences of children. This is supported by the transition literature which acknowledges parents and family members as important participants in transition, and highlights a need to listen to, and respect their experiences (Dockett, Griebel, et al., 2017; Griebel & Niesel, 2009; Lillejord et al., 2017; OECD, 2006).

School visits were often discussed during network meetings and in the interviews. From these interactions, it became clear that while some prior-to-school services regularly had input in the planning and rationale of school visits, the schools often assumed responsibility for the planning and implementation of these. In Westhill and Fern Creek for example, there was closer collaboration between the prior-to-school settings and schools than in the other sites. Possible explanations for this are the smaller size of these communities, and the proximity to one another that facilitated collaborative planning. Research suggests that transition pedagogies that are developed collaboratively with other key stakeholders are better placed to enhance continuity of relationships and learning outcomes for children between prior-to-school and school settings (Broström, 2000; Margetts, 2007).

Visits to the school aimed to provide opportunities for the children to participate in a variety of activities organised by the school educators in order for them to gain a sense of what school was like. Activities that provide children with experiences of school are often the focus of school visits (Fabian & Dunlop, 2006) and are identified by parents and children as being an effective transition activity (Chan, 2010).
In most of the study sites (Blacksmith, Robinleigh and Westhill) there were deliberate attempts made by the school educators to provide experiences based on the types of activities children engaged with in prior-to-school settings. Experiences such as playdough, drawing, group time and singing were given as examples. These activities were provided in an effort to help children feel ‘comfortable’ and ‘familiar’ in the new school environment. These experiences are described by Corsaro and Molinari (2008) as ‘priming events’, where children participate in activities to prepare them for anticipated changes in their lives. Although educators did not describe them as such, these experiences are examples of continuity of learning being promoted across settings. Continuity of learning can be fostered when children are given opportunities to actively explore their environment, engage with concrete materials, and interact with others (Dockett & Einarsdottir, 2017; Education Review Office, 2015; Karlsdottir & Perry, 2017).

School visits also afforded school educators the opportunity to meet with the children who would be attending school the following year, observe them in the school environment, and make some judgements about how each child was adjusting. Children’s adjustment to school, and in particular their organisational adjustment, is identified in the literature as being a prominent focus for educators (Dockett & Perry, 2004a). As well, some visits to the school also afforded opportunities for educators to meet and talk with parents, establishing relationships, trust and respect (Dockett & Perry, 2002).

Educators also identified how observing the children during the school visits and talking to other educators both during and after these were ways they could ascertain the effectiveness of the visits. In the Blacksmith site, there was a large primary school and a number of prior-to-school services ‘feeding’ into the school. School educators described trialling a number of different approaches to their school visits, and explained that this was an ongoing process of refinement. One of the reasons for this was that educators gave feedback
to one another during network meetings about the school visits. In one example, educators in the preschool communicated during the network meetings that too many visits to the school was disruptive to the preschool year. While this generated a range of debate, consideration of the topic suggests that while school visits are designed primarily to assist children with the transition to school, educators also placed importance on also valuing and respecting the time children have in prior-to-school settings.

Educators in the network noted that it was particularly challenging to negotiate logistical issues such as staffing, timing, regulating attendees and catering for parents’ needs when planning school visits across a number of sites. Meeting these challenges formed much of the discussion in the network meetings, as members engaged in conversation about these challenges and how they could be overcome. The logistical challenges of coordinating a number of sites and numerous people was a characteristic of working in a larger community, and was not identified as a major challenge in smaller communities. For example, in the smaller community of Westhill, preschool educators worked closely with the school educators to ensure that school visits were planned for days that the majority of children were in attendance, and that was the most appropriate for staff. Despite reasonably large numbers of children attending the preschool, educators worked together to put additional strategies in place to ensure all children attended the visits, even if they did not usually attend preschool on that day. Part of the reason this was possible related to the smaller size of the community.

School visits were not a one-size-fits-all pedagogy. Rather, they varied greatly between each community, and reflected the different needs and priorities of that community. This is echoed by the research, which states that transition activities should be responsive and flexible to the complexities of communities, and be respectful and inclusive to all stakeholders (Clancy, Simpson, & Howard, 2001). This is especially pertinent for families and children who may be considered ‘at risk’ (Dockett et al., 2011). In the main, educators
did not talk specifically about catering for families with diverse needs or those who might be considered at risk when discussing school visits, suggesting that school visits were mostly considered a generic pedagogy.

9.1.3 Information nights

Members of the networks aimed to develop pedagogies that involved parents in transition. The aims for parental involvement centred around building familiarity with the environment, the staff, routines and expectations, and fostering parents’ willingness to ask questions about school and to support their child. In three of the four study sites, the main strategy to involve parents was an information night, or ‘expo’, designed for parents to attend and obtain information related to their child’s transition to school.

The information sessions tended to be held around the same time as the school visits and were similar in their aims, which were for educators to talk to parents about transition to school. The main priority for educators in organising these sessions was to schedule them at a time they hoped would be convenient for parents, in an effort to have as many parents there as possible. They also aimed to provide an opportunity to give parents information about the school and to outline how the school visits would be operating, as well as answer questions from parents. (Chan, 2010) noted the effectiveness of information sessions as a transition strategy for parents, but highlighted the need for these to occur on a number of occasions during the transition period, in order for follow-up action and evaluation to occur. The findings of this study indicated that this was not the case in these sites; there was generally only one information night held, with no reported examples of follow-up or evaluation of this session. Suggestions to add an extra information night in Blacksmiths were countered by arguments that they were not necessary and did not always attract many parents.
The challenge of ‘getting parents there’ (to the information sessions) was often discussed in the network meetings. Some network members reflected on information nights being poorly attended by parents, or by parents using these sessions to ask questions that were not pre-empted by the educators (such as seeking advice about whether or not their child should start school) and as a result did not go according to the educators’ plans. The networks engaged in regular discussion about how to organise the information nights to attract more parents, and how educators could convey the information they deemed important for parents. Despite the challenges that were highlighted, the ongoing inclusion of information nights as a pedagogy for transition across the sites reflected the educators’ perception that they were effective.

Although these sessions were often poorly attended, the educators assumed that it was the timing of the sessions that was causing the lack of attendance, and did not appear to question the relevance of these sessions for parents, or the nature of them, as contributing to the absences. A study by Margetts (2007) reported that parents from high socio-economic backgrounds and with both parents who worked full-time, and parents who did not speak English at home were the least likely groups of parents to attend information sessions. It is possible that a number of these factors may have influenced the attendance by parents at information sessions. That this was the main pedagogy used by educators to include parents during their children’s transition, raises concerns about how well parents were being catered for during the transition. Consultation with, and accommodation of, families as stakeholders in transition is necessary for transition programs to be effective (Clancy et al., 2001; Rogers, 2018).

In another example, one information night was deemed as unsuccessful by the educators after a preschool and school educator gave conflicting information to a parent seeking advice about when their child should start school during open question time. Later, it
was observed that the educators confronted one another during a network meeting, each blaming the other for giving opposing advice, and expressing their dismay that their difference views were aired in front of parents and other educators. The educators’ focus was on the professional disagreement, and no consideration appeared to be given to the issue of parents seeking specific advice from educators at an information session. In this example, the educators appeared to focus on the parent’s questions as a barrier to their focus and agenda, rather than on the potential opportunity for parent engagement and the possibility that information nights were not providing opportunities for parents to seek the information they required.

Findings of this study indicated that many parents were not attending information sessions. It was also evident that parents were looking for information at the sessions which educators were not prepared to give. This suggests that the current design of the information sessions as a pedagogy for engaging parents was not effective, and that other pedagogies may need to be considered in order to promote family engagement with transition. In (Chan, 2010) study, parents articulated an aspiration for there to be more opportunities to be involved in the transition period to promote understandings about how the primary school operated, and what was expected of them. In addition, Pianta and Kraft-Sayre (2003a) reported that parents preferred, and gained more benefit from, transition practices that enhanced connections between systems in comparison to practices that were less personal and focused on exchanges of information. Similarly, Rous, Hallam, McCormick, and Cox (2010) and Rogers (2018) recommend appreciating family engagement, welcoming families as part of the transition process, and planning family-centred approaches to transition practices as positive efforts to improve transition experiences.
9.1.4 Speed-dating

Network members in Fern Creek and Blacksmith employed a ‘speed-dating’ (Semann & Slattery, 2015) pedagogy for communicating information about children directly between prior-to-school and school educators. Here, educators held face-to-face meetings with one another and talked about individual children, communicating information about each child directly to the other person. In the Blacksmiths site, the stated purpose of speed-dating was for the preschool educators to ‘hand-over’ the completed Transition Statements to the children’s future first-year-of-school teachers. While parental permission was required to share written Transition Statements, the same permission was not necessarily sought before educators engaged in conversations about particular children. While speed-dating has the potential to strengthen linkages across systems around the child, the verbal sharing of information raises issues of confidentiality and accountability.

Speed dating meetings were pre-arranged and occurred well in advance of the child starting school. Prior-to-school educators would sometimes bring along transition statements or other notes as prompts for the meetings, although this was not always the case - some meetings were purely dialogue between educators. Educators tended to work through a list of children who would be transitioning from the prior-to-school services to school, discussing the individual needs, strengths and any perceived weaknesses of that child. Contact between educators to discuss curriculum or a specific child was shown by LoCasale-Crouch et al. (2008) as being one of the strongest predictors of children’s skills in the first year of school. Educators reported that this method was more effective than written alternatives such as transition statements, as well as less time consuming. According to the educator involved, a further advantage of this pedagogy, when compared with reliance on using written transition statements, was that it provided opportunities to clarify information.
One educator noted that because transition statements were strengths-based documents, “we can’t always write everything in the statements”. This suggests that educators felt that communicating face-to-face about children in the speed-dating format gave them greater opportunities for exchanging information. This is supported in research by Hopps (2014a) who reported similar comments from educators. This can be interpreted as educators attempting to control the type of information that is communicated from prior-to-school to school settings, and to target particular information that is important to them. While educators reported that this pedagogy was efficient and valuable to them, it raises some questions about who is influencing the type of information being communicated, and for what purpose. There could be a danger of allowing school educators to dictate the type of information being shared, for the purpose of informing the school agenda, while other information that is not perceived as being important is ignored. Whether or not this occurred is uncertain, however the priorities and beliefs of the educators about what information is valued and what is not remains an issue.

9.1.5 Reciprocal visits

Reciprocal visits “involve collaboration between early childhood educators and school teachers, through visitation to both settings” (Semann & Slattery, 2015). These visits tended to be more informal and spontaneous than the school visits discussed previously and occurred at different times throughout the year. All of the research sites incorporated various examples of reciprocal visits.

Educators in the networks identified reciprocal visits as a pedagogy that held a number of advantages for transition to school. Advantages for educators included; improved relationships between settings; opportunities for communication; and building reciprocal
understandings, where educators were able to learn about different settings and children by visiting them and observing what happened there. These advantages are echoed by the literature, which argues that reciprocal visits can provide opportunities for educators to enhance their understandings of different pedagogies through observation and professional dialogue (Scull & Garvis, 2015; Semann & Slattery, 2015). Advantages were also cited for children. By visiting the schools, children were afforded opportunities for familiarisation with the school environment, staff, routines and other children. (Chan, 2010) emphasised the benefits that reciprocal visits between preschools and schools can afford, noting that both educators and parents identified this strategy as one that can improve transition experiences for children and families.

As reciprocal visits often coincided with a special event or incursion, the visits were not conducted solely for the purposes of improving transition for children, although they were credited with this. However, some reciprocal visits were planned with the primary purpose of enhancing transition. One example of this occurred in Westhill where the first-year-of-school teacher visited the preschool in the first half of the year and spent time teaching the preschool children, instead of their usual teacher. During this time, the preschool teacher spent time in the first-year-of-school classroom. The educators articulated the benefits of these visits, citing that this gave genuine opportunities for the children to get to know the teacher they would have the following year, and allowed the first-year-of-school teacher to get to know the children. Although it was not specifically mentioned by the educators, this type of activity also builds understandings between educators around pedagogical practices and in particular curriculum content (Broström, 2000), which was demonstrated by Ahtola et al. (2011) as being one of the most effective transition strategies for improving children’s academic outcomes. Demonstration of this is evident in the Foundation teacher’s classroom, where she adopted a play-based environment and learning experiences for the children. This was the
only example of educators collaborating around curriculum content and approaches to learning in an attempt to provide continuity of learning experiences for children.

Reciprocal visits were common when prior-to-school settings and schools were close in proximity to one another, and it ‘made sense’ to share in experiences and events. This was evident especially in Fern Creek and Westhill, where the preschools and schools were physically close to one another. Reciprocal visits occurred on a regular basis throughout the year as preschool children and educators visited the school and vice versa.

The pedagogy of reciprocal visits was influenced by the context and size of the networks, where it is likely that the closer settings are to one another, and the fewer the members, the easier it is for them to visit, and more likely that this will occur. This can be conceptualised using bioecological theory’s contextual microsystem which incorporates significant individuals and the resources available to them (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). The nature of the microsystem influences individual interactions, which can be observed here.

One educator from Westhill noted that organising reciprocal visits was supported by positive relationships across settings, explaining that the stronger the relationships are across settings, the easier it was to facilitate reciprocal visits. This is likely due to educators feeling comfortable and familiar with the process, and with one another. At the same time, reciprocal visits enhance the strength of relationships.

One educator commented that these types of visits did not happen without conscious effort, and highlighted that prior-to-school settings were well-placed to facilitate visits to the school because they were less restricted by routines and structure compared to schools. This notion is supported by the data, which indicated that reciprocal visits were almost always initiated (at least initially) by prior-to-school settings. This is also supported by the research,
which highlights that visits from teachers in schools to prior-to-school settings are one of the least common transition practices, and even less likely after the transition to school has commenced (LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2008). However, it is important to note that the reciprocal visits described in his study often occurred when services were in close proximity. At least one educator indicated that such visits were not always possible when services were some distance apart and transport was required.

9.1.6 Buddy programs

Three of the four sites utilised some version of a buddy program (DET, 2017; Dockett & Perry, 2005a, 2013a), where older primary school children were paired up with younger children. The older school children visited the younger children in their prior-to-school settings, and visa-versa. During these visits, the children participated in a range of activities which included the older children reading with younger children, helping younger children with a task or just spending time playing together. In Blacksmith, the educators described buddy programs as a very effective pedagogy for helping children build relationships with older children, which then benefited them when they went to school. Mentoring from older children who already attend the school provides modelling around learning for younger children (Fabian & Dunlop, 2006). Visiting buddies in respective settings helped by build familiarity with the setting environment, and with the educators, as well as promoting positive role models for the younger children. Educators described that one way they were able to glean the effectiveness of this strategy was through listening to the children talk about their buddies, and how much they looked forward to seeing them.
9.1.7 Classroom practices

In two of the sites - Westhill and Blacksmith, deliberate efforts were made to incorporate particular classroom practices that were used in one setting into another in order to facilitate continuity of practices across the prior-to-school and school settings for children. Educators justified this by saying that when children were familiar with particular practices in prior-to-school settings, they would be less likely to experience difficulties adjusting to them in the school setting. One example of this was in Westhill, where the preschool educators implemented a behaviour management strategy used in the school that was designed to help settle children during transition times (such as moving from outside to inside) and for gaining their attention during whole-group activities. Similarly, (Chan, 2010) reported that educators and parents thought that implementing strategies designed to teach children how to behave in the school learning environment was important. Another example of this was in Blacksmith, where a prior-to-school setting trialled a strategy removing play resources from the outdoor environment in the setting because ‘that’s what they’re going to have at school’. In both of these examples, the emphasis was on school-based practices influencing what happened in the prior-to-school setting. Educators clearly held a perception that by introducing specific practices used in the schools into the prior-to-setting, they were assisting children to become familiar with what school would be like, and therefore supporting their transition to school. This suggests that these practices are underpinned by a belief that it is the prior-to-school setting that should be changed in some way to make it more like school, not the reverse. This is explained by Moss (2013b) as an example of ‘schoolification’ where prior-to-school settings experience pressure to be more like school.

A notable absence from the data in this study was evidence of prior-to-school educators introducing specific academic expectations and/or skills in the prior-to-school setting as a strategy for enhancing transition. This was despite comments that parents often
expected a focus on academic skills as preparation for school and some comments from educators that the role of preschool was to prepare children for school both academically and socially. Several preschool educators were adamant that their play-based programs were both appropriate for the children and facilitated diverse areas of learning and development.

9.1.8 ‘All about school’ books

One school adopted the pedagogy of creating ‘All about school’ books. Each child starting school the following year was provided with a book, with the intention that it travelled between school and home to encourage regular contributions from children, their families, and from educators over the transition period and beyond. It is important for the rapport between educators and families to be established prior to children school starting (La Paro, Pianta, & Cox, 2000), which these books aimed to achieve. The books contained information that could help that particular child and their family. For example, photographs of the teacher and peers, photos of different parts of the school, or written notes. Research highlights the need for families to have a number of opportunities to interact with educators, as the needs and priorities of families differ, based on different expectations and understandings (Dockett & Perry, 2004a).

The notion behind this pedagogy was to help children build a positive connection between home and school. The books aimed to achieve this by improving the familiarity with the people and the environment at school, communicating specific information about that child and family, as well as strengthening the rapport between the child, the family and the educator. The use of social stories is an effective strategy for providing insights into the new place of learning (Briody & McGarry, 2005; Dockett & Perry, 2014a). It is crucial that educators make meaningful and genuine connections with families, as well as with one
another (Mangione & Speth, 1998; Margetts, 2007). This pedagogy demonstrated effort to engage with families during transition and suggests that educators valued input from families during this time.

9.1.9 Transition statements

Transition statements are a pedagogical communication tool completed by early childhood educators. They are written to complement the learning outcomes for children outlined in the EYLF (or state equivalent) which are holistic, and strengths-based in nature. In Victoria, it is mandatory for preschool educators to complete a transition statement for each child starting school the following year. The statements are designed to: act as a summary of a child’s learning from the prior-to-school setting; identify children’s individual approaches to learning and interests; and provide a tool for communication around curriculum, and how children’s continuity of learning can be supported into the school (DET, 2017). In New South Wales transition statements are not mandatory, but there is encouragement for educators to utilise the statements to “summarise the child’s strengths, interests and learning in line with the Early Years Learning Framework” along with the explanation that “Completed statements help school teachers get to know children before they enter preschool, then make connections with them and respond to their individual learning needs at school.” (New South Wales State Government, 2018, para. 2).

The usefulness of transition statements as a pedagogy for improving transition was discussed in all four sites. Both the advantages and disadvantages of the statements were explored at some length by members. While some educators praised the effectiveness of transition statements, describing them as ‘really valuable’, others highlighted a number of perceived disadvantages. One of these disadvantages was around the language used in the
transition statements. Some network members noted that the language used in the statements was unfamiliar to school educators, and this made them difficult to understand. The language adopted in the EYLF is consciously strengths-based, and in line with the document’s strong philosophical underpinnings for early childhood education. It avoids the use of standards-based language, which is one explanation for why school educators might be unfamiliar with the language. O’Kane (2016) emphasised the importance of transitions documentation being ‘user-friendly’ for both prior-to-school and school sectors. Educator comments suggest that this was not always the case in this study.

As well criticism of the language itself, school educators also described the content of the statements as sometimes being ‘ambiguous’ and as one educator said; “you spend more time reading between the lines...rather than what the guts of the matter is”. One explanation offered for this was that transition statements are seen by, and contributed to, by parents. As a consequence, there was a sense that were reluctant to be explicit in their comments about children. Similar findings were demonstrated in research by Hopps (2014a) where educators reported having to ‘read between the lines’ in transition statements. This was particularly the case when school educators were not familiar with the language used or the contexts in which they were composed. Given that school educators in this study indicated that they were unfamiliar with the EYLF, it is not surprising that they were unfamiliar with the outcomes being described or the strengths-based language used to achieve this. It could also be, as (Hopps, 2014a) has suggested, that the information provided in the statements was not the information sought by educators.

Some school educators held particularly strong views about the relevance and effectiveness of the transition statements, describing them as documents written for parents, rather than educators. Comments that “there needs to be another level of professional exchange...I think they are a bit of a waste of time” reflected the belief that transition
statements were not a strong pedagogical tool for educators, and did not contain information that was professionally regarded as valuable. These and other similar comments also are reflective of the belief that the type of information that educators share about children is different from the information shared with parents. Further, there were indications that parents ought not to be privy to professional exchanges of information. This was evidenced by the popularity of verbal exchanges of information during the speed-dating events.

If school educators are unable to understand the information in the statements, or do not respect the documents as a source of information, they are unlikely to perceive the statements as useful pedagogy to support the transition to school. This has implications for the prior-to-school educators who are completing them. In situations where school educators do not read or cannot understand the statements, prior-to-school educators may question the rationale for completing the statements and experience a de-valuing of their professional expertise (Hopps, 2014a).

Educators in two networks acknowledged that the lack of understanding around the statements was something that could be remedied through greater professional collaboration. They expressed the hope that through the network, they would be able to focus a goal on improving the understandings around the language used across the settings more generally, and this would subsequently improve the ability of educators to understand the transition statements.

One of the common disadvantages of the transition statements highlighted by the educators was the time required to complete them. Some educators said they would rather spend the time needed to write the statements having face-to-face communication with the other educator, indicating that face-to-face meetings were more valuable for communication
than transition statements. This is consistent with literature on the subject (Cassidy, 2005; Hopps-Wallis, Fenton, & Dockett, 2016).

One educator questioned the appropriateness of the statements for parents. She noted that the literacy requirements for completing the parent section were beyond the capabilities of some parents. She suggested further that efforts to engage with parents around transition could be severely hampered by such a negative experience. Other school educators noted that not all parents completed this section, and in some cases, educators perceived parents were not ‘honest’, which caused some educators to question the usefulness of the document as a source of information.

These criticisms reflected the view of some school educators that the information contained in transitions statement was often neither clear nor of particular value. As a result, some of the networks discussed alternatives to the transition statements. Educators at both Robinleigh and Blacksmith proposed a simplified, ‘tick-box’ checklist-type document where the prior-to-school educators could select from pre-defined options (with descriptors such as ‘left-handed’; ‘scissor skills’; ‘write their name’). It was evident from this, that some school educators believed there were more effective ways to gather the type of information they wanted from prior-to-school settings than transition statements. While the checklist-type of approach may be appealing for educators due to its simplicity, it also creates an opportunity for the communication to become focused on deficiencies rather than strengths and for the information to be dictated by the schools, rather than the early childhood settings.

Not all school educators were critical– some acknowledged the transition statements as being very useful, especially in conjunction with face-to-face meetings where the information in the statement could be unpacked further. One school educator explained how helpful the statements were for catering for the individual needs and interests of children,
particularly during the early stages of school. Despite this, advantages of the transition statements were mostly cited by prior-to-school educators, who held aspirations that the content of the statements would be helpful to school educators regarding children, and how to best cater for their learning needs.

In their review of the transfer of written documentation between preschool and school, O’Kane and Hayes (2013) noted the importance of sharing information about children’s strengths and identifying areas where support was needed to effect a smooth transition to school. Recommendations to support the effective transfer of documentation emphasised a strengths-based, rather than a deficit approach, and the importance of including the voice of the child (O’Kane, 2016).

A key point from the discussions around transition statements in this study was that there was a diversity of views: some educators considered them to be valuable and effective, while others did not. In all of the sites in this study, the existence of the network promoted other methods of communication in addition to the transition statements. Even when educators regarded the transitions statements as valuable, they preferred alternatives, such as verbal communication. This is consistent with findings of Hopps-Wallis and Perry (2017).

Ahtola et al. (2011) Finnish study reported that the exchange of written material such as a child’s ‘growth portfolio’, along with co-operation around curriculum between prior-to-school and school educators was one of the most effective predictors for children’s outcomes when compared with other common transition practices. However, this was also among the least commonly used strategies reported by these educators. While the exchange of written material – particularly transitions statements – was occurring in the sites in this study, this had met with various levels of acceptance and success. The second element of the pedagogy identified by (Ahtola et al., 2011) – co-operation around curriculum between prior-to-school
and school educators – was notably absent in the findings of this study. There was only one example where educators made concerted efforts to swap teaching roles and familiarise themselves with teaching practices and approaches to curriculum content across settings. This lack of cooperation around curriculum had implications for efforts to promote continuity of learning; it is very difficult to promote continuity when educators were not aware of the curriculum expectations across settings.

9.1.10 Summary

The study identified a range of pedagogies of educational transition used by educators in rural contexts to promote effective transitions to school. These pedagogies were: professional educator networks, school visits, information nights, speed-dating, reciprocal visits, buddy programs, classroom practices, ‘All about school’ books and transition statements. While all four sites used educator networks as a key pedagogy, the other pedagogies were not all used in every site, and some were used differently by different sites. Nevertheless, all of the pedagogies of educational transition identified were being used to promote successful transitions to school.
9.2 Question 2: What, or who, influences these pedagogies?

This study identified a range of influences on pedagogies of educational transitions. These were: leadership, purpose, reciprocal understandings, relationships, professionalism and goals for transition. As well as being influences on pedagogies of educational transitions, these influences also interacted with, and influenced each other in a number of ways.

9.2.1 Leadership

Each of the networks had a designated leader, or leaders. The issue of leadership was not mentioned during the network meetings attended by the researcher, but did emerge during the interviews, when network members were asked directly about leadership. In only one site was there tension about the network leadership, fed by the perception of some educators that the school-based leader of the Blacksmith network prioritised actions and issues relevant to her school context over others.

Across the sites, network leaders expressed some hesitancy about their nominated leadership role – indicating that it was not planned and had just seemed to happen that they adopted the role and/or that they would be willing to pass the role to someone else. This sense of downplaying leadership is reminiscent of the emphasis on teamwork in early childhood education – sometimes at the expense of a clear focus on leadership – that was pervasive in previous decades (Rodd, 1994; Waniganayake, 2014). In explaining this, L. Hard (2005) referred to the discourse of niceness, which prioritised teamwork over explicit leadership. Indeed, L. Hard and O'Gorman (2007, p. 56) suggested that this focus “demanded compliance to the group and [regarded] enacting leadership [as] and abdication of this position”. The discourse of niceness presents a barrier to leadership, and reflects the assumption that “every
staff member is able to lead” (Torrance, 2013, p. 362). It may also explain why, in the current study, leadership arrangements often were not questioned. Current conceptualisations of leadership in early childhood education reflect a stronger focus on the professional role of teachers and greater expectations that teachers will have the skills and knowledge to undertake leadership roles, as well as promote teamwork among educators who have various levels of qualification and experience (Fennech, 2013; Hujala, Waniganayake, & Rodd, 2013; Waniganayake, Cheeseman, Fenech, Hadley, & Shepherd, 2012). It is not clear how this approach to leadership will impact on the networks.

In all instances, the leader or leaders influenced the direction of, and acted as a motivator for, the pedagogies - in particular, the networks. At this point it is important to recall that – using the definition of pedagogies of educational transition outlined this study – the networks acted both as enablers of specific pedagogies, and as a pedagogy themselves.

Congruent with the literature (Lieberman & Grolnick, 1996; Varga-Atkins, O’Brien, Burton, Campbell, & Qualter, 2010), educators articulated the importance of having someone to ‘drive’ the network, ensuring it pursued the goals and vision of the network. Earl and Katz (2007) explained that the leaders themselves, as well as other members perceive that vision-setting and adherence to a network’s focus is the responsibility of the leader. Similarly, McGuire and Silvia (2009) explained that some of the characteristics of effective network leaders include identifying what resources and personnel are needed to achieve the goals of a network. Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) highlighted the role of a Person’s levels of motivation and persistence, and the influence this has on how individuals interact with others.

A number of leadership traits and skills were identified as being influential in this study. Leaders were described as being; confident, optimistic, encouraging, supportive and approachable. These are consistent with influential characteristics identified in other studies.
(Earl & Katz, 2007; O'Gorman & Hard, 2013). Of note, was that all the leaders in the networks also held other professional leadership positions, such as directors of preschools or team leaders in a school. This suggests that the previous leadership experience and expertise of members was acknowledged and valued by the network. This is reflected in the bioecological model where resource characteristics of a Person include past experiences, skills and intelligence. These are recognised as impacting on a Person’s interactions with others and their environment (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

Across the sites, organisation of the network - including scheduling meetings, distributing information to network members, and directing the focus of the meetings - was generally the role of the leader. Lieberman and McLaughlin (1992) described the allocation of important organisational tasks to leaders as being key for effective networks.

Leadership from beyond the network was also believed by the network members as being influential in the effectiveness of pedagogies. For example, in Robinleigh and Blacksmith the leadership of the school principals had a direct influence on the network and other pedagogies. In both these instances, the network received the endorsement and ongoing support of the school principals. While the school principals in these two settings were not members of the network, they still enacted a form of leadership in the network. Earl and Katz (2007) describe such leadership as an example of ‘formal leadership’ whereby rather than being involved in the networks themselves, principals were responsible for facilitating a series of activities that would direct the priorities of the school to ones of improvement, support and capacity building.

A similar example was observed in Westhill, where a previous school principal had been instrumental in initiating a relationship between the school and preschool. This created a precedent on which the current network was built. In this instance, the principal was able to
allocate funding to release a member of staff to work actively towards improving children’s transitions to school. In Fern Creek, one network member explained that support from the principal allowed her to utilise her time more effectively and therefore better meet the needs of children. By supporting the network through releasing staff, providing opportunities for professional development and access to resources, principals fostered a culture that valued changes in thinking and practice (Earl & Katz, 2007). The Fern Creek network also brought together members from both private and public schools, and one member commented that support from the respective school principals alleviated tensions and competitiveness between the schools, and instead focused aspirations on improving transition for children in the community, regardless of which school they attended. Among the features of effective leadership are the ability of leaders to allow autonomy of the network members (Vaessen et al., 2014) and to retain a focus on the primary goals or purpose of the network (McGuire & Silvia, 2009). This is evident in this example of formal leadership.

While it was clear that the role of formal leadership was beneficial in many ways, some network members also highlighted some tensions around formal leadership. In Robinleigh, the network members expressed some need to prove the effectiveness of the network to the school principals. This was likely influenced by the position held by the principals, and their ability to exert their power over the network. It could also be a reflection of increasing accountability requirements, where principals are under pressure to deliver positive outcomes across a broad range of school and community issues (NSW Department of Education, 2017). This influence was also observed in Blacksmith, where the school principals demonstrated considerable investment in the network, and had a clear agenda for their aspirations for the network, namely to improve children’s transitions to their school. This is echoed by O'Brien, Varga-Atkins, Burton, Campbell, and Qualter (2008), who stated
that school principals are influential agents of networks, and can act as gate-keepers, facilitators or barriers.

Lieberman and McLaughlin (1992) identified one of the leadership challenges faced by networks as differentiating between the delegation of organisational responsibilities and the tendency to implement hierarchical structures in order to fulfil the expectations of external influences. This is evidenced in the Blacksmith example where some network members perceived that the network leader was transmitting the principal’s agenda. Lieberman and McLaughlin (1992) explained that hierarchical structures in networks are not inherently problematic, however they should not stifle the willingness of other members to participate and contribute to creating divides in status and authority.

While there were some examples of formal leadership present in the networks, there was also consistent evidence of ‘distributed leadership’. One of the defining features of distributed leadership is the effective distribution of expertise across a number of people (O’Gorman & Hard, 2013; Woods, Bennett, Harvey, & Wise, 2004). This was evident to varying degrees in all of the networks studied, where, at different times, various members of the networks took different leadership responsibilities. For example, in Blacksmith, some network members posited that the leadership was ‘flat’ and that there was a number of members who made leadership contributions. Others described the leadership as being a ‘shared’ role. In Westhill, the leader of the network acknowledged that while she held a leadership position, she considered part of her role was to mentor other members of the network into leadership. This is once again consistent with characteristics of distributed leadership whereby the boundaries of leadership are ‘open’ to contributions from others (Woods et al., 2004). Further, Allen and Cherrey (2000) proposed that leadership in organic organisations such as networks requires distribution across a number of people in order to
become ‘leader-full’. A leader-full network demands that the capacity of others will be built (Allen & Cherrey, 2000).

The role of leadership can also be considered in relation to the theoretical model adopted in this study, in particular, the proximal processes that occur. Leadership clearly influenced the ‘form, power, content and direction’ of the proximal processes (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, p. 996) which in this case were the interactions between the network members as well as with their environment over time.

9.2.2 Purpose

Educators identified the importance of having a clear purpose for the various pedagogies of educational transitions implemented in their sites. Having a purpose is consistently identified in the literature as being one of the key characteristics of educational networks. Further, educational networks are oftentimes defined by the possession of a common interest or goal (Bell et al., 2006; Lieberman & Grolnick, 1996; Lieberman & McLaughlin, 1992; Vaessen et al., 2014). While leaders of the networks were acknowledged as being responsible for the continued motivation of the network, the purpose or focus of the network was generated by the members. Indeed, members required their participation in the network to have a purpose in order for them to consider it worthwhile. The purpose of the network and its benefit to the members are mutually dependent. Varga-Atkins et al. (2010) explained that in order to be effective, a network requires a common purpose that benefits the individual needs, and this promotes collaboration and commitment. This can be conceptualised as an example of a ‘bottom-up’ network, where the network is developed by the members, for the members; is self-governing and practice-driven (Vaessen et al., 2014).
When the interests and needs of the network members are central, the network is sensitive to both the individual and collective development of its members (Lieberman, 2000).

As explained in the methodology chapter, all of the networks were selected for this study based on their focus on improving transition to school practices. Hence, it was unsurprising that the networks identified this as their primary aim. Some of the networks held aims in addition to this. For example, the Robinleigh network held aspirations to enhance community capacity and collaborate professionally with other educators. Increasing community capacity and professional collaboration are both recognised in the literature as being outcomes of educational networks (Hopkins, 2000). Network members in Blacksmith aimed to combat some of the disadvantage experienced by children and families in their community. Both of these networks believed that it was through a focus on transition to school that these additional aims could be achieved.

It is common for networks to focus their purpose on a specific, identifiable group (Bell et al., 2006) as is the case in all four networks in this study where the focus was on children and families making the transition to school. When the goals of a network align with the expertise of its members and the network can operate effectively to meet its objectives, there are clear benefits for the targeted groups (Bell et al., 2006).

There were a number of ways that the members hoped a clear purpose would benefit children and families through the adoption of pedagogies of educational transition. These included working collaboratively, pooling expertise and experience and enhancing educators’ professional practice; “it was time to work together” was one comment, noting that, prior to the network, there had been “lots of people with expertise but all working in different directions.” This reflects a belief by educators that seeking expertise from others with different experiences and knowledge, and then working collaboratively gave greater
opportunities for achieving the goals to improve transition than working independently; “…to do something with a team of people to build those strengths and use the expertise of each other”.

Transition to school provides a unique opportunity for the collaborative sharing of knowledge and experience between prior-to-school and school educators (Dockett & Perry, 2001a; Hopps, 2014a). These interactions are also examples of key processes (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) in effect between the network members. It is recognised that when groups of people work together in a network there is the potential for creation of new knowledge that can then be disseminated to others. It is this process of knowledge generation and sharing that allows change to occur, and as a result, professional practices to be influenced (Earl & Katz, 2007; McCormick et al., 2011a).

Inherent to the purpose of the pedagogies of educational transition was the bringing together of educators and other professionals from different contexts (primarily schools and prior-to-school and health settings). The collaboration of ‘experts’ from these settings represents an example of ‘boundary-spanning’ where professional inquiry and relationships cut across different contexts, providing opportunities for innovative pedagogies to emerge (Hall, Wall, Baumfield, & Towler, 2010).

9.2.3 Reciprocal understandings

All network members highlighted reciprocal understandings as being an area of influence on the network itself, as well as the network’s ability to enable other pedagogical practices. Reciprocal understandings referred to holding shared, or similar, understandings about professional practice, particularly what happens in the ‘other’ setting. Network members also referred to reciprocal understandings in the aspirational sense: how they would
wish to see reciprocal understandings developed by the network. This focus on the importance of reciprocal understandings is likely due to the network being made up of educators and other professionals from different contexts. Prior-to-school and school settings differ in a number of key ways including; the physical location of the settings, the overarching curricula and policies, the structure of the workforce, as well as pedagogical practices. The members bring with them different professional experiences, beliefs and understandings. The coming together and interaction between two different contexts as evidenced here is described by Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) as an example of a mesosystem.

The importance of shared understandings is echoed by Peters (2014) who stated that these were key for successful transitions across different educational contexts and (Bell et al., 2006), who have highlighted the capacity of networks to build understandings across sectors. The network members articulated a need for a level of reciprocal understandings between the members in order to work collaboratively and meaningfully together. Network members referred to reciprocal understandings in a number of ways, including sharing a common purpose, which was discussed previously. Other examples referred to reciprocal understandings of language and of one another’s professional roles. These two elements are interwoven to a large extent, as the language used by educators was often determined by their professional roles. A consistent example of this involved the transition to school statements. These were written by prior-to-school educators utilising the language of the Early Years Learning Framework or the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework. The language of these documents and the approach to reporting that derived from them was mostly unfamiliar to the school educators who received them. Similarly, prior-to-school educators acknowledged their lack of understanding around the language of school curricula and assessment strategies. Some network members also identified the language used by other
professionals – such as maternal and child health nurses and other community workers – as being unfamiliar. Members hoped that the network would provide a platform for becoming more familiar with the different language used, and therefore improve their reciprocal understandings of contexts and professional practice.

Some of the networks members identified a lack of understanding of the professional roles and pedagogical practices between school and prior-to-school educators, and in some cases (Robinleigh and Blacksmith), other professionals. Reasons for these mismatched understandings included lack of experiences with the different settings. School educators did not understand the professional role of prior-to-school educators due to having had no experience working in that setting, and vice versa. For example, Nerida indicated that her only knowledge of the EYLF came from her experience as a parent of a child attending a prior-to-school setting.

Educators’ limited understandings of different settings is known to be a barrier to continuity of learning and practice (Timperley, McNaughton, Howie, & Robinson, 2003). Another potential reason for the lack of reciprocal understandings between prior-to-school and school educators may have been generated by fear of change, and having practices influenced by the ‘other’ setting. Hopps (2014b) found that while there were benefits to working together to improve practice, practice could also be influenced in negative ways. For example, prior-to-school settings could be reluctant to be influenced by schools for fear of push-down curriculum and increased pressure to incorporate more structured and formalised learning into their setting (Hopps, 2014b). While the reasons for the limited reciprocal understandings were not clear, members identified that this contributed to different, and often competing priorities, expectations and beliefs among the members which, in turn, presented a range of challenges for the networks.
One prominent example of this was the dichotomous understandings of prior-to-school and school educators around the purpose of the year prior to school and the notion of school readiness. These competing understandings were a source of tension and frustration, where both prior-to-school and school educators believed their approach was the ‘right’ one. Some prior-to-school educators resisted the pressure from schools to ‘prepare’ children for school, instead positioning the year prior to school as educationally valuable in its own right; “Our whole [preschool] year is a year preparing our children for life, and learning those life skills, not so much a year of teaching them to be ready for school.”

This view is consistent with the pedagogical philosophy espoused by the Early Years Learning Framework, which advocates for a holistic, play-based approach to learning that recognises the strengths of children and their existing knowledge (DEEWR, 2009a). In contrast, the pedagogies of school educators are steered by the Australian Curriculum, with its focus on content and achievement standards (Dockett, Perry, et al., 2017). School educators are under considerable pressure to ensure children at school are meeting targeted learning outcomes (Moss, 2013b). As a result, it is possible that a major transitions focus for school educators can become children’s ‘school readiness’ – usually defined as their preparedness to meet these demands (Dockett & Perry, 2009, 2013b). In this view, the responsibility rests on the child to be ‘ready’ for school (Grieshaber, 2009; OECD, 2006) and pressure is exerted by school educators on their prior-to-school educator colleagues to prepare children (Moss, 2013b). A clear example of this emerged in Blacksmith, where two network members articulated their disparate beliefs about the purpose of preschool, each making a passionate argument for their beliefs. One held the firm belief that [preschool] is the pre-year to school, so if they’re [preschools] not preparing them for school, then who the hell is? This network member’s opinion of preschool was so strongly held, that even when she Googled some of the websites for the government, about what [preschool] is and
discovered that ...it almost looked like the Department was trying to tow the [preschool] party line, they were being very careful about how they worded it, and I thought, this is bullshit, she did not question her own beliefs. In contrast to these beliefs, a prior-to-school educator stated that we’re hell bent on preparing our children for that next step in life, rather than letting them be in the space they’re in, and just allowing them to ‘be’, without having to prepare them for what’s coming next.

Another, similar example was observed in Westhill, where a previous school principal was reported to have blamed the preschool director for students’ perceived poor performance on the Best Start assessment, suggesting that the director had not prepared the children well enough academically for school.

In Blacksmith, there was disagreement between some prior-to-school and school educators around the number and duration of transition visits to the schools that should occur as part of the planned transition program. School educators held the view that the earlier transition to school program commenced (in particular, visits to the school), the better, as it gave schools more ‘time’ with the children, presumably to introduce children to the school environment, curriculum and pedagogies. Meanwhile, prior-to-school educators believed this was an imposition on their year with children and interfered with the learning programs and routines. This latter view invokes the notion of resistance to the preferences of school educators and their influences on the preschool program. The preferencing of values and agendas of schools within prior-to-school settings is referred to as ‘schoolification’ (Moss, 2013b; OECD, 2006). A further example of schoolification was also identified in Blacksmith, where educators in a prior-to-school setting had decided to make preschool ‘more like school’ in an effort to aid children’s transition to school. A major enactment of this decision involved removing many of the children’s play resources: ... we’ve done a few things ... to make [preschool] a bit more like school. The justification for this was that is what they’re
going to have at school. This example illustrated how specific school-based pedagogical practices had filtered down to prior-to-settings and were being implemented. Further, the prior-to-school educators appeared to genuinely believe they were implementing a practice that would benefit the children and improve their transition to school experience. The OECD (2006) has warned that ‘schoolification’ endangered early childhood education by narrowing the educational focus and introducing inappropriate pedagogical practices. Moss (2013b) conceded that the discourse of ‘readying’ children continues to dominate the transition to school conversation. In the adoption of this discourse, prior-to-school education is seen as an intervening measure to improve outcomes at school, rather than an educationally valuable experience in its own right.

To counter this, there were examples of school educators attempting to implement early childhood focused pedagogies into their school classrooms. In Blacksmith, this included play-based experiences involving playdough, pegboards and craft activities being included during the first term of the year – *It’s very much a blend between [preschool] and school...doing play-based activities*. Upon closer examination of this example, it became apparent that the play-based activities were *activities at the tables...we call it developmental play...very much aiming to promote fine motor development and social skills and things like that*. This use of the term play and play-based is not necessarily compatible with that utilised in early childhood education (Danniels & Pyle, 2018; DEEWR, 2009a), particularly definitions which emphasise the voluntary and internally motivated characteristics of play. In this instance, reciprocal understandings of play were not evident.

In the Westhill network, school educators implemented play-based approaches to teaching and learning that seemed more compatible with the EYLF definition of such approaches as contexts “for learning through which children organise and make sense of their social worlds as they actively engage with people, objects and representations”
In the Westhill first-year-of-school classroom, the set-up of one whole section of the classroom was based on the preschool setting and included familiar play areas. In addition to this, school educators integrated play-based pedagogies into their teaching practice in the classroom, modelled on what had been observed in the prior-to-school setting during reciprocal visits. Developing understandings of ‘other’ pedagogical practices is recognised as challenging. It requires educators to reach beyond the ‘protection’ of their own practices and beliefs and acknowledge the value and validity of other pedagogical practices (Petriwskyj, 2005).

Two of the networks – Fern Creek and Westhill – recognised the benefits that could be afforded by conducting reciprocal visits to increase the understandings of the professional roles of prior-to-school educators and school. Here, educators spent time in their respective settings during which educators could observe and become more familiar with the pedagogical practices being implemented. It is worthwhile to note that Fern Creek and Westhill were the two smaller, less formal, networks in this study. The schools and prior-to-school settings were also located within close proximity. While not necessarily the determining factor, this was likely to have been of benefit in facilitating these visits. Also relevant, is that these visits developed over a period of years as network members grew to know one another better, trust one another, and became more familiar with the respective pedagogical practices. This is reflected in the bioecological model where Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) emphasised the influence and importance of time on the development of processes.

Network members in Blacksmith and Robinleigh indicated that organising reciprocal visits was something they aspired to, although this had not eventuated during the time of this study. Some of the reasons given for not undertaking reciprocal visits were lack of funding, the difficulty finding replacement teachers, and time. This is consistent with findings
from Einarsdottir et al. (2008), who reported that, while educators thought meetings with other educators to discuss pedagogies was a ‘good idea’, this rarely translated into actual practice. Despite the challenges, reciprocal visits are one pedagogy that educators can use to build reciprocal understandings of professional pedagogies across contexts.

Communication was cited by network members as having a direct influence on the development and consolidation of reciprocal understandings. In order for reciprocal understandings to occur, communication between members needed to be clear. Members were required to be willing to share information with others in order to grow the reciprocal understandings within the network. Of equal importance, was the willingness of those receiving the information to acknowledge and respect the information being shared.

Communication between prior-to-school and school settings has been identified in the literature and policy as being advantageous for transition to school (DEEWR, 2009a; Hopps, 2014b).

Network members highlighted examples where poor communication had resulted in confusion, anxiety and frustration between the network members, and for families. In Robinleigh and Blacksmith, families were given conflicting advice regarding their children’s transition to school as a result of educators not communicating with one another: “With the parents we found last year there was a bit of confusion that came from both parts – from the school and probably from ourselves as well, so that’s why we feel it would be good to be on the same page. Chan (2010) has noted that, although prior-to-school settings and schools can cooperate with one another, information exchange is often at a superficial level and this can be prohibitive in attempts to implement effective pedagogies of educational transition. Further, it is important for educators to use clear and detailed communication in order to help combat some of the lack of understandings that exist across different settings. Research has recommended a range of communication practices to enhance transition and improve
continuity across settings. These include sharing of information about children’s learning, collaborative planning of transition activities, and developing complementary approaches to curriculum, teaching and learning (Dockett & Perry, 2009, 2014a). While network members across the sites described communication that encompassed these topics, the level of detail or superficiality was not explored.

Several different pedagogies were employed, through all of the networks at various times, to enhance communication. In addition to the network meetings, other, more informal interactions between members took place. Communication also occurred during planned strategies such as speed-dating, reciprocal visits, the development and completion of child checklists, and the sharing of transition statements. Black-Hawkins (2004 p.11) has advocated for ‘a range of effective and flexible communication strategies’ to support the interactions of network members. Similarly, Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta (2000) note the connection between high quality communication and regular contact between contexts (microsystems) in which children are embedded, and positive outcomes for children starting school.

Communication between educators provided a level of professional support to educators. In Fern Creek, network members described feeling more positive about finding a solution to a problem knowing that they could talk to their colleagues: One thing I would do is say ‘these are strategies that have worked for me’. Effective communication also had benefits for children and families. Network members acknowledged that when relevant information was shared, educators were better informed to make more appropriate decisions, and ultimately better able to meet the needs of children and families, because it’s crazy having done all this work with the children and then schools starting with a clean slate, and not having any background that could put them so much further forward. Effective communication between educators was associated with improved reciprocal understandings.
9.2.4 Relationships

Relationships had a major influence on the pedagogies of educational transition enacted in and through the networks. Relationships and reciprocal understandings are mutually dependent. Positive relationships enable greater reciprocal understandings to be developed, and of the building of reciprocal understandings affects positive relationships. The importance of relationships in networks was espoused by Black-Hawkins (2004, p. 54), who noted the importance of “developing and sustaining supportive and invigorating relationships” on the basis that “networks fundamentally comprise people and … the quality of the relationships between participants is therefore crucial to their success”.

In their development of a model of transition to school derived from Bronfenbrenner’s (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) bioecological model of development, Pianta, Rimm-Kaufman, and Cox (1999) emphasised the importance of facilitating positive relationships to support children. In their ‘ecological and dynamic model of transition’, effective transition pedagogies “facilitate an ongoing relationships process among all partners” (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003b, p. 9). Further, as children are recognised as embedded within a range of interacting systems, the relationships within and across these microsystems (and the mesosystems generated when they intersect) are influential in determining the outcomes of transition (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000).

One of the achievements of the each of the four networks involved in this study was to bring educators and other professionals together in a context where they could form meaningful relationships from which new and improved pedagogies emerged. Moss (2013a) described the ‘transformative’ potential for change that emerged from educators coming together in a ‘meeting place’ that promote a climate of respectful challenge to existing practices and promoted the development of new pedagogies (Dockett & Einarsdottir, 2017).
While there was no evidence that such transformative change had occurred to this point, there was evidence in at least some of the sites that professional relationships had moved beyond those characterised as ‘readying’ children for school into the realm of ‘strong and equal partnerships’ (Moss, 2013a). While such relationships supported collaboration among the network members, it was not always the case that educators in prior-to-school and school settings regarded themselves as equal partners in these relationships.

Strengthening relationships was credited with improved communication and greater reciprocal understandings in the networks studied. In particular, members highlighted the benefits afforded by networks for building ‘face-to-face’ relationships. Educators noted that: *Previously I hadn’t met any of the primary school staff, so it’s given me an opportunity to meet more of the people who are working with young children in the area; and ...it allows that opportunity for us as educators, of primary and [preschool] to all get together, and become familiar with who is teaching in Blacksmith*. The face-to-face element in these interactions is important, as (Hopps, 2014a) has argued that positive relationships are developed most effectively through face-to-face communication.

Network members in Westhill, Blacksmith and Fern Creek articulated that time was important for the development of relationships in the network. Karila and Rantavuori (2014) and Dockett and Perry (2009) have highlighted the need for adequate time to consolidate collaborative activity. Network members demonstrated this in their comments: *I’d say our relationship has gotten stronger. When I first started, to now, the number of teachers and the relationships between the teachers I reckon has gotten broader and stronger; The group being established quite a number of years ago now has enabled that communication to happen more easily and also in a group setting; and I think when you’ve got your eye very closely on what’s best for the child, then that will enable you to make the connections with the other people in the community who are working with those children...Over time, a culture*
develops where I see that the barriers aren’t there. Another network member explained that action and change necessitated positive relationships: You can’t just rock on in there and have this program because it won’t work, unless you’ve got those relationships first. Time is highlighted in the bioecological model as being integral for the development of relationships (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

Positive relationships among network members had clear advantages for pedagogies of educational transition and this is well-recognised in the literature (ETC Research Group, 2011; Hopps, 2014b; Pianta, Cox, Taylor, & Early, 1999). Network members described how increased familiarity with and ‘knowing’ other educators created avenues for professional dialogue. The following example occurred in Blacksmith, where a network member commented I think by strengthening the relationships I feel that the teaching staff are happy to sort of call and chat about a kid if we are having a few problems at school, or they’re having trouble settling in, because we know them. Additionally, positive relationships facilitated effective communication and sharing of pedagogical approaches: I feel quite happy to ring a preschool teacher and if I’ve got a child, or got some concerns I feel quite happy to ring a [preschool] teacher and say ‘hey can you tell me a bit more about this student,’ or ‘what did you do to deal with this?

Educators who have opportunities to share in, and acknowledge others’ expertise are well-placed to build positive relationships. Indeed, educators expect to be able to build collaborative relationships with other educators in order to enhance transitions (ETC Research Team, 2011). Network members in Blacksmith cited an example where they believed that the positive relationships, coupled with reciprocal understandings and communication, enabled them to work together to support a child and family more effectively as they were making the transition to school. They described some challenging circumstances where the family required additional support during this time. In their view, resolving the
issue would not have been as positive without the collaboration of educators through the
network. Congruently, transition research has suggested that tackling complex issues through
the development of new pedagogies is only possible in a context of positive relationships and
reciprocal understandings are present (Dockett & Einarsdottir, 2017; Peters, 2014;
Petriwskyj, 2005).

Some network members explained that the relationships developed through the
network had expanded beyond the network to include other educators within the community.
An example of this was in Blacksmith where educators from different schools and prior-to-
school settings attended professional development together. This development suggests that
members valued the relationships they had developed in the network. This concept is echoed
by Ahtola et al. (2011) who posited that positive interactions between prior-to-school and
school educators form a foundation on which other, positive relationships can be developed
and reinforced.

Network members highlighted some potential barriers to the creation of positive
relationships. In Fern Creek and Robinleigh these barriers were focused on competitiveness
between settings. Specifically competition between schools for enrolments inhibited some
efforts to collaborate and share expertise: Sometimes people get that competitive thing
happening...but we try to be really mindful of that. Moutafidou and Sivropoulou (2010)
identified competition as a factor that can disrupt cooperative relationships.

Network members in Fern Creek and Westhill acknowledged that building
relationships required ongoing effort and commitment. In their experience, the responsibility
for this often fell to prior-to-school educators. Members pondered whether the same level of
relationships would exist without their initiation: I feel like if we didn’t invite ourselves we
wouldn’t get invited. This did not present a difficulty for another prior-to-school educator
who believed it was up to the preschool to initiate relationships: *I think it’s up to the preschool staff I suppose to make that initial advance towards the schools, because they [schools] are so set in their ways.* This is consistent with previous findings that prior-to-school educators are more likely than their school counterparts to instigate and continue communication around the transition to school (Hopps, 2014a).

9.2.5 Professionalism

The networks were influenced by a variety of aspects relating to professionalism. One example of this referred to the level of professional support experienced by the members. Network members described how participation in the network had afforded greater professional support through opportunities to work together, and to share professional ideas and knowledge: *It’s been a success in getting to know people who are there to support us.* Networks provide a structure through which the educators can both receive and offer support (O’Brien et al., 2008). Participation in networks can afford opportunities to navigate complex issues, ask questions and share expertise (Schiff et al., 2015). One network member explained the benefit of having someone that you can say ‘I’m stuck on this, can you give me a bit of a hand, what do you think about this?’ A preschool educator in Blacksmith described the benefits of receiving support from the network in what was often a professionally isolated role. When educators work together around the transition to school they are afforded opportunities to garner support from one another (ETC Research Group, 2011). Further, adequate support for educators during transition has been identified as key for ensuring schools are ‘ready’ for children starting school (Woodhead & Moss, 2007). In addition, networks also offered support to members by facilitating connections with other professionals
such as maternal and child health nurses, speech therapists, occupational therapists and other community members.

Professional regard was also identified by the members as being important. Respecting individuals and their differences is a fundamental requirement of open collaboration (Attard, 2012). Further, when educators belong to a professional network where there is open and shared communication, network members can be valued and respected (Lieberman, 2000). In Westhill, members noted that part of the success of their network was due to the professional regard in which they held one another: *We respect each other. Underneath, we don’t say it, but we just have that respect and value for each other I think.*

In another example, a network member in Blacksmith measured the level of respect by the ability of members to contribute ideas freely and confidently. Sachs (2010) had argued that instances where professionals come together in ‘communities of practice’ (Wenger, 1998) generate contexts and conditions that facilitate respect, collaboration and reciprocity. The notion of networks as communities of practice is seen in the school education literature (Bastow Institute of Educational Leadership, 2018) and sets the scene for further exploration of this topic in the context of pedagogies of educational transition.

The networks involved in this study fostered a culture of respect by providing opportunities for members to give one another professional feedback, including the comments: *I would like to see more teachers like you!* and *Whatever you’re doing, keep doing.* Network members described feeling valued when other educators respected their decisions. Recognising and respecting the expertise and decisions of others is reinforced in the literature as being important for successful collaboration between educators (Hopps, 2014a; Karila & Rantavuori, 2014; Vaessen et al., 2014). One network member articulated
her belief that respect was mutual – that is, it was enhanced when respect was demonstrated
to others.

Although the networks in Westhill and Fern Creek reported high levels of mutual respect between educators, both networks acknowledged that this level of professional respect had not always existed. Rather, it had developed over time and after building positive relationships and reciprocal understandings. Niesz (2007) argued that respect between members of a network is born of shared experiences and relationships, and from this, professional practice can evolve. Therefore, the time that the Westhill and Fern Creek networks had been operating was likely to have influenced the level of professional respect the members held for one another.

Network members in Westhill reported that previously, there had been a perception by prior-to-school educators that their professional role was not as important as that of the school educators. One network member explained that there was a perception that the role of prior-to-school education was Looking after the kids until they get to the ‘real’ [uses hands to indicate inverted commas] job of learning. There was also some evidence of this in the Robinleigh network, where the prior-to-school educators felt their professional opinions about whether or not particular children were ready for school were overshadowed by those of the school educators. This suggests an underlying belief that the professional roles of school educators are of greater importance, and held with greater respect, than that of prior-to-school educators.

This is echoed in the literature, with Karila and Rantavuori (2014) noting that, despite educator collaboration, stereotypical views of each sector remain. These views are described as ‘restrictive’. Notwithstanding the recent attention of the importance of early childhood education (DEEWR, 2009a), there remains a perception that the prior-to-school sector is
characterised by ‘care’ while the task of ‘education’ is for the school sector (Moss, 2013c). Compounding this perception are differences in professional identity between prior-to-school and school educators. Generally, prior-to-school educators have lower professional status compared with school educators, receive significantly less pay, and have fewer opportunities for professional development and support (Productivity Commission, 2011). There are additional differences in qualifications, funding, regulatory bodies and curriculum between prior-to-school and school sectors that may contribute to the differences in professional identities (Hopps, 2014b; Moloney, 2010). While the underlying reasons for the perceived lack of professional respect between educators were not clear in these networks, it was apparent that the members were aware of them and were working towards ameliorating some of the affects.

In addition to improving reciprocal understandings and building more positive relationships, other, specific examples were provided by the network members as strategies that enhanced professional respect and support. These included holding the network meetings across the different workplaces of the members in an effort to foster an attitude of equality in the network. Another example involved network members being invited to attend professional development opportunities by other members. This suggested that network members valued the professional learning of their counterparts. As well, it provided opportunities for educators to be exposed to the professional worlds of their colleagues and, through this, to enhance understandings and relationships across settings. One prior-to-school educator stated her belief that in order to expect professional respect from others, one must respect their own profession and espouse those beliefs, highlighting the importance of making sure that we respect what we do, and that we advocate for what we do, and don’t dumb down what we’re doing. This comment suggested that some prior-to-school educators have difficulty advocating for their professional roles. Einarsdottir (2003) offered some
explanation for this, noting that prior-to-school educators who experience some insecurity around their role subsequently find it difficult to argue the importance of their work. Despite this difficulty, respect for professionals working in prior-to-school settings is emphasised by the OECD (2006) as necessary to ensure quality of education for children. In the context of this study it is also a central element of promoting pedagogies of educational transition.

9.2.6 Goals for transition

Network members described a range of goals or aspirations for children, families and educators in the development and implementation of pedagogies of educational transition. Most commonly, the goals for children’s transition centred on assisting them to make ‘happy’ and ‘smooth’ transitions to school. Smooth and/or happy transitions were considered to be positive transitions, free from disruptions or discontinuity for children. These priorities are congruent with much of the literature on transition to school which promotes positive transitions through a focus on continuity (Ballam et al., 2017; Barblett, Barratt-Pugh, Kilgallon, & Moloney, 2011; Dockett & Perry, 2014a).

When asked about aspirations for transition, educators focused primarily on children’s adjustment – socially and emotionally. This was enacted through practices to help children feel comfortable in their new environment, such as school visits and the introduction of some behaviour management strategies from the school into preschool settings. Very few of the educators’ aspirations for transition referred to academic abilities. This is consistent with findings from Dockett and Perry (2004a) who reported educators’ tendency to focus on adjustment-related elements of transition rather than academic skills or knowledge. A recent replication of this study identified shifts in the perspectives of educators, with increased attention to children’s skills as contributing factors to children’s transition experiences.
(Dockett, Perry, & Davies, 2016). It may be that a shift such as this prompts a change in the goals developed by networks. It may also be that such a shift provides fertile ground for critiquing practice and the development of new pedagogies of education transition.

Across the networks, some educators acknowledged the learning, abilities and interests that children bring with them to school. The EYLF highlights the importance of recognising the prior knowledge and interests that children bring with them to school (DEEWR, 2009a). Members agreed that it was very important to listen to the feedback from children and attempt to meet some of the children’s expectations and needs through the transition programs. This included time to play and make friends. Dockett and Perry (2005c) contend that children are active and competent participants in transition and that listening to the voices of children is necessary for planning effective transition programs.

The Westhill and Fern Creek communities had high proportions of Indigenous Australian families, many of whom were identified as experiencing challenging life circumstances. Some educators used the term ‘at risk’ to describe Indigenous Australian children and families. Network members reported increased in the number of enrolments of Indigenous Australian children both in the preschool and the school, in part because of concerted efforts by educators. Access to quality early childhood education is a government priority to improve educational outcomes for Indigenous Australian children, particularly those living in rural and remote areas (Productivity Commission, 2011, 2016). Educators explained that by actively campaigning for Indigenous Australian children to attend preschool, they hoped for better outcomes for these children as they made the transition to school. The goal of supporting families and children was seen in efforts to promote collaboration with families to reduce children’s experiences of discontinuity as they start school. Such efforts are reported to make a difference to the educational expectations of both children and families (Malsch, Green, & Kothari, 2011).
Network members held clear goals and aspirations for families of children who were starting school. Families were recognised as being part of transitions to school as well as facilitating positive transitions for children (ETC Research Group, 2011). Members described strategies that aimed to build relationships with and involve families in the transition to school, reflecting an acknowledgement that families also undergo transitions at this time (Griebel & Niesel, 2002).

In keeping with recent research, educators’ comments highlighted the importance of engagement and effective communication with families (ETC Research Group, 2011; Rogers, 2018). Network members valued the involvement of families in the transition process, designing some sessions for families within transition programs. Educators particularly references information nights as a key means to connect with families. While information nights provided opportunities for parents to be actively involved and support their children in transition, and this in turn can promote lasting engagement with the school (Arndt & McGuire-Schwartz, 2008), Rogers (2018) has cautioned that these sessions are not always regarded in the same positive light by families. Even though educators were concerned about the attendance at information nights, there appeared to be little reflection about why this was so and how educators’ practice could change as a result of such reflection.

The goal of connecting with parents was enacted through strategies designed to help educators get to know families, identify and respond to their needs. In the words of one educator: *It’s about knowing your children and knowing your families...You have to, otherwise you can’t help them.* This is in keeping with Rogers (2018) emphasis on developing relationships with, and understandings of, families.
Across the networks, educators placed importance on demonstrating understanding and compassion for families in different situations, and the acknowledged their responsibility to search for new and different ways to develop relationships with families. In addition, network members were aware that parents’ expectations, as well as their own experiences at school influenced interactions with educators and educational settings. A range of research supports these conclusions (Miller, 2015; Turunen, 2012; Turunen & Dockett, 2013).

9.2.7 Summary

A number of influences on pedagogies on educational transition have been considered in this section. Importantly, these influences cannot exist separately. Rather, they are interconnected and mutually dependent. For example, leadership influences the purpose and direction of the networks, goals for transition, as well as the opportunities for reciprocal understandings; the depth of reciprocal understandings is dependent on the strength of relationships and quality of communication; relationships and reciprocal understandings are underpinned by theories and beliefs of professionalism. This interplay of influences can be understood through the lens of the bioecological model which identifies these as examples of proximal processes which become progressively more complex over time (Bronfenbrenner, 2001; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).
9.3 Question 3: What influence, if any, does rurality have on these pedagogies?

Despite their many strengths, rural areas face challenges that are less common in urban areas, including access to essential services and high-quality infrastructure (Edwards & Baxter, 2013). In addition, rural areas experience fewer income and employment opportunities, along with higher rates of chronic illness, mental illness and drug abuse when compared to their urban counterparts (AIHW, 2018; 2012).

While rural schools often serve as a central community ‘hub’, and form a vital part of the fabric of rural communities, there are a number of complex issues impacting the provision of rural education (Halsey, 2005). This is primarily due to the geographical distance to major centres. The effects of distance, coupled with the high proportion of families of low socioeconomic status living in rural areas, directly impacts on educational outcomes for children (Baxter et al., 2011) whose academic performance and educational achievement is generally less than those in urban areas (Bartholemaeus, 2006; Halsey, 2018). Because of these discrepancies and the subsequent impact on productivity, the improvement of educational outcomes for rural areas is a federal priority (Halsey, 2018).

The network members identified a range of ways that their pedagogies of educational transition were influenced by the rural contexts in which they lived and worked. These influences were around three major themes: characteristics of rural communities; familiarity with people; and issues in rural education.
9.3.1 Characteristics of rural communities

One characteristic of rural communities identified as a strength by members of all the networks was a sense of ‘community-mindedness’. Members discussed this as being an asset of rural communities, where members of the community came together to support one another, often pooling efforts and resources, as demonstrated in the following comments: *I think like in any rural community on the whole, you know when there is a need, our families rally together, and I think we pick up on each other’s strengths as well. We’ve all got something to bring to the party; and We had some children come [to our] program, even though they weren’t coming to our school. Our Principal at the time said it [was] because they didn’t have a transition program it was fine for them to come with us.*

These comments reflected an attitude by the network members that they were focused on providing access to services and improving communities, not just individual schools or centres. Part of this approach included pooling resources such as professional expertise and knowledge, buildings and equipment to benefit the community. This required members to work cooperatively by acknowledging the strengths and contributions of individuals and how these could be used effectively to strengthen the community: *I think a lot of people who teach in this kind of setting have that…shared focus and drive to bind together as our own community in the school to make it better for students.* This is relevant because outcomes for children are improved when schools work together with communities (National Curriculum Services, 2013).

Another example of community-mindedness was observed in Westhill where the preschool director organised visits from professional support agencies to her own service, but through the network opened this up to other education services in the community. In Blacksmith, community members pooled travel to preschool to reduce the burden on
individual families. *We have quite a few families that travel into Blacksmith for [preschool] attendance, quite a few farming families...there is quite a little network there where people carpool if they know each other, or they get to know each other through [preschool] and share things like drop-off and pick-up so they’re not having to travel in and out so much.*

In another example, a network member described how she chose to return to work in the community in which she grew up and went to school in order to *give back to the community*, reflecting the results of Cuervo and Acquaro (2018), who found that teachers who grew up in rural areas were likely to return to these communities that they understood and knew well.

These comments demonstrate the capacity of rural communities to be innovative - finding new and different ways of meeting challenges, such as in the example where schools invite children from other schools to participate in transition programs. Rural communities are also self-sufficient, recognising and utilising the existing strengths within the community rather than relying on external support. Examples of this were carpooling to preschool and improving the community by sharing a common focus. These examples also highlight the resilience of communities in response to challenges and change.

Fleming, Ysasi, Harley, and Bishop (2018) emphasised that a rural community’s resilience does not diminish the obstacles faced. Overwhelmingly, the strength and resilience of rural communities is attributed to ‘social capital’ (or the quality of relationships between community members), kinship and pride (Fleming et al., 2018). This attribute of relationships was identified by the network members who described relationships between community members as being important for engaging children and families in education and creating a sense of belonging: *You just naturally know people...I know the principal of the high school really well and...it just feels like we are part of the community*. The smaller size of rural
communities was credited as being advantageous for the building of positive relationships. Relationships are known to be important for educators to feel connected to their community and promote resilience when living and working in rural areas (Sullivan & Johnson, 2012). As well, building positive relationships between educators and families has been identified as a strategy for improving families’ engagement with educational services (Rogers, 2018). This is especially important for families identified as being disadvantaged, living in complex circumstances, or transient (Grace, Bowes, & Elcombe, 2014) all of which are common in rural areas. A sense of community-mindedness and existing social networks can further leverage pedagogies of educational transition.

9.3.2 Familiarity with people

The smaller numbers of people in rural communities generally means that the degree of familiarity with people is higher in rural than urban communities (Hughes, Black, Kaldor, Bellamy, & Castle, 2007). Network members identified a number of ways that familiarity with people impacted on their pedagogies of educational transition.

Familiarity with people was considered by the network members as advantageous in a number of ways. Network members explained that being familiar with other educators made it considerably easier to communicate and form working relationships with them. With fewer educational settings, and therefore fewer educators, educators were more likely to recognise and interact with one another outside their work settings: I can see Anne down the street, I know who she is, [and] I feel comfortable to make a phone call to her. Members in Fern Creek described how being familiar with other community members, such as the local police officer, made dealing with sensitive issues easier: I’ve got this family...this is happening.
Network members reported that smaller educational settings and class sizes provided better opportunities for familiarity with families and children. Familiarity impacted on the quality of relationships: *I think I’m able to have a better relationship with all the families, because there are less of them, it means I can spend more time talking to all of them;* and *We see a lot of continuation of families in our service, so we might have had the oldest child eight years ago, and now it’s the youngest child of families of three or four, and that’s really rewarding, we really enjoy that, we have that continuity with our families, and I think you probably get that more in rural settings.* In one example provided by Connie from Westhill, the familiarity between herself as the local preschool director and a family allowed her to intervene in a tense domestic violence incident which involved children whom she taught and cared for. Connie explained that had it not been for her familiarity with this family over a period of time, she felt she would not have been able to help successfully diffuse the situation. In contrast, when families and communities are not familiar with educators, this can present a challenge for educators: *You don’t fit in because you weren’t born here.*

Knowing and understanding families and children is important because this informs educators’ professional pedagogies (DEEWR, 2009a). Cuervo and Acquaro (2018, p. 8) have highlighted the value that educators place on familiarity with others, emphasising the experience of teaching in a rural area as “personal”. Furthermore, the level of familiarity with others is an important factor for motivating educators to remain in rural teaching positions (Cuervo & Acquaro, 2018).

Familiarity with people can also present challenges and barriers to educators’ pedagogies of educational transition. One of these challenges is around professional boundaries. Network members described that, while it was often an advantage to be easily recognisable in the community, it could also cause professional and personal boundaries to become blurred. Educators who work in rural communities, where they regularly interact
with children outside of their professional roles, can be of particularly high risk of breaching professional boundaries (Australasian Teacher Regulatory Authorities, 2015). One network member in Fern Creek explained *Sometimes people think that at any time of the day or night they can ask you things about work*. Another stated that it was sometimes difficult for others to make a distinction between educators in their professional role, and that of a community member: *Yeah it can be a positive and a negative thing, it can be hard to be seen as anything other than the preschool teacher.*

Network members also described confidentiality as being an issue. In small communities, it can be difficult to avoid gossip and talk: *Because everyone knows everyone’s business in a small town.* Educators are required to negotiate a variety of situations where sometimes confidential information regarding the families and children is being openly discussed. Also, educators in rural communities are more ‘visible’ to the community, and therefore more susceptible to scrutiny from the community (Cuervo & Acquaro, 2018). One network member acknowledged this as an inevitable consequence of the job: *Because you live in the community, your kids go to the school, you’re part of the community…so that can pose issues.*

Pedagogies of educators are influenced by familiarity with people in both positive and negative ways. Familiarity with people enhances relationships and understandings, as well as providing channels for communication. This is likely to improve educators’ abilities to enact a range of pedagogies of educational transitions due to existing relationships with others. Disadvantages of familiarity with others may include individual’s confidentiality being breached which may create distrust and breakdown of communication between educators and members of the community, affecting the successfulness of pedagogies of transitions.
9.3.3 Issues in rural education

Network members highlighted a range of issues related to the provision of educational services in rural communities. These were: staffing; access to professional development; working with families living in complex circumstances; isolation; and access to services and resources.

Staffing

Members from each of the networks identified staffing as a challenge in rural areas. Most predominantly, members highlighted the difficulty of accessing suitably qualified staff. Attracting and retaining teachers in rural areas is a significant and persistent issue in Australia (Boylan, 2012; Cuervo & Acquaro, 2018; Halsey, 2018; Wallace & Boylan, 2007). Indeed, rural schools are often characterised by high teacher turnover, fewer services and facilities, inexperienced staff, teachers who have been attracted by significant incentives but do not stay, and teacher isolation (Wallace & Boylan, 2007). Recent changes to early childhood policy with the introduction of the National Quality Standards (NQS) have required greater numbers of qualified teachers in prior-to-school settings, and therefore the overall demand for qualified teachers has risen. For areas where accessing and retaining staff was already a challenge, this has placed additional pressure on rural communities (Productivity Commission, 2011).

Network members stated that sourcing relief staff when permanent staff were absent, was especially difficult: There are issues with getting casual teachers…obviously the larger the population base the more casuals you’ve got access to. In some cases, settings were forced to close due to being unable to find relief teaching staff: To find [preschool] teachers
is very difficult, they actually don’t have a back-up for me if I’m sick, so [preschool] can get cancelled unfortunately…so that’s an issue we have.

Constraints on staffing in rural education settings can be different from those in larger communities. For example, there may not be a need for as many full-time positions, so part-time and casual employment can be common. One network member cited fewer opportunities for permanent employment, especially in the prior-to-school sector as a potential disadvantage of rural communities: Most [preschool] positions are part-time, not full-time, so that makes it harder because some people aren’t willing to move to a rural area to gain employment if they know employment is only going to mean a certain number of hours per week.

Changes in the nature of employment in prior-to-school settings in rural areas are common due to fluctuations in populations and other localised workforce issues, such as drought (Productivity Commission, 2011). This was observed in Westhill, where network members explained that public housing was cheap, and the town had a high, often transient population of Indigenous Australians. Fluctuations in numbers of people moving in and out of the area created uncertainty around enrolment numbers at the preschool which, in turn presented staffing challenges. Education settings will often employ staff on a casual basis to allow for these fluctuations (Productivity Commission, 2011). Consequently, staff may have to be flexible in their work hours, changing to meet the needs of the community. Relief staff may be needed to cope with unexpected absences, or fluctuations in work. However, there is not always an adequate supply of relief staff, or relief staff who are available may have other casual employment. The perpetual issue of lack of staffing in rural areas serves as a further disincentive for other educators to consider teaching in rural communities (Cuervo & Acquaro, 2018). The challenges of attracting and retaining staff, and of fluctuations of
employment in rural areas can impact on the ability of educators to develop and maintain effective pedagogies of educational transition.

**Professional development**

Access to opportunities for professional development was identified as a challenge for educators already working in rural areas. Having opportunities for regular professional development is vital for educators to continue to grow their pedagogical practices, network with other educators and reinvigorate their commitment and engagement with teaching (Halsey, 2011; Sullivan & Johnson, 2012). Further, providing educators with opportunities for professional development is essential for retaining them in rural areas (White et al., 2011).

The network members described how it was often the case that the nearest provider of professional development was some distance away and it required significant planning by educators to organise attendance: *That can be a detriment in a rural setting like this, is keeping motivated through professional development and that sort of thing, because it’s all offered east of the mountains.* In some instances, the distance to travel to professional development, as well as restricted access to replacement staff prohibited educators from attending professional development. In Westhill, network members noted that despite the inconvenience posed to the community by closing down the preschool for two days, educators felt resolute about their commitment to attend professional development for the benefit of their growth as professionals, and for the community. In Fern Creek, one network member acknowledged the challenges of attending professional development, but highlighted technological alternatives as being a potential solution. While accessing and attending professional development was a challenge for the network members, some were determined to find ways to overcome these. This is an example of the type of resilience and innovation characterised by rural communities (Fleming et al., 2018). Access to professional
development impacts on educator pedagogies of educational transition as professional development provides opportunities to renew and refresh their ideas.

Working with families experiencing complex circumstances

Another issue highlighted by the network members as affecting education generally and pedagogies of educational transitions specifically, was working with children and their families who were experiencing complex circumstances. Across the networks such complex circumstances included: backgrounds of poverty and socio-economic disadvantage; being Indigenous; and experiencing family violence and/or mental health issues. In several instances children experiencing these circumstances were described as also having additional learning or behavioural needs. Rural communities are identified as having higher populations of people from low socio-economic backgrounds and populations with higher rates of illness. Typically, rural communities also have access to fewer professional support services (AIHW, 2018). Facilitating successful transitions to school for children and families from complex circumstances is recognised as important for disrupting cycles of disadvantage and improving outcomes (Smart et al., 2008).

Network members described how working with these families was often challenging:

There are quite a lot of issues within the town in regards to things like family violence, mental health issues… I don’t know that we’re properly supported a lot of the time, there are waiting lists for some services and it can be quite tricky with young families because they haven’t got the support they need.
Blacksmith is a resettlement area for victims of family violence from urban centres. One network member described the complexity of issues presented for women and children from such families, and for educators:

*We sometimes get families that come, that are placed, from cities, coming to rural areas, particularly families who are experiencing family violence and things like that, they get shunted off to the country, and they are often quite isolated so that can present challenges... and that impacts on children’s transience in and out of schools and [preschool]...it’s very disruptive and we’ve seen a bit of it. Often they don’t end up staying very long, so they don’t always make the connections they need to...setting kids up to fail. So that social isolation is worse in rural areas because when they come here, they haven’t got the services and things...*

In this example the combined effects of low socioeconomic status, mental health issues and transience are noted. In such circumstances, it can be hard for children, families and educators to develop relationships and connections with one another and to access the support services required. This is consistent with research that suggests that families from complex backgrounds are considered ‘hard-to-reach’ by educators, who report finding it difficult to engage families in educational services (Grace et al., 2014; McDonald, 2010).

One network member identified the effects of the high incidence of family violence within the community, and the impact on children at school: *We have frightening numbers of domestic and family violence...a lot of our kids come to school having witnessed horrendous things on the weekend or in the morning, and a lot of kids come to school without breakfast or having a rough night’s sleep and we’ve got families living on or below the poverty line. It is recognised that experiences of trauma or traumatic events including family violence can create psychological effects and impact children’s engagement in education (Dockett et al., 2011).*
In some instances, it was evident that attempting to manage children and families from complex circumstances was challenging and affected educators’ levels of motivation and positivity towards education: \textit{Sometimes the children can get you really frustrated and down, and it’s their life experiences and it’s a generational thing that’s going on in families, and it gets quite challenging}. This has implications for educators’ pedagogies in terms of remaining positive and committed to improving children’s transitions to school.

Fern Creek and Westhill communities both had high populations of Indigenous Australians. Members of both of these networks identified some of the challenges this posed to them as educators, with one commenting:

\textit{The hard thing for us is that in an Aboriginal community there is so much more politics and arguing amongst certain families and groups. If we had an Aboriginal worker on one day, another family might not want to come that day that that family’s there... They fight so much amongst each other... We’re lucky our Aboriginal worker at the moment seems to have a good relationship with most of the community, but we’ve had in the past; ‘I’m not going if she’s there’ .}

In situations such as this, it can be difficult for educators to develop relationships with Indigenous Australian families and members of staff. It also poses challenges for communicating effectively with families and educators to facilitate and support transitions. Strong relationships and communication with Indigenous Australian families is vital for effective transitions (Dockett et al., 2007) and to improve educational outcomes for Indigenous Australian children (McTurk, Nutton, Lea, Robinson, & Carapetis, 2008).

It is notable that throughout the discussions with network members, references to children and families experiencing complex circumstances focused predominantly on problems and challenges. Prior-to-school educators did also refer to the importance of
strengths-based approaches, particularly when writing transition statements. None of the educators reflected on the juxtaposition of these perspectives or commented on how they aligned them in their practice.

Children and families experiencing complex circumstances are often considered to be at risk of experiencing discontinuities and challenges when starting school, and it is therefore especially important that these groups receive the support they need (Edwards, Baxter, Smart, Sanson, & Hayes, 2009). One way in which children and families from complex circumstances can be supported is when educational services work together (McDonald, 2010).

**Isolation**

Levels of isolation, or the remoteness, of particular communities is measured by the geographical distance to larger centres and cities and their relative access to goods and services (AIHW, 2018). Rural communities face a range of challenges associated with isolation (Edwards & Baxter, 2013) and several of these were echoed by the network members. While distance itself can be a disadvantage, it is also recognised to compound other factors such as low socioeconomic status and health issues (Edwards & Baxter, 2013).

For example, in Westhill, families had to travel considerable distances (up to 100km) from their homes so that children could attend preschool and school. The frequent travel placed pressure on families. This was further exacerbated for some families who do not drive, or were reluctant to leave their communities – a situation which occurred sometimes in Indigenous communities. To help relieve this pressure on families, the Westhill and Fern Creek communities operated buses to transport both school-age and preschool children to and from home to school or preschool. Network members also reported that families often carpooled, sharing the task of transporting their children to and from school and preschool.
While car-pooling is not unique to rural areas, the distances travelled using car-pooling are. These are examples of the resourcefulness of rural communities to find solutions when faced with a challenge. Facilitating children and families to attend preschool and school is of great importance to ensure children’s educational needs are being met. If children and families do not regularly attend educational services, educators are restricted in their enactment of pedagogies of transitions.

Network members highlighted the difficulties of children and families accessing health services in isolated rural communities. As part of their roles as educators, network members often worked collaboratively with a range of health professionals, such as speech therapists, occupational therapists and other specialists, to meet children’s needs. The preschool in Westhill had actively helped campaign to have travelling ear and dental services visit the town, bringing these to the children and their families. Ensuring that the health and welfare needs of children and families were being met was a priority for educators who recognised that these needs had to be met in order for educational services to be effective.

Network members also described the challenges posed to them by having to travel to attend professional development and meetings. Having increased distance to travel meant significantly larger costs to settings for staff to attend professional development, or pay for a professional to visit. There were additional challenges for educators in organising excursions for children. While educators noted they were committed to not allowing isolation to be a barrier preventing children from attending extra curricula experiences, they admitted that the cost of travel was often prohibitive.

While network members identified a range of challenges associated with the isolation of living in rural communities, it was evident that many of these challenges had been met with viable solutions in order for relevant pedagogies of transition to be implemented.
**Access to services and resources**

Network members highlighted a variety of specific issues around access to services and resources. Difficulties with accessing necessary services and resources in rural areas is well known in the literature (AIHW, 2018). One example of this was in Blacksmith where shortly before the study commenced, the community had undergone a restructuring of the public primary and high schools, amalgamating them into one school, spread across a number of campuses. One network member described how parents had communicated their dissatisfaction with this change, believing it left them with little choice regarding which public school to send their children. This suggests that there was a level of discontent towards the public school from families, which could have implications for educators engaging families in, and implementing, pedagogies of educational transitions.

There were mixed responses from network members regarding access to educational resources. Some network members described having ready access to resources, while others lamented the lack of adequate resources, citing the level of difficulty in securing these. A lack of resources has been identified as a challenge for rural schools, who often have small numbers of children with less allocated funding than their urban counterparts (Halsey, 2011). Without adequate resourcing, it is more difficult for educators to plan and implement strategies to enhance transitions for children and families.
9.3.4 Summary

Rurality influenced pedagogies of educational transition in a range of ways. A sense of ‘community-mindedness’ was a characteristic of the rural contexts in the study, where educators were committed to improving their practice to benefit their communities as a whole. Network members’ familiarity with one another presented both benefits and challenges for enacting pedagogies of educational transition. While being familiar with people made communicating and positive relationships easier, it also raised some potential issues around maintaining confidentiality. Rural communities faced a number of issues in the provision of education. While each site was affected differently, common issues were staffing, professional development, working with families experiences complex circumstances, isolation and access to services, which can inhibit educators’ planning and implementation of pedagogies of educational transition.
9.4 Question 4: In what ways have pedagogies of transition in rural contexts changed as a result of the new curricula?

One of the aims of this study was to examine how the introduction of the new Australian curricula – the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) and the Australian Curriculum (AC) - has impacted on pedagogies of educational transitions in rural areas. This section considers the impact of these curricula separately, and then the potential for continuity between the two.

9.4.1 Early Years Learning Framework

While network members perceived the EYLF to be a valuable and relevant resource, there was some question about the effect its introduction had had on practice. Also, there were differences in how school and prior-to-school educators interpreted and used the document in their rural contexts, which impacted on their pedagogies of transition.

Anne, a prior-to-school educator did not consider the EYLF document to be ‘new’, instead referring to it as a mainstay of her practice. Anne voiced her belief that while she did value the EYLF, its introduction had not changed her practice. Rather, it had reaffirmed her existing practice: *I don’t think our practices have changed in any way, shape or form because the EYLF has come out...[we] embed it in what we do.* Anne further elucidated that the philosophy of the EYLF was embraced in the everyday practice of educators. Her view was that meeting the basic needs of children was more valuable that having evidence of meeting particular outcomes: *I always say to the girls, you are looking after three to five year olds, your job is to play and have fun ...our number one job is to make sure those kids feel safe and secure, or they’re not going to learn anything, so we probably concentrate on that a lot more.*
Anne’s comment suggested that she perceived the EYLF as a tool to assess learning, rather than a vehicle to promote the principles and practice elements. While it is possible that Anne and her colleagues were indeed already espousing the tenets of the EYLF in their practice in rural contexts, research have acknowledged that the potential of the introduction of the EYLF for change of practice on a local level is uncertain (Tayler, 2012).

Despite the EYLF’s focus on children’s learning ‘through the transition to school’ (DEEWR, 2009a, p. 5), network members noted that there was little understanding of the EYLF in rural school settings. This posed a series of challenges for educators to overcome in order to develop effective pedagogies of educational transitions in rural areas:

\[I\text{ remember we were at a transition meeting a few years ago and the Prep teachers had never seen a copy of Belonging, Being, Becoming [EYLF], or the Victorian Framework [VEYLF], they didn’t know what it was, and I thought ‘oh my, what are we doing?’... so I think there is a LOT of work to go there, on both sides, I feel like I need to be educated about that [the AC], but I also feel like the schools need to be as well.}\]

From this example, it is evident that while school educators were not familiar with the EYLF, prior-to-school educators were also unfamiliar with the school curricula. In other words, the lack of understanding of the different curriculum documents was not exclusive to one sector.

School educators acknowledged the lack of familiarity and understanding of the EYLF, noting that there was little opportunity or encouragement from their sector to engage with the document: *I’ll be honest, I’ve never read it [the EYLF]. You know it’s not something we’re even told about as primary, it’s not something that’s put on our radar anyway in any way, shape or form.*
One school educator noted that she had only heard of the EYLF because her own child had recently commenced preschool. Another described that she was not aware the EYLF existed until a friend who worked in the Department of Education had given her a copy. This suggests that there has been little incentive for educators in rural areas to engage with the different curriculum documents. Further, opportunities for participation in professional development around the curriculum framework are often limited as a result of the isolation faced by rural contexts.

Prior-to-school educators expressed aspirations for school educators to understand the EYLF better. They explained that this would improve understandings of the pedagogies of prior-to-school educators and children’s learning, as well as improve communication between settings. Continuity of understandings and pedagogies across settings is promoted in the literature as being advantageous for transition to school (Dockett & Einarsdottir, 2017; Petriwskyj, 2005).

Several educators referred to inconsistencies in the language being used across prior-to-school and school settings and the ways these contributed to difficulties in pedagogical understandings. Examples are noted in comments referring to the transition statements where prior-to-school educators were of the view that schools [educators] aren’t familiar with the document and are thinking ‘what is she really saying when she talks about a sense of identity’?

One prior-to-school educator argued that the EYLF could be utilised in the school context to support children’s learning and promote pedagogical continuity across settings because our Framework isn’t only for preschool, it’s for Grade One and Two as well, [it] isn’t utilised as well as it could be in the primary school setting... I think the Framework would be really helpful in linking that [preschool] year to an early play-based Prep year.
This sentiment was seen as particularly relevant for children in rural areas as it provided a context for promoting continuity in pedagogies and learning for children from disadvantaged backgrounds – a number of whom lived in rural contexts – to improve educational outcomes (Dockett et al., 2011; McDonald, 2010).

Some school educators were interested in becoming more familiar with the EYLF in order to understand pedagogies in the prior-to-school settings better, and ultimately be better placed to plan for and meet the needs of school children. However, network members identified that the unfamiliar nature of the EYLF made it difficult for them to interpret. In the words of two school educators I remember reading the framework and some of it is really hard to get your head around…I thought ‘what exactly do they mean by that? and I think the biggest hurdle for us is not really knowing the curriculum and how that setting works, because it’s so different from school. Limited opportunities for professional development and a lack of access to adequate resources experienced by rural communities is likely to exacerbate these lack of understandings about the EYLF.

In Blacksmith, some school educators had taken a recent interest in the EYLF because they had realised what a great resource this [the EYLF] was for us as lots of our children were below the …standards. Plans to use the EYLF recognised its potential to help us work out where children are to move them onto their next point of growth.

These examples suggest rural school educators were becoming aware of the advantages of the EYLF and its use to understand better where children were coming from prior to starting school. It is also relevant to note that these school educators took interest in the EYLF because they were searching for a benchmarking tool for lower-performing children, not to use as a general pedagogical resource.
There was one example in Fern Creek where the EYLF was being used to guide pedagogies in a rural school setting. One recently graduated teacher had actively adopted a play-based pedagogy in the first-year-of-school classroom. This was explained as the new teacher figuring out what to do, so she’s gone with the current research. In this example, this was not a school-wide approach, rather, the educator had been given permission by the principal at the school to explore implementation this method of teaching in the school classroom.

In another Fern Creek example, the EYLF was utilised to plan a transition to school program taking place on school grounds, and funded by the school. Here, the prior-to-school educator was strongly committed to using the EYLF as the guiding curriculum framework to support children’s transition, rather than the school curriculum to make sure we had that balance of early childhood, play-based learning in a school environment.

Although the EYLF was acknowledged as being important and relevant for transition in rural areas, it was not familiar to school educators. Despite this, school educators showed interest in becoming more familiar with the EYLF. Both school and prior-to-school educators identified the potential benefits for promoting effective pedagogies and supporting children’s learning in rural contexts through use of the philosophy and approaches espoused in the document. Educators noted that the networks provided an ideal opportunity to achieve this: that could be something that we could talk about at our next meeting next year, about the Framework, and the language in that. Another idea posited was to attend targeted professional development to establish mutual understandings of the relevant curriculum documents and where there was common ground.

Networks are known to provide opportunities for educators to engage in professional collaboration to improve pedagogical practices, and enact reform (McCormick et al., 2011a;
Schiff et al., 2015). Further, engagement in ongoing and supportive professional learning communities has been a consistent recommendation made to enhance the enactment of changes to practice as a result of the EYLF (Grieshaber, 2010; Tayler, 2012). Professional development that facilitated the establishment of *common ground* was seen as providing one such opportunity.

9.4.2 **Australian Curriculum**

The Australian Curriculum (AC) outlines the content to be taught in Australian schools and the achievement standards they are expected to attain. Although both Victoria and New South Wales have responded to the introduction of the AC with their own state iterations, the essentials of the curricula are very similar. Many network members were concerned about increased pressure to achieve learning outcomes and the AC’s incompatibility with prior-to-school pedagogies which may negatively impact on attempts to promote effective pedagogies for transition in rural areas.

In Westhill, Jenny responded indifferently to the recent introduction of the AC, noting that in practice, she did not feel there was a significant difference between the new curriculum and the previous one. Just as Anne responded to the EYLF, Jenny indicated that she would *probably stick to old ways a little bit*. Other educators, notably those in Fern Creek, indicated that the introduction of the AC had changed the ways they taught mathematics at school. Their comments reflected a level of excitement that teaching maths had become a lot more *hands on*. For another educator at Blacksmith, the changes to curriculum were *really annoying* generating confusion about *what I’m supposed to be teaching there*. These examples suggest that implementation of the AC depended a lot on the individual educator as well as the approach taken throughout the school.
The rate and extent of change wrought by the AC was an issue for some educators. The comment that just as [you] *get your head around one thing…they change it to another* suggested that time to adjust to the new curriculum was an issue. This supports recommendations made by Halsey et al. (2010).

Some prior-to-school educators had hoped that the introduction of the AC would see a move away from more traditional school-based teaching practices and an increased acknowledgement of early childhood pedagogies, especially a focus on play-based learning in the first years of school. There was some disappointment from educators when this was not observed.

School educators in Blacksmith stated that the AC was often an inappropriate document for teaching children in the first year of school in rural contexts. They argued that the achievement standards placed pressure on educators to see children, who may already be educationally disadvantaged, performing at a particular level. Concern was expressed that the curriculum content was not necessarily responsive to local needs and interests or based on children’s experiences and knowledge. In the words of one school educator *our curriculum is assuming that all of our children are coming in at zero point zero which is not the case.* In another example, an educator explained that children commenced school at vastly different points in their learning, and that it was extremely challenging to plan to meet the needs of each individual while still being accountable to the AC *so we can say ‘yes we are doing our job’*. It is therefore worthwhile to revisit the goal of the AC as it “sets the expectations for what all young Australians should be taught, regardless of where they live in Australia or their background.” (ACARA, 2018a, para. 2) and consider this against the comments made by these educators.
Some school educators lamented that despite a desire to include the EYLF and play-based pedagogy in their rural practice, they felt immense pressure to report against the standards set in the school curriculum, commenting that there is also lots we have to have covered, and that we’re accountable for. As has been argued by Moss (2013a) the outcomes-based agendas of schools are often incompatible with those of the prior-to-school sector. This is despite the AC stating that teaching content should be introduced gradually, building on what children know and can do, and as children are able to access it. Further, the AC recognises the value of early childhood pedagogies and recommends they continue to be implemented appropriately in the school setting (Connor, 2011). It is evident that educators faced significant challenges negotiating the practicalities of implementing these recommendations. These are likely to have been compounded further by some of the challenges facing rural communities including working with children and families experiencing educational disadvantage (Halsey, 2018) and lack of access to professional development for staff.

Many network members highlighted tensions around the AC, and searched for ways to support its implementation, even though this presented a range of challenges for educators when planning effective pedagogies of transitions in rural contexts. These tensions primarily focused on the lack of pedagogical continuity between prior-to-school and school settings, with network members citing the rigidity of the AC as the main cause of this. Several school educators stated a desire to incorporate more early childhood, play-based approaches to learning into their school classrooms to cater for the needs of children starting school in rural areas. However, many felt stymied by the constraints of the school curriculum, making it difficult for educators to implement these practices. This leads to closer inspection of the potential for continuity between the EYLF and the AC in rural contexts and of continuity of the pedagogies that support these curricula.
9.4.3 Continuity between the EYLF and the AC

At the policy level, the EYLF and the AC are considered as different, unconnected documents that were developed in different spaces and for different purposes (Dockett, Perry, et al., 2017). While some links between the EYLF and the AC can be identified, such as links between the EYLF’s Learning Outcomes and the AC’s General Capabilities (Connor, 2011), there is an expectation that continuity between the curricula will primarily be enacted through the pedagogies of educators.

Separately, both curricula refer to the importance of continuity of learning and building on prior experiences during transitions. The EYLF states that “Building on children’s prior and current experiences helps them to feel secure, confident and connected to familiar people, places, events and understandings” (DEEWR, 2009a, p. 16) and the AC acknowledges the learning that children possess prior-to-school and aims to “build on the learning children achieve under the EYLF and recognise that learners in the first years of school have particular needs and entitlements” (Connor, 2011, p. 13).

While the importance of promoting continuity of learning across transition to school is clear in each curriculum document, how this continuity ought to be effected is less clear. There is increasing recognition of the importance of continuity of pedagogies between educators working across the prior-to-school and school settings to support children’s learning and transition to school (Dockett & Perry, 2014a). An important part of this is promoting continuity of curriculum (Fabian & Dunlop, 2006; Kienig, 2013).

In Westhill, there was evidence of continuity in implementation of the curriculum and pedagogies. Network members reported that they thought that the EYLF and the AC fitted well together. However, they regarded it as the educator’s responsibility to interpret and
understand the different curriculum documents and build continuity in a meaningful way: *if you interpret it the way I would, then it is like a continuous line*. Descriptions of the school classroom in Westhill noted the *opportunity to still be children and play...the same as we do here* through the incorporation of play materials. In this example, network members explained that the school educator *value[d] play as part of children’s learning, which can be lost a little bit in primary school*, was open-minded regarding different approaches to curriculum and pedagogies and was confident to implement these strategies *because you see what works*. These educators recognised that continuity of learning can be promoted when prior-to-school educators understand the school curriculum, and when school educators have knowledge of the early years curriculum and are prepared to try new approaches (Department of Education and Training (DET), 2016).

Network members in other sites did not share the belief that it was necessary to have knowledge of the different curriculum documents in order to promote continuity. As an example, one network member in Fern Creek reflected that educators can still espouse the philosophies of the curriculum without being consciously aware of doing so, noting that *the schools still have the principles of the EYLF, it’s just not known that that’s the EYLF.*

Another educator noted that continuity of learning for children in rural areas could be promoted through conversations with other educators and observing classroom practices, not through use of the curricula. In this site, opportunities for, and facilitation of, conversations and spending time in other educational settings may have been enhanced by the smaller size of the rural community, and familiarity among the educators. In contrast, other network members felt there was a clear ‘disconnect’ between the two curriculum documents: *They don’t look alike, and they don’t use the same language...it’s like they didn’t communicate with each other when they did it.* This was regarded as a disadvantage for providing continuity of learning.
While discussion in some networks explicitly explored the continuity of the curriculum documents, this was not the case across all sites. In one network that comment was made that *we’ve got a lot of groundwork to do before we kind of get into the nitty-gritty of that.* A later comment expanded on this, noting that a great deal of trust needed to be built before *opening up other schools for kind of interrogation.* These comments acknowledge the hard work that is often required to tackle difficult issues, and the critical need for trust before such efforts.

The importance of supporting children’s continuity of learning across the transition to school in rural contexts was recognised in all of the networks. What was less clearly agreed upon was the importance of continuity between the curriculum documents in rural contexts. Some network members did not ascribe importance to continuity between the curricula, instead focusing on establishing effective pedagogies. Others perceived there to be a lack of continuity between the curricula, and saw this presented a barrier to developing pedagogies to support continuity of children’s learning and transition to school in rural areas.

Some rural networks experienced minimal impact as a result of the introduction of the EYLF and the AC. This could be attributed to members’ confidence that their existing pedagogies complemented the new curricula and therefore there was no need to change their practice. Another potential explanation for this could also be the perceived success of the network; specifically, its ability to mitigate potential disruptions to practice by promoting effective pedagogies of transition. In at least one network, members admitted they had not explicitly addressed the new curricula and it was not their primary concern. Therefore, the pedagogies of educational transitions in this rural context were not affected in significant ways by the new curriculum documents.
Meanwhile, other networks were impacted in a variety of ways by the new documents. The most significant impacts explained by the network members were around the lack of familiarity of the curriculum documents by the different sectors and the consequences of this. The lack of understanding created marked difficulties for educators to communicate using a shared language and to develop and implement effective pedagogies to support children’s continuity of learning and transition to school in rural contexts. Inconsistencies in curriculum and pedagogies across sectors can result in different understandings of children’s learning needs (Dunlop, 2017). The ability of the network to communicate and develop reciprocal understandings has been established as important to facilitate effective pedagogies of transition. The perceived ‘disconnect’ of the two curricula has the potential to disrupt network members’ ability to enact these pedagogies.

9.4.4 Summary

Although the degree of influence experienced by the networks as a result of the new curricula varied, nevertheless, influences were identified. There was also evidence that both advantages and disadvantages associated with living in rural contexts influenced the ways in which pedagogies of transition had changed as a result of the changes in curriculum approaches. By enacting effective pedagogies of educational transitions in rural areas, educators potentially were able to offset disruptions and discontinuities that were experienced as a result of changes to curriculum.
9.5 Question 5: How do pedagogies of educational transition in rural areas inform the development of a theoretical model?

The theoretical framework underpinning this study is Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological, or PPCT model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). In particular, the key components – Person, Process, Context and Time provide the foundation for informing the development of the study’s theoretical model which seeks to explain pedagogies of educational transitions. A theoretical model is generated as a result of the constructivist grounded theory approach used in this study where “theory is a consequence of, and partner to, systematic data collection and analysis” (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 491).

The theoretical model so generated represents a ‘localised’, or ‘substantive’ theory, which aims to explain the pedagogies of educational transition in rural areas as “interrelated propositions or concepts lodged in particular aspects of populations, settings, or times” (Preissle Goetz & LeCompte, 1984, p. 38). The model does not seek to present a generalised theory. Rather, it aims to offer an explanation of the phenomena that are specific to this context, at the time of the study.

In order to explain pedagogies of educational transition, it is necessary to revisit their key components, as well as influences on these. For this study, pedagogies of educational transitions are defined as:

the interactive processes and strategies that enable the development of opportunities, aspirations, expectations and entitlements for children, families, educators, communities and educational systems around transition to school, together with the theories, beliefs, policies and controversies that shape them.
In this definition, pedagogies of transition include both ‘interactive processes and strategies’, as well as ‘the theories, beliefs, policies and controversies that shape them’. That is, a conceptualisation of pedagogies of transition includes all of these components. Together, these enable the ‘development of opportunities, aspirations, expectations and entitlements for children, families, educators, communities and educational systems around transition to school’. The pedagogies of educational transition identified in this study were: networks; school visits; information nights; speed-dating; reciprocal visits; buddy programs; classroom practices; ‘all about school’ books; and transition statements. It is important to note that while the networks themselves were a pedagogy of transition, they also enabled and facilitated the other pedagogies.

This study identified eight key influences on pedagogies of educational transition: leadership; purpose; reciprocal understandings; relationships; professionalism; and goals for transition as well as rurality and the two curriculum documents – the Early Years Learning Framework and the Australian Curriculum.

The proposed theoretical model represents the ways in which the nine pedagogies of educational transition were generated, through interactions with and among the eight identified influences. The model is conceptualised in Figure 1 below as a series of interlocking components. These components are both dependent on, and influenced by, one another. In other words, the components do not act in isolation from the other components, and, each individual component directly influences the other components. In this model, the nine pedagogies of transition are impacted by the eight key influences mentioned while the eight influences are simultaneously affected by the pedagogies and by each other.

The continued interaction among the components over time represents the proximal processes. It is these processes, understood by Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) as
“progressively more complex reciprocal interaction between...the persons, objects and symbols in its immediate environment” (p. 797) which are the ‘driving forces’ of the model and which occur over time.
Figure 1: Pedagogies of educational transitions model
9.5.1 Summary

The theoretical model described here provides a localised, substantive theory particularly relevant to pedagogies of educational transitions in the rural areas involved in this study. It emphasises the interrelated and interconnected nature of pedagogies of transition and their influences and acknowledges the complexities that can be generated.
Question 6: How can this model inform the ongoing development and implementation of policy for transition to school in rural areas?

The theoretical model of pedagogies of educational transition can inform the ongoing development and implementation of policy for transition to school in rural areas in a number of ways. To demonstrate how this can be achieved, this question is answered through a series of recommendations concerning policy for transition to school in rural areas.

It is recommended that transitions policy:

- Facilitate a *range* of pedagogies of educational transitions.

  The findings of this study suggest that educators employed a range of pedagogies that were contextually relevant. There was no one ‘recipe’ for effective pedagogies of transition. Drawing on a variety of different pedagogies of transition, allows educators to be responsive to the needs of individuals and contexts, and implement pedagogies in meaningful and relevant ways.

  Research has shown that the incorporation of a variety of pedagogical practices can improve outcomes for children starting school, especially those who may be considered at risk (Ahtola et al., 2011; Entwisle & Alexander, 1998). An important characteristic of transitions is the acknowledgement that these are uniquely different for each individual and/or context. Policy to facilitate the development of a range of flexible, responsive and relevant pedagogies of educational transition is recommended in order to meet these individual needs.

- Acknowledge the role of leadership in pedagogies of educational transitions.
This study found that leaders influenced the direction of, and motivation for, pedagogies of educational transitions. Leaders were not necessarily the hierarchical leaders of the educational settings. Often, the leaders were passionate educators striving for the best possible outcomes for their children. Having someone to ‘drive’ the pedagogies of educational transitions helped ensure that goals and vision were pursued. As well, those in more hierarchical leadership positions, such as school principals and preschool directors, were also influential. These leaders provided support for educators to enact pedagogies of transition, by releasing staff and providing or supporting opportunities for professional development. This type of support from leadership is known to foster a culture that values changes in thinking and practice (Earl & Katz, 2007). Examples of distributed leadership where the leadership responsibilities are shared, and collective expertise valued, were seen in this study to be effective for enacting pedagogies of educational transitions.

Acknowledging the role of leaders on pedagogies of educational transition includes not only recognition of those already in leadership position, but also opportunities for educators to explore approaches to leadership through professional development and to take up positions of leadership.

- Appreciate the influence of purpose for pedagogies of educational transitions. This study found that having a clearly defined purpose provided impetus for the development and implementation of effective pedagogies of educational transitions. Purpose is required in order for educators to see the benefits afforded by the pedagogies, and to justify their participation in and commitment to these pedagogies. When a clearly defined purpose aligns with the expertise of individuals, such as in educational networks, the purpose can be achieved and benefits afforded (Bell et al.,
Policy that encourages educators to develop clearly a defined purpose around transition is beneficial.

- Recognise the significance of reciprocal understandings for pedagogies of educational transitions.

The findings of this study demonstrate that pedagogies of educational transitions are influenced by reciprocal understandings, particularly among prior-to-school and school educators about different educational contexts, the role of the professionals working within these, and their professional pedagogies. When educators hold common or similar understandings, effective communication, meaningful collaborations and positive relationships can occur. In contrast, when there was a lack of reciprocal understandings it was difficult for educators to communicate, creating a barrier to continuity of practice. The importance of reciprocal understandings among educators for effective transitions has been recognised in earlier studies (Peters, 2014). Policy that promotes opportunities to improve educators’ reciprocal understandings across settings can enhance transition to school.

- Facilitate the building of relationships to support pedagogies of educational transitions.

Positive relationships underpin effective transitions to school (Dockett & Perry, 2007, 2001b; Pianta, Rimm-Kaufman, et al., 1999). Positive relationships also enhance reciprocal understandings, communication and pedagogical collaboration between educators. In this study, educators were able to develop positive relationships with one another through regular interactions. The opportunities afforded for face-to-face communication through the networks was particularly valuable. Time was also vital
for the development of meaningful relationships. Relationships helped develop ‘strong and equal partnerships’ (OECD, 2006). Positive relationships, in tandem with reciprocal understandings, are also necessary for the development of new pedagogies of educational transitions (Dockett & Einarsdottir, 2017). Given their influence on these pedagogies, policy which facilitates the development of positive relationships among educators is critical to promoting optimal educational transitions.

- Acknowledge the impact of professional support and professional regard on pedagogies of educational transitions.

The findings from this study suggest that pedagogies of educational transitions influence and are influenced by elements of professionalism, specifically, professional support and professional regard. Effective pedagogies of educational transitions offered professional support to educators by generating opportunities for sharing expertise, asking questions, and navigating complex issues through open collaboration and reciprocal interactions. For some educators, the professional support they received was the main reason they continued to engage in pedagogies such as the networks. Professional regard among educators is known to be important for successful collaboration (Karila & Rantavuori, 2014). Given persistent discourses that position prior-to-school educators as having a lower professional status than school educators (Moss, 2013c; Productivity Commission, 2011) it is pertinent that policy attention is given to opportunities through which professional regard among educators can be improved. This study has demonstrated that the joint development and implementation of pedagogies of educational transitions can provide such opportunities.
• Recognise the importance of goals for transition on pedagogies of educational transitions.

Findings from this study demonstrated that an array of goals for transition, primarily focused on children and families, influenced pedagogies of educational transitions. Underpinning pedagogies of educational transition were goals to facilitate ‘smooth’ and ‘happy’ transitions to school for children. Pedagogies were also influenced by educators’ aspirations to meet the individual needs of children, particularly those who were considered ‘at risk’. Educators held goals for families that acknowledged their participation in the transition to school, encouraged their engagement with educators and educational settings, and valued the development of positive relationships. Policy that encourages goal setting can also encourage reflection, and evaluation of the attainment of those goals, generating an improvement cycle specifically focused on pedagogies of educational transition.

• Encourage explorations of continuity between the two Australian curriculum documents relevant to the early childhood years – Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia and the Australian Curriculum.

While practices to recognise continuity of learning are advocated in both curriculum documents, educators in this study reported receiving little guidance from the documents themselves. Rather, cross-curriculum continuity occurred when individual educators and/or networks of educators accepted responsibility for building continuity in their specific contexts. Many of the participants in this study struggled with this responsibility, partly because of their lack of detailed knowledge of both curriculum documents. Other contributing factors included the time required to explore the different documents and opportunities for professional development.
Policy that promotes access to both curriculum documents, provides time for exploration and reflection, and encourages educators to collaborate has the potential to build professional capacity while at the same time acknowledging the professional competence and responsibilities of educators across both prior-to-school and school settings. Outcomes of such policy are likely to be locally relevant pedagogies that support educational transitions.

- Appreciate the influence of context on pedagogies of educational transition.

The findings from this study suggested that pedagogies of transition were impacted both positively and negatively by rural contexts. Rural communities were identified as having a number of strengths such as resilience, innovative approaches to pedagogy and familiarity with people, which were advantageous to pedagogies of educational transition. Findings also suggested that rural contexts experience a number of challenges for effective pedagogies of educational transition including isolation and access to staff.

Rural communities are known to experience educational challenges often not experienced by those in urban communities (Wallace & Boylan, 2007). The academic performance and educational achievement of children in rural areas is generally below that of children in urban areas (Bartholemaeus, 2006; Halsey, 2018). Given these challenges, it is paramount that children in rural areas, who are at greater risk of experiencing discontinuities and challenges when starting school, receive the support they need (Edwards et al., 2009). The effects of rurality can be ameliorated by transitions policy that provides opportunities for professional development for educators, and attracts and retains staff in rural areas.
• Encourage and resource the development, implementation and sustainability of professional educator networks.

The findings of this study suggest that educator networks in rural areas are an effective pedagogy of educational transition. In addition, educator networks can also enact other pedagogies of educational transition in rural areas. Educator networks were shown to influence transition pedagogies by promoting reciprocal understandings and communication between educators across settings, fostering positive relationships and promoting professional support and regard for educators. Networks are recognised as being a powerful tool for enacting change in educator practice (Niesz, 2007) and have the capacity to build understandings across sectors (Bell et al., 2006). Pedagogies that promote collaboration between prior-to-school and school settings are important to improve transitions to school (Bogard & Takanishi, 2005; Hopps, 2014a). Children and families experiencing complex circumstances can be supported when educational services work together (McDonald, 2010), such as in professional networks. Professional networks are a key pedagogy of educational transition which require policy and material support for their development, implementation and sustainability.

• Support the continuation of the study of pedagogies of educational transitions and the ways in which they can contribute to effective transitions to school.

Given that the study of pedagogies of educational transitions is a new area of research, it is pertinent that consideration be given to continuing to investigate these in relation to effective transitions to school. In particular, further research is needed to understand the ways in which different pedagogies of educational transition intersect at the transition to school, and how these support or hinder continuity of learning
across prior-to-school and school settings. Further study of educator networks and how these constitute an effective pedagogy of educational transition can build on the findings of this study. In addition, further investigation of the influences on pedagogies of educational transition is needed in order to understand how pedagogies of transition may be encouraged and supported.

9.6.1 Summary

This study has generated a series of recommendations for the development and implementation of transition to school policy in rural areas. These recommendations have been informed by the theoretical model of pedagogies of educational transition and provide a range of suggestions for how policy can support these pedagogies of educational transition.
9.7 Overarching question: How are pedagogies of transition enacted through educator networks in rural areas?

Educator networks were fundamental to the development and implementation of pedagogies of transition across the four sites in this study, as well as being an important pedagogy themselves. The educators participating in these networks described them as being effective for enhancing pedagogies of transitions and improving transitions to school.

There are significant differences between prior-to-school and school settings. These differences are observed physically, socially, culturally, academically and philosophically (Fabian & Dunlop, 2006). Transition to school is a time when considerable change occurs as a result of different contexts, curricula, policies and pedagogical approaches converging in one physical and conceptual space (ETC, 2011). It is this space that the educator networks were aiming to navigate and negotiate, with the specific aim of promoting positive transitions to school in their communities.

While discontinuities for children and families are expected during transition to school (Dockett & Perry, 2006), previously, the onus for managing these discontinuities has been on the child. Examples can be seen in efforts to ensure that children were ‘ready’ for school (Dunlop & Fabian, 2007; Graue, 2006). The establishment of educator networks with clear aims to improve transition reflects a shift in focus to what can be done on a pedagogical level to foster continuity between settings (Dunlop, 2013). Consistent recommendations have been made to encourage pedagogical collaboration between prior-to-school and school educators to promote successful transitions, and to enhance continuity of learning (Arnold et al., 2006; Dockett & Perry, 2014a; Peters, 2000).
Educator networks created spaces where expertise could be sought from others with different experiences and knowledge. According to those who participated in them, networks enhanced pedagogies of educational transition. Through working collaboratively, opportunities for achieving the goals to improve transition were developed in each site. When educational ‘experts’ from both schools and prior-to-school settings collaborate, professional inquiry and relationships cut across different contexts, providing opportunities for innovative pedagogies to emerge (Hall et al., 2010). From such collaborations, new knowledge can be created that will then be disseminated to others. It is this process of knowledge generation and sharing that encourages change in professional practices (Earl & Katz, 2007; McCormick et al., 2011a). Evidence of this was identified in the sites where a range of pedagogies of educational transition, in addition to the networks themselves, were enacted through the network. These included school visits, information nights, speed-dating, reciprocal visits, buddy programs, classroom practices, ‘all about school’ books and transition statements.

In this study, these pedagogies were enacted utilising the many benefits afforded by the educator networks including opportunities for professional collaboration, sharing of information, improving communication and reciprocal understandings, building relationships, and fostering professional support and respect for one another. These benefits are common across effective educator networks generally, with advantages for both children’s outcomes and educators’ practice (Schiff et al., 2015). The benefits may also have been enhanced by the rural communities in which the networks operated. This study found that rural contexts espoused an attitude of ‘community mindedness’, with a focus on capacity building, rather than individual gain. This was often despite some inherent competition among educational settings for student enrolments. The degree of familiarity among people living in rural areas is likely to have been a further advantage in promoting collaboration.
By bringing educators together, educator networks are able to develop new and innovative pedagogies to improve practice in meaningful and relevant ways (Lieberman & Miller, 2008). This has particular relevance for the development and enactment of pedagogies across prior-to-school and school settings that are situated in, and influenced by, different, and often competing, social, cultural and political contexts. It is important to consider the ways in which educator networks enacting pedagogies of educational transitions may contribute to deconstructing the dominant discourses of ‘school readiness’ and ‘schoolification’ of early childhood settings (Moss, 2013c). Educator networks in rural areas can afford particular advantages in attempting to achieve this. Rural communities where there are fewer people and a high degree of familiarity promote opportunities for working closely with other professionals. In addition, lower levels of student achievement in education in rural areas (Halsey, 2018) may serve as motivation for educators to seek new and innovative practices to improve these outcomes (as was observed in Blacksmith).

Many of the identified benefits of the networks are reflected in understandings of effective transitions to school. Transitions to school are effective for all involved when educators: engage in professional dialogue and sharing of information (Dockett & Perry, 2009); communicate and develop reciprocal understandings about one another’s practice and children’s learning (Hopps, 2014a; Peters, 2014); establish positive relationships with one another (ETC, 2011) and when there is professional regard across settings (Barblett et al., 2011; Karila & Rantavuori, 2014).

While the networks in this study operated differently, each was effective in its own right, highlighting the notion that networks need not follow an exact formula in order for them to be successful. Indeed, the organisation of networks is required to be flexible in order for the members to have autonomy in the network (Niesz, 2007). This sense of autonomy and agency it vital for networks to be effective and sustainable as it allows the network to be self-
governing and practice-driven. Networks that are driven externally, from a managerial level, are found to be less effective than those that have been generated from the ground-up (Vaessen et al., 2014). In other words, networks are effective when they are initiated by the members, for the members. This is evidenced by the networks in this study which were educator-led with a specific aims to improve transitions to school in their communities.

9.7.1 Summary

In this study, pedagogies of educational transitions were enacted through educator networks in a range of ways. By bringing together educators from prior-to-school and school settings, the networks generated ongoing opportunities for collaboration with the purpose of developing and implementing effective pedagogies of educational transition.
10 Chapter Ten – Closing Reflections

This chapter is deliberately titled ‘closing reflections’, rather than ‘conclusion’ as the researcher does not perceive there to be a natural ‘conclusion’ to the study of educator networks enacting pedagogies of educational transitions. The context of the study was that of educators working in ongoing, collaborative professional networks to improve transitions to school in rural areas. These educators have not ceased in their practices since the conclusion of the research, and their ambitions to support children and families as they transition to school continue. Hence, the researcher acknowledges that more appropriately, this chapter chronicles a series of reflections about the study and its implications for research, particularly in the field of pedagogies of educational transitions, and provides recommendations for future research possibilities. First, the limitations and challenges of the study are acknowledged.

10.1 Limitations and challenges

It is important to acknowledge a number of limitations and challenges in this doctoral study. The sampling methods meant that the number of participants was small. While the researcher notes that it was not the purpose of this doctoral study to yield large quantities of data, but to present genuine, real-life accounts of participants’ experiences and perceptions, the small number of participants and sites means that the transferability of results is limited (Cohen et al., 2011). Despite this, the findings have still formed a valuable contribution to the body of literature by providing unique perspectives of transition to school in rural communities.

Other limitations of the study relate to the focus group interviews. For example, some group members dominated other members of the group, directing much of the interview with
their thoughts and opinions. The researcher employed a number of strategies to deal with such issues, including making deliberate attempts to engage all members of the group. Before conducting the research groups for this study, the researcher participated in focus group interviews run by experienced focus group researchers from the overall ARC project. This enabled her to experience some of the strategies those researchers use in order to conduct successful focus groups.

The researcher also acknowledges that by being the sole collector and analyser of data, there were increased chances of researcher-related effects, such as researcher-bias. Strategies such as reflexivity and continued engagement with supervisors and members of the broader ARC project research team were employed to ameliorate these effects as much as possible.

10.2 Study contributions and implications

The understandings generated by this study make a significant contribution to the existing literature by developing further understandings of pedagogies of educational transitions. One of the achievements of this study was to generate a clear, innovative and comprehensive definition of pedagogies of educational transitions. While there is considerable literature and research around the areas of pedagogy (Alexander, 2008; Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002; Stephen, 2010; Watkins & Mortimore, 1999) and transition to school (Dockett & Perry, 2014a; O'Kane, 2016) there has been much less attention on pedagogies of educational transition, or a clear understanding of what is meant by this. This study has brought together definitions and understandings of pedagogy and transition to school to generate a definition through which to research and understand pedagogies of educational transition.
This study makes a further contribution to understanding pedagogies of education by identifying a range of pedagogies enacted by educators in rural areas. Pedagogies of educational transition create opportunities to promote continuity of learning, and build relationships between prior-to-school and school settings (Dockett & Einarsdottr, 2017). This study described how these pedagogies were often used concurrently to enhance educational transitions.

A range of influences on pedagogies of educational transition has been identified and explored in this study. This contributes to understandings of how pedagogies of educational transition are enacted by educator networks in rural areas. These influences are both dependent on, and influenced by, one another.

The results of this study contribute to existing literature by demonstrating the impact of rural contexts on pedagogies of educational transitions. While the understandings generated by this study reinforce much of the literature around the challenges facing education in rural communities including access to professional development (Halsey, 2011; Sullivan & Johnson, 2012), supporting families experiencing complex circumstances (Edwards et al., 2009) and staffing (Productivity Commission, 2011), this study has made an important contribution to understanding the ways that pedagogies of educational transition can offset some of these challenges.

An important element of this study addressed the ways in which the introduction of the two Australian curriculum documents – Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia and the Australian Curriculum have impacted on pedagogies of educational transitions in rural areas. The perceived disconnection between the documents presented challenges for educators. At the same time, it prompted some educators to take on the challenge and construct their own forms of continuity that were relevant and
meaningful in their contexts. The study suggested ways in which pedagogies of educational transition can be enacted to mitigate disruptions and discontinuities that are experienced as a result of changes to curriculum.

In seeking to explain the phenomena studied this research has generated a substantive theoretical framework which provides a visual representation of pedagogies of educational transitions. The model is conceptualised as a series of interlocking components that represent the ways in which pedagogies of educational transition, and their influences, are interconnected and interdependent. As well, the model integrates key components of Person Process, Context and Time from the bioecological model. This contributes to the existing body of transitions research that noted the effectiveness of Bronfenbrenner’s model for theorising transition to school (Dockett & Perry, 2014a; Dunlop, 2014; Rogers, 2015).

A series of recommendations for the ongoing development and implementation of policy for transition to school in rural areas is contributed by this study. The recommendations specify ways that policy can incorporate and facilitate pedagogies of educational transition for enhancing transitions to school. In particular, the study’s focus on rural contexts contributes to a policy position that effective transitions can improve outcomes for children living in disadvantaged circumstances (DET, 2017).

Finally, this study offers understandings of how pedagogies of educational transition are enacted in rural areas through the many benefits afforded by educator networks including opportunities for professional collaboration, sharing of information, improving communication and reciprocal understandings, building relationships, and fostering professional support and respect for one another. These findings contribute to the existing understandings about the benefits of educator networks (Bell et al., 2006; Schiff et al., 2015)
and improving transitions to school through educator collaboration (Dockett & Perry, 2009; Hopps, 2014b).

10.3 Future research possibilities

The study of pedagogies of educational transitions is a new area of research, and requires further investigation to explore how these can facilitate effective transitions to school more comprehensively than has been possible in this study.

The study focused its attention on educators’ perspectives of pedagogies of educational transitions. Transition to school is not just experienced by children and educators (Dockett & Perry, 2014a), and a fuller picture of the importance of pedagogies of educational transitions would be gained through investigation from a variety of viewpoints, including those of children, families and communities. As well, any future research into pedagogies of educational transition would be enhanced through larger numbers of participants from each group.

While this study concentrated on the rural context, both the larger ARC study and future studies could investigate other contexts to enhance understandings of context on pedagogies of educational transitions and the influence of context on these pedagogies.

This chapter concludes this thesis through a number of closing reflections around pedagogies of educational transitions in rural areas and the transition to school. It has outlined the valuable contribution to the existing knowledge and collective understandings of transition to school the study has made by examining the roles of pedagogies of educational transitions, including educator networks in rural areas.
10.4 Personal reflections

It has been a great privilege for this study to be part of the larger ARC research project, and to work under the direction of extremely experienced and highly regarded researchers. The larger project provided the doctoral study its focus on pedagogies of educational transitions in rural areas. The doctoral study’s connection to the larger project also afforded opportunities to be part of an international alliance of researchers known as POET – Pedagogies of Educational Transition. Participation in this collaboration provided opportunities for me to both share my research, and benefit from the immense collective knowledge and expertise of other researchers also researching about pedagogies of educational transitions. I wish to acknowledge the valuable and influential experiences, perspectives and interactions that this opportunity afforded me as a doctoral student, an educator, and as a person.

Conducting a study in a new area of research has been both exciting and challenging. While the task of developing a definition of pedagogies of educational transitions was daunting, it also provided me with a unique opportunity to think deeply about what pedagogies of educational transition are, and how they ought to be conceptualised. It is my hope that the understandings generated from this study about what is meant by pedagogies of educational transition will benefit future thinking and research.

As someone who grew up and attended school in a small rural community in Victoria, I felt a sense of connection to the rural communities who were part of this study. Their descriptions of some of the challenges and advantages of living in a rural community resonated with me as I reflected on my own childhood. I understood the dichotomy of distance; the barriers it presents to people, but also as part of what defines rurality, and indeed as often the very reason people choose to live in rural areas. The reference to familiarity with
people as both a blessing and a curse stirred memories of what it was like for my siblings and I to have parents who were both teachers in a small town. Particularly resonant, was the attitude of community-spirit, resilience and innovation which define my memories of the rural community in which I grew up.

Finally, I reflect on the deeply satisfying and rewarding experience of interacting with a number of passionate, dedicated and inspirational educators who participated in this study. Many of the educators expressed to me how grateful they were for the opportunity to participate in research about transition to school, and have the work they were doing as a network acknowledged. I believe these sentiments speak volumes about the professional integrity of these educators for whom improving children’s transition to school was a steadfast commitment. I am incredibly thankful for their generosity, selflessness and willingness to share their knowledge and experiences, which has not only contributed immeasurably to the research, but to me as a researcher and educator. I hope that I have been as virtuous in sharing their stories.
11 References


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## Appendix A: Example interview guide – Westhill focus group interview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Guiding interview questions</th>
<th>Possible probes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Can you tell me about Westhill?</td>
<td>Town, school, preschool</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. What does transition look like here?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. What makes a successful transition?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Can you tell me about the transition network?</td>
<td>Strengths, challenges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. What impact has the introduction of the EYLF and AC had on your practice?</td>
<td>Success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. What is it like to live and work in rural area?</td>
<td>Strengths, challenges</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B: Example interview guide – Westhill follow-up interview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Guiding interview questions</th>
<th>Possible probes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. How did this year’s transition go?</td>
<td>Success, challenges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. In what ways was it successful?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. With Jenny on leave, how has that affected transition here?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. What are you engaged with around transition at the moment?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Is there anything that makes it difficult to live in a rural area?</td>
<td>Strengths, challenges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. What does continuity of learning mean for you? Is it important?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. In what ways do the curriculum documents promote continuity of learning?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Pedagogies of Educational Transitions: Continuity and Change as Children Start School in Rural Areas is a doctoral research project that is focused on exploring the pedagogical practices of educators around transition to school in rural areas of Australia.

The doctoral research project is part of a larger Australian Research Council funded Discovery Project that is designed to evaluate the impact of the *Early Years Learning Framework* and *The Australian Curriculum* on transition to school in Australia. The introduction of two new curricula across the transition to school is a unique opportunity to reflect on the influence of change in policy and practice on pedagogies of educational transitions. Part of the larger project has been the implementation of a nationwide survey of both early childhood and school educators about transition to school. The data from the survey related to rural areas will help guide the direction of the doctoral research project.

The doctoral research project will focus on the pedagogical practices of educators who work together as part of a network across the early childhood and school sectors around the transition to school. The research aims to gather the perspectives and experiences about transition to school from those living and working in rural Australia. Rural communities are often presented with unique circumstances and challenges and it will be a focus of this study to explore these. The study will also be focused on the ways in which the introduction of the two new curricula; the *Early Years Learning Framework* and the *Australian Curriculum* have impacted on the pedagogies of educators during transition to school in rural areas since their introduction.

With informed consent from participants, data for this project will be gathered from the participants in the form of a series of focus group interviews. It is anticipated that the focus group interviews will take place during the regular network meetings. Some additional follow-up interviews may be arranged, upon consultation with the participants.

I welcome your participation in this research project. However, there is no obligation to be involved. Even if you choose to participate it is still possible to withdraw from the project. There are no negative consequences should you choose not to participate or you can only participate in some aspects of the project.
Permission from all participants will be sought to audio record interviews. It is important that you know if you choose to be involved in the focus group interviews, and chose to withdraw from the project part way through such an interview, all information you have contributed up until that point cannot be removed from the data generated in the project.

I am not seeking organisational perspectives or asking people to represent specific organisations. Rather, I am interested in understanding the influences and the changes that have been undertaken in recent years. Results from the project will respect confidentiality.

All participants in the project will receive a summary of the findings at the completion of the project.

I can be contacted using the details listed above if you would like any further information.

NOTE: The School of Education Ethics Committee has approved this project. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this project, you may contact the Committee through the Executive Officer:

Dr Brian Hemmings  
School of Education  
Charles Sturt University  
Locked Bag 5688  
Boorooma Street  
 Wagga Wagga NSW 2670  
Tel: (02) 6923 2451  
Fax: (02) 6923 2488  
Email: bhemmings@csu.edu.au

Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully and you will be informed of the outcome.
Appendix D: Network member consent form

Charles Sturt University

Pedagogies of Educational Transitions: Continuity and Change as Children Start School in Rural Areas

Consent Form – Network Member – Interviews

Contact:
Jessamy Davies
PhD candidate
School of Education
Charles Sturt University
jdavies@csu.edu.au

Supervisor:
Professor Sue Dockett
Professor of Early Childhood Education
Charles Sturt University
Phone: 02 6051 9424
sdockett@csu.edu.au

I am seeking your assistance in conducting a research study entitled Pedagogies of Educational Transitions: Continuity and Change as Children Start School in Rural Areas. The study is designed to explore the pedagogical practices educators engage in during transition to school in rural areas, as well as the impact of the Early Years Learning Framework and the Australian Curriculum on transition to school in rural Australia. Detailed information concerning the project is provided in the accompanying Information Sheet.

Participants involved in the project will be invited to participate in a series of focus group interviews that will take place during the transition network’s regular meeting times. It is expected that each interview will be incorporated into the network meeting itself. Some follow up interviews may be scheduled outside of this time, at a time and place that is convenient for participants. With the permission of participants, the interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Any information or personal details gathered in the course of this research about you or your organisation are confidential and neither your name nor any other identifying information will be used or published.

I welcome your participation in this research project. However, there is no obligation to be involved. Even if you choose to participate it is still possible to withdraw from the project. There are no negative consequences for you should you choose not to participate or if you can only participate in parts of the project.

As a participant in this project you will receive a brief summary of the findings, e-mailed to you upon completion of the project. The final doctoral dissertation will be published and accessible via Charles Sturt University. The research will benefit children starting school, their families, teachers, schools and communities through the development of a sound practice base and theoretical framework founded upon the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia and the Australian Curriculum. As a result, more children, families and teachers will experience successful transitions to school with the consequent setting of stronger, more positive trajectories for future learning and success.

I can be contacted using the details listed above if you would like any further information.

Yours Sincerely,

Jessamy Davies
Network member - Consent Form - Interviews

I have read and understand the information about the study Pedagogies of Educational Transitions: Continuity and Change as Children Start School in Rural Areas contained in the accompanying information sheet.

I have been able to clarify any questions I had about the project and my participation in it. I understand that I am free to withdraw from the research at any time, and that if I do I will not be subjected to any penalty or discriminatory treatment.

I understand that any information or personal details gathered in the course of this research about me are confidential and that neither my name of any other identifying information will be used or published without my further consent.

I understand that, with my permission, the interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Network Member Consent

I, ___________________________ (Network member’s name) agree to be involved in interviews described in the information sheet provided.

Name: ___________________________

Signature: _________________________

Date: _____________________________

Contact Phone: ______________________ Email: _____________________________

NOTE: The School of Education Ethics Committee has approved this project. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this project, you may contact the Committee through the Executive Officer:

Dr Brian Hemmings
School of Education
Charles Sturt University
Locked Bag 058
Bourke St.
Wagga Wagga NSW 2679
Tel: (02) 0933 2461
Fax: (02) 0922 2858
Email: bhemmings@csu.edu.au

Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully and you will be informed of the outcome.
Appendix E: Example focused coding

1. Reason/purpose to meet – defining the 'why'.
2. Leadership
   a. Within network
   b. Leadership support (from Principals, senior leaders)
3. Mutual understandings
   a. Importance of understandings
   b. Building understandings
   c. Continuity?
4. Relationships – does this include communication? Collaboration?
   a. Exchange of information
      i. Competition between schools/settings
5. Professionalism
   a. Respect (from both other professionals and others to families)
   b. Support
6. Organization (formality, structure, scheduling)
7. Convenience (location)
8. Commitment
   a. Effort
   b. Time
9. Interagency networking
10. Sustainability of network
    a. Goal setting
    b. Leadership
    c. Commitment
11. Transition
    a. Goals for successful transition
    b. Activities /strategies
    c. Scheduling

- Need to sub-categorise?
- Use D + P3 categories?
- Different priorities?

- Parental expectations?
  a) Communication (exchange of information)
  b) Expectations?

- Communication (exchange of information)
  i) Parental consent

Flexibility/collaboration
12. Context: Rural contexts - characteristics of rural areas?
   a) Professional boundaries, confidentiality

13. Early Years Learning Framework
   a) Language

14. Australian Curriculum
   b) Familiarity with people (family)
   c) Rostering / use of staff
   d) Access to staff
      (relief / casual staff)
   e) Characteristics of workforce