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## **Universal Access to Preschool Education – approaches to integrating preschool with school in rural and remote communities**

In 2012, the government of South Australia responded to Federal agreements aimed at universal access to preschool education for children in the year before starting formal schooling by introducing a trial designed to 'integrate' preschool children into first year of school programs in rural and remote areas of the state.

This paper reports on the evaluation of this trial, exploring the ways in which integration was interpreted and implemented in eight rural and/or remote sites, the perceived value of collaboration in planning integrated provision and the ways in which two new curriculum documents – one for the prior-to-school years and the other for compulsory school – influenced the delivery of integrated preschool-school programs. Results identify several types of integration, highlight some of the challenges of collaboration in integrating preschool with school and share the caution of educators about the push-down of school curriculum into preschool contexts.

**Keywords:** preschool; universal access; integration with school; rural and remote; Australia

### **Background**

In 2008, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) – joint meetings of the Australian government and the governments of all states and territories in Australia – committed each state and territory to ensuring that all children would have access to a quality early childhood education program by mid-2013, delivered by a four-year university degree qualified teacher, for 15 hours per week, 40 weeks a year, in the year before full time school attendance (COAG 2008). This commitment, known as 'universal access', was both a political and policy imperative for a number of reasons, including the strong evidence of the academic, social and emotional benefits for children of quality preschool education (Heckman and Masterov 2004; Linder, Ramey and Zambak 2013; Shonkoff and Phillips 2000).

Bilateral agreements between each state and territory and the Australian government outlined commitments to be achieved by 2013. The bilateral agreement for South Australia, the state in which the study reported in this paper was conducted, included commitments to:

- increase the proportion of four-year-old children enrolled in early childhood education from 87.9% (2008) to 95% (2013); and
- increase the average hours of early childhood education offered to 95% of the total population of 4-year-old children (from an average of 11 hours per week in 2009) (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR] and State of South Australia 2012).

By the time this study was mooted, South Australia was well on the way to meeting these commitments. In 2011, a preschool enrolment rate of 91.7% was reported with 28.8% of children in the year before school participating in at least 15 hours of preschool per week (DEEWR 2012). However, there were still some challenges, with the provision of preschool in rural and remote locations one of these.

The commitment to universal access has occurred within larger reforms. The National Early Childhood Development Strategy (COAG 2009) outlined plans for partnerships across and between governments, with the non-government sector, and with families around the needs of young children. Reforms for early childhood education have been guided by two important frameworks: *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (DEEWR 2009) and the *National Quality Framework* (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority [ACECQA] 2012). Together, these frameworks outline expectations for pedagogy and curriculum in the early years as well as expectations related to staffing and quality standards. A further reform pertinent to this study is the introduction of the first ever national schools curriculum for Australia from 2010. *The Australian Curriculum* (Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority [ACARA] 2012) is the obligatory curriculum for all Australian schools. At the transition to primary school, the *Early Years Learning Framework* and *The Australian Curriculum* come together, both for the benefit of Australian children, but with quite different philosophies and pedagogical approaches.

Recent reviews have explored factors associated with the implementation of universal access (The Allen Consulting Group 2011). Both identified some major challenges to be overcome, including challenges at the state/territory level, such as developing sufficient infrastructure to meet the commitments outlined in the universal access agreements; implementing universal access in ways that do not jeopardise the viability of other early childhood services; promoting a common understanding of universal access; and providing universal access in rural and remote areas.

Within this national reform agenda for early childhood education, South Australia introduced the *Integrating Preschool with the First Years of School* (IPWS) trial which aimed to assess the viability of the provision of a preschool program in a school setting, in communities where there were small numbers of children entitled to access preschool in the year before school. It also aimed to examine the interface between the *Early Years Learning Framework* and *The Australian Curriculum* to determine whether or not a coherent learning program could be developed and implemented which integrated preschool and school programs.

### **Approaches to integration**

When used in relation to early childhood education policy, the term integration has a number of uses and meanings. Using Moore and Skinner's (2010) framework, these range from integration at the government department and policy level, through integration at the regional planning level, to service delivery integration, and the development of an integrated team of professionals working for and with children and families.

A central plank of the COAG Reform Agenda for early childhood education has been "providing families with high-quality, accessible and affordable integrated early childhood education and care" (Early Childhood Australia 2011, 20). In this sense, much of the attention involving integration has been directed towards integrated service provision (Press, Sumsion, and Wong 2010). The rationale underpinning service integration recognises the complexity of the lives of children and families and the limited responsiveness of fragmented services and seeks to address this through the increased efficiency and effectiveness of services (valentine, Katz, and Griffiths 2007). On the basis that "navigating service boundaries" (Corter and Pelletier 2010, 46) can present challenges for children, it is also argued that integration can promote continuity, as children experience fewer transitions,

adults engage in co-ordinated planning for individual children and there are more consistent expectations for children (Pelletier 2012).

Wong, Sumsion and Press (2012, 5-6) outline three principles that characterise effective integrated service provision:

- a clear sense of purpose with different agencies/ teams coming together under a shared philosophy and objectives;
- congruent and compatible practices across different professional boundaries in a way that is responsive to each family's needs; and
- minimal referral and acceptance processes for families needing more than one service or form of support.

Underlying these principles is recognition that:

- integration is only worthwhile if it serves an agreed shared purpose;
- a central focus of integration should always be on better supporting children's learning, development and wellbeing; and
- profound and lasting change requires time, structured and incidental opportunities for joint professional reflection, and evidence based professional learning and development.

While the primary focus of the project *Integrating preschool with the first years of school* (IPWS) was not the creation of a fully integrated early childhood service, these principles are relevant to considering the ways in which preschool and school services may be integrated to promote universal access. Recognising the importance of such principles reminds all involved that early childhood education and school education, while linked in many ways, draw from different theoretical, philosophical and practical bases, often engage with children and families in different ways and occupy different spaces within educational continua.

### **Integrating preschool with school**

Few previous studies report attempts to integrate preschool and school. However, as early as 1983, Roopnarine and Johnson reported on studies about

grouping children of varying ages in formal educational and social settings. Studies indicate that the presence of younger children may foster the development of caretaking behaviors, prosocial behaviors, communicative skills, and intellectual skills among older children. At the same time, younger children are exposed to a more socially diverse group of children and to older, more advanced models. For younger children, the mixed-age setting is quite suitable for learning various social and cognitive skills through peer tutoring and through the observation and imitation of more competent behaviors. (578, internal citations omitted)

As they reported on their *School of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* project, Desimone et al. (2004) outlined several challenges in developing an integrated school-based preschool program. Key challenges included establishing boundaries – for example, identifying appropriate roles within integrated provision and considering whether or not preschool and school services operate to a common timetable; and provision of adequate space and resources for the operation of an integrated program. A significant challenge related to time, particularly time to promote collaboration and to discuss curriculum. Key factors to support an integrated approach included support from the school

principal and district administrators. Major benefits for educators related to opportunities for collaboration and the opportunities for them to work as a team.

Parent perspectives on the introduction of preschool into school raised some concerns about preschool becoming academically focused, as well as about the perceived relative lack of structure in preschools when compared with school. However, “one of the strongest implementation successes teachers and parents reported was an improved transition to [school]” (Desimone et al. 2004, 383). These findings again highlight the importance of educators collaborating about the curriculum and being consistent in the ways in which the program was outlined for parents.

Developing collaboration between educators who regard themselves as operating in different sectors may require strong leadership (Siraj-Blatchford and Manni 2007). Where integration is valued and accepted by the leadership team it is likely to be reflected in the organisation of the service and prioritisation of resources. Press et al. (2010 45) report that effective leadership for integration “focused on developing shared understandings within and across staff teams” and sought to “embed integrated thinking ... shared a common purpose”. Leaders have an important role to play in developing organisational culture and ethos. Referring to organisational culture as “the feel of the organisation and the shared values, norms and patterns of behaviour” and ethos as the “shared view of the right thing to do”, Press et al. (2010 16) highlight the critical role of shared values, assumptions and approaches in creating conditions for successful integration.

Interdisciplinary professional practice and team building refers to the requirement for educators with different backgrounds and experiences to work together effectively. While it may be assumed that educators have a common base for beginning collaboration, it is also important to recognise differences that exist between prior-to-school and school education around theoretical and philosophical orientations and practice. Examples include the non-compulsory nature of preschool education and the focus on play-based pedagogies in many preschool contexts (OECD 2006). Wong et al. (2012, 6) note that

Embedding effective collaboration takes time, professional support and a commitment to problem solving. Team members must be prepared to share their expertise and perspectives with others who may have quite different views. They must be able to articulate the reasons for their professional decisions, whilst also being open to change long established practices ... Bringing together diverse views in productive ways can be challenging, but is ultimately the strength of integrated practice.

### **Evaluation of the *Integrating Preschool with the First Years of School* trial**

The *Integrating Preschool with the First Years of School* (IPWS) was conducted during 2012, in eight sites across rural and remote South Australia. Each site consisted of a school and preschool setting. Criteria for inclusion in the trial included small or fluctuating number of preschool children entitled to universal access, a willingness of the school (including leadership) to support the trial, and commitment from both preschool and school educators to work collaboratively to develop integrated provision of preschool within the school context. In each of the sites, small or irregular numbers of children attending preschool had led to questioning about the viability of the preschool program.

Educators at each site were supported through access to professional development, additional resources and support from regional and state-based consultants – particularly around the development of a service delivery model for each site and in designing curriculum. Regular site visits

by these consultants facilitated consideration of resource issues, implementation plans, challenges and strategies to overcome these.

The two main aims of the trial were the focus of the evaluation:

1. Children are enabled to access a preschool program in their local community through provision in their local school site.
2. A learning program for children aged four to six years, using both the *Early Years Learning Framework* and *The Australian Curriculum* which provides all children with their curriculum entitlement, is developed collaboratively by teachers from both the preschool and school sites.

In this paper, we draw on data from educators across the trial sites to address three sub-questions:

- What is understood by integration of preschool with school?
- How has collaboration supported understanding of an integrated program?
- How have the *Early Years Learning Framework* and *The Australian Curriculum* informed the development of an integrated program?

### **Evaluation sites**

All eight trial sites participated in the evaluation. Some of the characteristics of the sites are provided in Table 1. In South Australia, the first year of formal school is called Reception and the preschool year is called Kindergarten. In other parts of Australia, the term ‘Kindergarten’ denotes the first year of school. To avoid confusion with the multiple uses of this term, we use the terms ‘Reception’ for the first year of school and ‘preschool’ for the year before the first year of school, throughout this paper.

At the time of this study, most children in South Australia started school at the beginning of the term after they had turned 5 years old. They attended either primary schools (incorporating grades Reception to Year 7) or, in rural or remote locations, area schools (incorporating grades Reception to Year 12). In South Australia, approximately 90 of the 430 schools with a junior primary component have a co-located preschool.

All of the schools in the evaluation sites had co-located preschools in which preschool teachers were employed part-time. School teachers often taught multi-age classes covering the range of Reception – Year 2 or Reception – Year 3. Preschool programs operated for 2½ days per week or for 5 days per fortnight (usually 2 common days each week and an extra day every second week). Enrolment patterns for children attending preschools co-located with the evaluation schools were largely determined by school bus timetables.

Table 1. Characteristics of trial/evaluation sites

<b>Site ID</b>	<b>School type</b>	<b>Range of grades</b>	<b>Total enrolment</b>	<b>Preschool enrolment</b>
A	Area	Preschool to Year 12	61	5 – 13 (range during evaluation)
B	Primary	Preschool to Year 7	36	3

C	Area	Preschool to Year 12	114	13
D	Primary	Preschool to Year 7	53	6
E	Primary	Preschool to Year 7	30	6
F	Primary	Preschool to Year 7	30	5
G	Primary	Preschool to Year 7	46	8
H	Area	Preschool to Year 12	100	8

### ***Methods of data generation***

Data for the evaluation of the IPWS trial were generated using multiple methods.

1. Engagement of the evaluation team in regional professional development events. This enabled the team to become familiar with the participants, gather initial demographic data and encourage participation in all aspects of the evaluation.
2. On-line survey of teachers (preschool and school) and principals in the eight participating sites at Time 1 (prior to site visits by the research team) and Time 2 (towards the end of the evaluation).
3. Participants were asked to develop a 'package of reading' for the evaluators that outlined how the trial operated in their site. While these 'packages' varied across sites, they typically consisted of teachers programs, school and Departmental policy documents, school newsletters, site specific transition to school material and children's work samples.
4. Site visits. During these visits, researchers interviewed children, parents and educators about the trial, viewed documentation and, where possible, attended classrooms where the trial was being conducted. The interviews of adults during these visits were sometimes individual and sometimes group interviews depending on the preferences and availability of the participants. The interviews focussed on the integration of preschool within school and sought statements concerning the advantages and disadvantages of the approaches being undertaken in the site. Conversations with children were always group discussions concerning what the children liked and disliked about being part of the integration of preschool within school and what they saw as important as they started school.
5. Presentation and discussion of initial impressions and analysis from the evaluation during a combined meeting of participants. This served as a 'testing ground' for the evaluation team's analysis of the data and draft recommendations.

Twenty-one surveys, with representation from all eight sites, were completed at Time 1, and 13, again representing all sites, at Time 2. Interviews were conducted during site visits with a total of 128 participants (28 educators, 29 parents, 71 children). Approximately half of the children interviewed were attending preschool. Data were analysed using conventional content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This involved close reading of documentation, interview transcripts and field notes, identification and labelling of codes that were then sorted into categories. From this, descriptive models were constructed, illustrating the ways in which integration was interpreted and implemented, the ways in which collaboration occurred within the context of integration and the contribution of the different curriculum frameworks to the practice of integration.

## Results

### ***What is understood by integration of preschool with school?***

A range of approaches to integration emerged throughout the project. At the beginning of the trial, some educators applied the term integration to any times that preschool and school children spent together – including the playground or the classroom and times when the children came together for special events. By the end of the trial, the term integration was more likely to be applied to a specified period when children from preschool and the first years of school came together for a planned and co-ordinated period. Using this definition, integration occurred in most sites over 1-2 sessions (3-6 hours) per week, out of the total 15 hours of preschool provided under the universal access arrangements.

From the outset of the evaluation, it was evident that interaction between preschool and school did not start with IPWS. All sites reported ongoing interactions as the children engaged together in reciprocal visits, attended special events and excursions. One consequence of this trial was that, in some sites, the formality and accountability of these interactions changed as the term *integration* was applied.

We established more formal lessons with the preschoolers coming to the junior primary room to work on science together. This was one area we felt could be improved by exposing the preschoolers to a taste of life in the big school. [early years of school teacher]

The specific focus of integrated sessions differed among sites but almost always had a traditional subject base, perhaps reflecting a tendency for the school curriculum to take precedence in the integrated sessions.

[the school] were the main players, I guess, because that's where all the Australian Curriculum was coming in ... all the pressure was on the school more than the kindy sector. [preschool educator]

In four of the eight sites, science was the focus of integration; other sites focused on studies of society and environment, mathematics/numeracy/inquiry, and arts/language. In the final site, the focus varied.

However, subject specification was not universal and comments from some sites indicated that integration legitimised opportunities for the older children to engage in play-based experiences.

### ***Full integration***

The notion of full integration was explored throughout the trial. None of the sites implemented a fully integrated preschool within school program; that is, a program in which preschool and school children were together for all the time the preschool children attended. Resistance to the idea of full integration was evident from both preschool and school teachers and can be related to the different educational entitlements for children.

[with full integration] I think the kindies and the parents and all the expectations will change and everyone will think kindy is supposed to be sitting there learning how to write your name and it's not. And it would just upscale ... [it] will just be constantly piling more and more onto kids, rather than focusing on the social/emotional bit that kindy should be. [preschool educator]

This firm rejection of full integration was also evident in responses to the final survey, all of which were strongly against full integration. The following comments are indicative of teacher responses to the statement *Preschool should be fully integrated with school in my site.*

As an Early Childhood Educator I believe that the first few years of schooling (preschool included) set students up with the attitude and desire to learn. There are obvious benefits for both cohorts of students in an integrated program, but I still believe they need the time to develop in an environment that is specifically understanding and supportive of their learning. [preschool educator]

They are two very separate entities. While combining a couple of times a week is beneficial, full integration means all students are missing out in a curriculum that best serves their needs. [early years of school teacher]

### *Categories of integration*

Initial analysis resulted in the identification of five categories of integration: physical integration; integrated planning; curriculum integration; pedagogical integration; and organisational integration. These categories were not necessarily discrete. For example, in some sites at some times, physical integration was accompanied by integrated planning, curriculum integration, pedagogical and/or organisational integration; in other sites or at other times, one form of integration predominated.

*Physical integration* was used to describe occasions when children from preschool and the early years of school spent time together in the same location and participated in common activities. Examples included preschool children attending a school assembly. This was facilitated when the preschool was co-located with the school. In this form of integration, the children making the visit 'fitted in' with what was already happening.

We've always done it [integration]... we used to share activity afternoons. Usually weekly, but sometimes it didn't happen. Sometimes it was fortnightly... where we'd go over to them one week and they'd come over to us the other week. And we'd take it in turns, if we went over there [school teacher] organised activities and we'd join in. And if they came here, I'd organise it and they'd come and visit and join in. And that was a good chance for us to share information and for her to see the kids in action just before they start school... it made transition really easy. [preschool educator]

*Integrated planning* involved the preschool teacher and the early years of school teacher planning together for the integrated sessions. This was facilitated by these teachers having common teaching release time.

... because we've been given the time together ...release time together... we've been able to sit and discuss the kids in depth and find out who needs what...[the school teacher] named a few kids who really need more numeral recognition, they just aren't quite up there with recognising their numbers...those kids came over to us from one morning a week and we'll do some really full on number recognition activities. Hands on... and then the literacy, she wanted more time with those younger ones as well as to help them get a better grasp on phonics and sounds and letters. [preschool educator]

Examples of *curriculum integration* built upon integrated planning by weaving together the expectations of the *Early Years Learning Framework* and *The Australian Curriculum* in ways such that relevant outcomes from each framework were addressed. This presented a number of challenges for participants, who indicated that the school curriculum took precedence over the *Early Years Learning Framework*.

[the school] were the main players, I guess, because that's where all the Australian Curriculum was coming in ... all the pressure was on the school more than the Kindy sector. [preschool educator]

The Australian Curriculum is really pushing lots of outcomes... with the Australian Curriculum in place I am really feeling a little bit pressured about kids achieving these goals by the end of whatever year

they're in. And while that doesn't define what I do, it is always in the back of my mind. [school principal]

Despite this, educators in several sites worked to develop *pedagogical integration*, where the pedagogies of the *Early Years Learning Framework*, particularly play-based pedagogies, were implemented during the integrated sessions. In some sites, this involved team teaching and the identification of shared understandings and approaches.

[integration] has given us licence to work together on something. [early years of school educator]

We're all on the same site and we work quite closely together and share resources and do all those sort of things. So I think this project has made us think about how to be more strategic about doing it... we have worked together already and we have the same sort of philosophies about children and working with children. [preschool educator]

When integration was used as a means of managing staff and student entitlements, it was described as *organisational integration*. This occurred when integrated sessions were used as a means to provide the required periods of teacher release. For example, the preschool and early years of school groups may be combined in order for one of the teachers to leave the class to take the release time to which she was entitled. In these cases, other staff were required to participate in the integrated sessions.

We've been releasing each other but we can see the benefits of us both being in there and team teaching and working together on things. So it's probably the next step for us. [early years of school educator]

Other examples related to the early years of school teachers using integrated sessions to spend time engaging with individual children in intensive learning activities. This was particularly the case where the first year of school teacher was responsible for several grades – often Reception-Year 3 – and integrated sessions were seen as a means of utilising both teachers in targeted ways to focus on children's learning across this range of ages and grades.

The younger [school] children were going over to the Kindy to do science. And that way I could teach the 2/3s, the older group, science and do the report writing and really get stuck into their learning...one reason [preschool teacher] was doing maths was because some of mine are behind in their number work, so we thought that she could then cater for their needs...[early years of school teacher]

These categories were tested in a presentation by the research team during a professional development session. Participants in the trial acknowledged these different types of integration, with some outlining challenges in their attempts to move beyond physical or organisational integration. In the final survey, respondents were asked to rate the extent to which these forms of integration were evident at their site. All participants reported either 'some' or 'a lot' of physical and organisational integration. Eighty-five percent reported either 'some' or 'a lot' of pedagogical integration while the ratings for curriculum integration and integrated planning were lower at 70% and 62% respectively.

At all sites, the advent of the IPWS trial meant that interactions between the preschool and school were enhanced in terms of time, regularity and purpose. It also meant that those involved in each site considered their existing approaches to integration and explored alternatives. Not all involved regarded integration positively, but there was consensus that it provided the potential to

promote collaboration among preschool and school educators, with positive outcomes for children and families.

### ***How has collaboration supported understanding of an integrated program?***

In some, but not all, sites, teachers from preschool and the early years of school reported that they engaged in collaborative planning. However, in the majority of sites, planning time was either not provided or teacher release time not utilised for integration planning during the school day. In some sites, teachers reported using their own time – either after school or in holidays – to work on their integrated program. Factors influencing the availability of time for collaborative planning during the school day included timetabling issues, schedules for teacher-release time, knowledge of the various curriculum documents and willingness to invest time in collaborative planning.

The willingness of preschool and school teachers to work collaboratively is a central feature of an effective approach to integration. No staff across any of the sites indicated that they were unwilling to work collaboratively. Indeed, most indicated that they would welcome greater opportunity to do so. However, they also nominated a range of issues that impinged on these opportunities.

The availability of staff presented challenges in a number of sites. In some cases, fluctuating numbers of enrolments had an impact on staffing numbers, with some teaching positions being lost and others gained. The move to universal access meant that some preschool educators who were previously employed part-time, had been asked to increase their hours of work as well as the way they spend those hours. For many, this has been a positive change. However, for other staff, it has created difficulties around the availability of planning time as well as access to teaching-release. Where a combination of staff work part-time, finding a common time to meet or plan has also presented some difficulties.

It's really quite difficult [to meet]...we have staff meetings and then [some staff] are not here on some days... I don't seem to have the opportunity to meet with the teachers because they meet on a Monday and I'm not here on a Monday. [preschool educator]

Time was raised as an issue in many ways. These included the scheduling of integration at a time that fitted into the school timetable; time for staff to plan; teachers' non-teaching time; time to talk with parents; and time for children to be together. In at least some of the sites, integration occurred during the time scheduled for teacher release, that is, non-teaching time. This meant that either the preschool or the early years of school teacher was responsible for the integrated group while the other teacher was released. While this arrangement meant that it was possible to provide the required release time, it did not promote team teaching or collaborative planning.

Teachers across most sites indicated difficulties in finding time for collaborative planning. This was particularly an issue for teachers who did not feel confident with the new curriculum documents.

it's time mainly...it's a whole new head set and... it takes ages to get your head around the whole thing...we're just getting our head around the Australian Curriculum and then to add another document and to do that as well... [early years of school teacher]

When asked to nominate changes that would make integration more effective, time featured in comments from participants in all sites.

Time for teachers to really, genuinely collaborate rather than ... it has been a bit superficial ... but to talk about outcomes and things like that ... actually take the time to sit down together and focus in on *today we are doing this* and ... having some genuine, hypothetical conversation about *what if, what might happen, this is my understanding, this aspect of the early years learning framework, what's your thought on...* some professional conversations. That's all about time. [preschool educator]

While educators expressed willingness to work collaboratively and regarded this as a core element of an effective approach to integration, they also highlighted the challenges of time, familiarity across the curriculum documents, willingness of others to engage, and the availability of staff. Where collaboration occurred, it was regarded as beneficial.

[collaboration] supports teachers to think a little bit about how they're going to plan and differentiate their pedagogy... it's really good, just for the professional practice and for the learning again... it's opened their eyes up to the broader range of practice... It supports them to develop a richer working relationship, a co-worker type relationship and a theme. But also I think it deepens their thoughts about what constitutes good practice.[school principal]

So I know, as a team, we have developed...the quality of our relationships are better, not because we spent another year together but because we've addressed certain things that make for good working relationships in school. [preschool educator]

### ***How have the Early Years Learning Framework and The Australian Curriculum informed the development of an integrated program?***

In both surveys, participants were asked to rate their understanding of the *Early Years Learning Framework* and the *Australian Curriculum*. As may be expected, preschool teachers reported greater knowledge of the *Early Years Learning Framework* and school teachers reported greater familiarity with the *Australian Curriculum*. Perhaps more surprisingly, around one-third of participants in the final survey reported that they only had a weak understanding of the *Early Years Learning Framework* while almost half reported that they had a weak understanding of the *Australian Curriculum*.

Overall, most teachers had a working knowledge of the curriculum documents they accessed most often. While there was some cross-over knowledge of the 'other' curriculum document, this was the exception rather than the rule. Several teachers indicated that a sound understanding of their own document was more important for them, and they sought opportunities to share both the document and their knowledge with teachers in the 'other' context.

The importance of time for collaboration was highlighted again in these conversations, as teachers sought opportunities to share their knowledge of various curriculum documents and to use these together in their planning for integration. In several instances, it was noted that teachers expected to extend their knowledge about the different curriculum documents through interaction with colleagues. One teacher referred to the importance of *getting our heads around and thinking really, about how we can make the connections there*. Evidence from several sites indicated that teachers were considering ways in which the two curriculum documents could be connected. Despite this, there remained a strong focus on the differences across the documents and the potential implications of these, as indicated in the following exchange:

I just wish that they had made the Australian Curriculum come down to [preschool] or made [the EYLF] go up. It's insane having the two separate. It really frustrates me because they want us to be part of schools and yet they always make us different. I love the EYLF, it's the best learning framework I've ever had to work with... I feel really comfortable with the EYLF. My parents know the terminology... learning

portfolios... and different learning outcomes...but we've been trying to link it to the Australian Curriculum... [preschool educator]

But it does link... and it's about how you teach. I find to link it, it is more in how you teach. The Australian Curriculum is more about what you need to teach...[early years of school teacher]

Across the sites there was recognition of the different emphases across the *Early Years Learning Framework* and the *Australia Curriculum*. The *Early Years Learning Framework* was characterised as *play-based, focusing on children's self-identity, building confidence and exploration*. In contrast, the *Australian Curriculum* was characterised as *pushing outcomes, pressured, and focused on kids achieving outcomes*. A theme across the sites was concern with what was regarded as an increased focus on outcomes in the first years of school.

We are actually always asking that question to ourselves, are we expecting them to know too much? You're always worrying ... that they're going to get to where they need to get...there's more and more pressure. [preschool educator]

While I fully agree with play based activities I'm on about purpose and direction and having some end points because I think we can't ... If we understand the rapid acquisition of the knowledge these people are capable of I don't want to see that frustrated or unnecessarily delayed. I think we need to give them every opportunity to develop. [school principal]

Some teachers noted that integration had resulted in more formality and structure. Others noted that it provided opportunities for older children to engage in play-based experiences.

... we went from informal to formal. That's where we changed. So the preschoolers came to my classroom once a week and we did more formal lessons so they could get used to the idea of having to sit and do a whole lesson, rather than just getting up and choosing activities and moving between them at their own pace. And the fact that it is from Reception to 3. I mean, if it had been a Reception/1 class it would be very much more play-based, but it's not nearly as play-based as it could have been. So it is quite a bit different for them to go from preschool to school. [early years of school teacher]

I see the Receptions come in [to preschool] and they're excited too because they get to paint and play with the play dough and they get to do things that they miss.[preschool educator]

Despite a strong sense of support for integration, there was also a note of caution in the comments from some teachers. One asked:

How do we seriously do integration? We're running mini- [school] programs in preschool classes for integration. We're not using preschool language, so I'm not really sure that what we are doing is preschool. They are more like mini-[school] classes. This is an issue because we do not want to lose early childhood pedagogy. [I'm worried] that we will lose early childhood pedagogy because of the expectations of the Foundation stage.

Over the course of the trial, educators reported a developing familiarity with the two curriculum documents. However, there remained a sense that their 'own' document was the one they need to know. Several educators relied on their colleagues to contribute knowledge of the 'other' document to their planning for integration. From both preschool and school educators came recognition that the integrated programs tended to emphasise the Australian Curriculum, particularly in terms of content and subject areas, resulting in pressure to 'push-down' school curriculum into preschool contexts.

## **Discussion**

The overall conclusion from the evaluation was that integrating preschool with the first years of school can promote access to a quality preschool program for small numbers of children living in rural and remote communities through their local school site when:

- there are small numbers of preschool children involved;
- preschool and school teachers work collaboratively in partnership to develop an integrated program;
- parents are supportive of the educators; and
- organisational and leadership support promotes collaborative planning and team teaching.

The evaluation also highlighted some cautions in promoting integration. These relate to two of the principles outlined by Wong et al. (2012) as characteristic of effective integration. The first principle emphasises the importance of a clear sense of purpose, shared philosophies and objectives. Across the IPWS trial sites, educators demonstrated a common purpose – to ensure access to high quality preschool programs for all children in rural and remote areas. However, they also recognised the differences between preschool and school contexts, particularly their philosophical and pedagogical bases. Developing and implementing an integrated program required willingness to engage with educators and their practices in the ‘other’ setting. During the trial, the educators achieved a great deal as they worked together to develop shared philosophies and objectives. For some, this meant grappling with different approaches to curriculum, different demands and different ways of working. For most of the educators involved, this was the start of the journey to build shared philosophies.

The second principle to characterise effective integration (Wong et al. 2012) involves congruent and compatible processes across setting boundaries. In this trial, preschool and school educators were required to work collaboratively to generate an integrated program that reflected both the preschool and school curriculum frameworks. Educators noted differences in their curriculum approaches and the challenges of bringing these together. Of particular concern was the pushing-down of school curriculum and the sense that, without vigilance and genuine collaboration, integrated preschool provision could become another year of school.

Collaboration was regarded as an achievable aim across the trial sites. However, the challenges associated with effective collaboration were also noted: particularly issues of time and willingness to collaborate. These reflect the findings of Roopnarine and Johnson (1983) and Desimone et al. (2004). The importance of collaboration becomes clear when the many ways of understanding and enacting integration are noted. Without exploration of these, it is quite likely that with the best of intentions, different people will be working towards different ends (Press et al. 2010). Levels of pedagogical integration, curriculum integration and integrated planning rely on the commitment of educators to work collaboratively in the development and implementation of an integrated program that reflects the approaches and outcomes of both the *Early Years Learning Framework* and the *Australian Curriculum*. Even when educators demonstrated this commitment, they noted the importance of time – to develop connections, reflect, share perspectives and understandings, and consider different ways of doing things – in developing their own approaches to integration (Pelletier 2012).

## **Conclusion**

The provision of universal access to preschool is a political and policy imperative across Australia since there is ample evidence to suggest that participation in a quality centre-based preschool program is beneficial to social, emotional and academic wellbeing as children start school and is associated with later school success. Children in rural and remote communities do not have the same access to preschool provisions as children from urban or regional areas and such provision can be seen as a social justice imperative. An integrated preschool-school program provides one way in which equity of access might be achieved. However, as the data suggest, there are many caveats,

particularly around the resourcing of the integration, the pedagogical entitlements of the children and the professional entitlements of the staff. Nonetheless, an integrated preschool-school program has the potential to provide opportunities to all involved to develop, implement and enjoy quality preschool programs.

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