Abstract: Policymakers, researchers and educators around the world have acknowledged the importance of children’s transition to school, both as a significant life event and as a factor in future engagement with education. As a result, much attention has been directed towards researching transition experiences, developing policies to support positive transitions, and implementing a range of transition practices and programmes aimed to promote effective transitions. At the heart of many of these has been th...
Transition to school: Revisiting the bridge metaphor

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Introduction

The differences between early childhood education in the prior-to-school years and the compulsory years of school have been highlighted by many researchers and educators. On one level, prior-to-school and school settings reflect different visions and cultures, as well as different histories, goals and purposes, different pedagogical approaches and methods, different demands and expectations (Bennett 2013; Neuman 2002; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) 2006). Differences are also evident in governance structures, administrative auspices, regulations and monitoring regimes (Neuman 2002). In many countries, there are also different professional requirements, professional recognition and conditions of employment for educators (Pianta 2010). Further, structural differences can be reflected in preferred ways of communication, both professional and with those engaged in the setting, as well as different professional languages and expectations (Moss 2013; Neuman 2002).

Given the raft of differences, it is not surprising that a gap (Dunlop 2007; Fabian 2002) or chasm (Peters in press), has been described as existing between prior-to-school and school education. Recognising this gap, recommendations of Starting Strong reports (OECD 2001;
2006), have acknowledged the differences between prior-to-school and school settings and urged that “attention should be given to transition challenges [with] a greater focus on building bridges and curricula in both systems” (2006, 59).

The term bridge has many meanings. In the field of music, a bridge can provide support for the strings of some instruments, or constitute a passage of music that connects different movements. In nautical terms, the bridge is the position from which a ship’s movement is controlled. Dentists use bridges to connect replacement and existing teeth, and engineers construct bridges to provide passages over gaps, rivers and chasms (Oxford University Press 2006). These meanings highlight notions that a bridge between preschool and school can promote connections, particularly between the familiar and the unfamiliar; provide support as a passage is navigated and serve as a platform for guiding that passage.

Transition as a bridge

The metaphor of a bridge has many connotations in relation to the transition to school. As examples, Dunlop and Fabian (2007) and Broström (2007) describe transition programs as bridging activities that narrow the gap between preschool and school; and Pianta (2004) describes relationships with and around children as providing the bridge to school; Neuman (2002) outlines the importance of bridging children’s learning across the different settings, and there is considerable focus on promoting continuity between prior-to-school and school contexts (Barblett, Barratt-Pugh, Kilgallon, and Maloney 2011; OECD 2006; Petriwskyj, Thorpe, and Tayler 2005), by providing a bridge, and smoothing the transition to school (Rosier and McDonald 2011).

Garpelin (in press) applies the bridge metaphor to the Swedish pre-school class – “a child-centred and school preparatory preschool experience within the context of primary school,
where children prepare for school in a playful way” (Ackesjö 2013a). Most Swedish preschool classes are situated on school sites, and guided by school curriculum, but with a focus on active and experiential pedagogy (OECD 2006; Skolverket 2004). They represent a move away from preschool, but are not considered a year of school. Garpelin (in press), asks “Does the preschool class have a role as a ‘bridge’ between the worlds of the preschool and the school?” or does the child spend “a year on the bridge” between the worlds of preschool and school?

These questions prompt some examination of the bridge metaphor. The various notions of bridges do suggest that children’s journeys to school may be guided, supported and smoothed by passage across a bridge. However, the nature of the bridge is often unexplored. For example: how is the bridge constructed? Is it a temporary, or permanent, structure? Does the bridge support two-way traffic? Are there multiple lanes on the bridge, or is every journey expected to follow the same path and occur at the same speed? Are some lanes actually fast tracks? Are there tolls or gates on the bridge? How do lanes merge on the bridge? What provisions are there for emergencies? Is the bridge a place of transit, or a meeting place?

Garpelin and his colleagues (Garpelin, Ekström, Kallberg, and Sandberg 2008) note that attempts to make the transition as smooth as possible can also contribute to uncertainty, as children and families find themselves ‘in between’ preschool and school, on the bridge. Using van Gennep’s (1960) description, the transition to school can be considered a rite of passage, acknowledging the departure from one phase of life and arrival in another phase. Three phases contribute to thinking about rites of passage: preliminal rites (rites of separation, as people detach from the existing group); liminal (or threshold rites, where people are in-between states, having left one group or status, but not yet become part of another); and postliminal rites (where people become incorporated into the new group,
assume the new status and identify what goes with being a member of this group). In this sense, being on the bridge represents, for Garpelin et al. (2008), the in-between or liminal state, where children are no longer considered preschool children, but are not yet considered school students.

The notion of being ‘in-between’ as children move from home or prior-to-school setting to school is also captured in theories of border crossing (Giroux 2005; Peters in press). From this perspective, children making the transition to school enter borderlands as they identify borders between preschool and school and move between these. Labelling transition to school as a time of border crossing focuses attention on the nature of the borders themselves (Newman and Paasi, 1998), the potentially inclusive and exclusive functions of borders, and the credentials required to cross borders (Dockett, Petriwskyj and Perry, in press).

If transition practices construct a bridge to help cross borders, it is appropriate to question how and with what it is constructed, who owns and maintains the bridge, and to identify any potential gatekeepers or supporters standing on that bridge. Equally important are questions of how children experience their time on the bridge (Ackesjö 2013b). In their New Zealand study, Peters and her colleagues (Hartley, Rogers, Smith, Peters, and Carr 2012), addressed some of these questions as they explored ways of building bridges and enhancing border crossing experiences. Results highlighted the importance of relationships between educators in both sectors, strategies for promoting learning connections and a sense of belonging for children and families at school, as well as community recognition of the importance of transition.

The focus on relationships features in a range of contemporary research around transition to school (Dockett and Perry 2009; Griebel and Niesel 2013; Hamre and Pianta 2001). While
positive relationships between and among children, peers, families and educators are all important in supporting transitions to school, relationships between educators are highlighted in reference to building bridges between prior-to-school and school settings. In particular, there have been calls for educators in prior-to-school and school settings to build relationships that support a “strong and equal partnership” (Bennett 2013, 52). In his critique of the relationships between settings, Moss (2013) draws on the work of Dahlberg and Lenz-Taguchi (1994), to incorporate this notion of partnership into a “vision of a meeting place” (Moss 2013, 19), where educators work together to “illuminate the cultural encounter between school and pre-school, as well as the pedagogical possibilities and risks involved in an integration of the two school forms” (Moss 2013, 20). The meeting place is conceptualised as a location for reflection, analysis and critique, promoting the construction of shared meanings, as the knowledge, culture and transitions of the different sectors are valued and respected, and new pedagogical practice is generated:

the concept of an educational meeting place opens up…the possibility of border crossing … it can help to realise the proposition that … early childhood institutions… should be, first and foremost, places for political and ethical practice … the meeting place creates a new space for participatory democratic practice, inviting the inclusion not only of educators, but of all concerned with education as a public and community project. (Moss 2013, 45)

The meeting place could well be located on the ‘transition’ bridge.

In the following discussion, we revisit the bridge metaphor and its potential to inform theoretical and conceptual approaches to transition. We do this through the consideration of two recent projects on transition to school: the German Brückenjahr project (The bridge year
Background to educational systems in Germany and Australia

In both Germany and Australia, early childhood education has been characterised as segmented and structured in such a way as to separate prior-to-school and early school education. In both countries, prior-to-school and school education have, until recently, been auspiced by different government departments: social and community services and education, respectively. Prior-to-school services, such as kindergartens, and school systems are grounded in different histories and approaches such that prior-to-school services have been regarded mainly as voluntary, supplementary services to families, providing support and care, and schools have involved compulsory attendance and a strongly regulated curriculum. One consequence is that two distinct educational professions are considered to be engaged in early childhood education: prior-to-school educators and school teachers. A further consequence is that “when children move from preschool to primary school … this involves a transition between two distinct systems with regard to political responsibility” (Arndt, Rothe, Urban, and Werning 2013, 25).

Recently, structures have changed in both Germany and Australia and there have been developments – structural and curricular – that have aimed to bring the two early childhood education sectors closer together. In Australia, the first national early childhood curriculum framework was introduced (Department of Education, Employment and Workforce Relations (DEEWR) 2009). This curriculum framework promotes learning outcomes for children from birth to five-years-of-age and through to the transition to school. It describes a number of
principles of early childhood pedagogy, including an emphasis on providing for continuity in experiences and enabling children to have successful transitions (DEEWR 2009, 14).

The term Schulfähigkeit – school readiness – has dominated discussion about the transition to school in Germany. However, recent concerns about the reliability of readiness assessments and growing international attention to transition processes (Dockett and Perry 2009; Griebel 2007; LaParo and Pianta 2000; Minsel and Griebel 2007), have resulted in a change of focus. One consequence has been greater awareness of ecological perspectives of school readiness, particularly the importance of interconnections between home, kindergartens and schools (Kammermeyer 2004). Within both Germany and Australia, the notion of ‘bridge’ has been used as a representation for transition to school. In the remainder of this paper, we consider an example from each of Germany and Australia and investigate the use of the bridge metaphor.

**The German Brückenjahr project**

The purpose of the Lower Saxony Brückenjahr project is to strengthen the connections between kindergartens and primary schools and to make early learning the collective business of educators in both settings. A number of sub-projects fit under the umbrella of Brückenjahr, and, since 2007, 570 model-projects have been undertaken: all are focused on building bridges between kindergartens and schools to support continuity of learning (Niedersächsischen Kultusministeriums 2013).
The project has focused on building connections among the various participants in transition. For example, one project has addressed parent engagement in school, providing a series of workshops for parents and inviting families to participate in school events and festivals. Another project has promoted connections between children, with the school children and their teachers writing to the kindergarten children to explain what school was like and what was likely to happen when they started school. Outcomes from these projects included building shared understandings of children and school among families, educators and the children themselves. Hence a one-way ‘bridge’ was created from school children to kindergarten children. In some cases, this ‘bridge’ was made bi-directional through the kindergarten children writing or sending audio messages to the school children asking them about what it is like to be at school. This has also proved quite successful in a similar Australian project (Perry & Dockett 2011).

Shared professional stances were the focus of several other projects. In one of these, educators from both settings formed project teams to observe and document children’s learning. As a result, the teams embraced the concept of ‘learning stories’ (Carr and Lee 2012), and the kindergarten educators developed portfolios for children, consisting of learning stories to highlight children’s competence, learning and dispositions. Collaboration resulted in the adoption of the same approach by school educators. These portfolios accompanied the children to school, and were used both as ‘icebreakers’ in discussions about school readiness, and as the basis for ongoing communication with educators, families and the child. Children, who had been involved in documenting their own learning, were excited to share the portfolios with school educators and to talk about their kindergarten experiences with teachers and new classmates. This project illustrates the possibility of a multi-lane (children and teachers as complete groups and perhaps as individuals or smaller groups) and
bi-directional ‘bridge’. In many ways, the learning stories provided a meeting place where all participants could gather to share their own achievements and celebrate these and those of their colleagues and peers.

Key findings from the evaluation of the Brückenjahr projects were that opportunities were provided to:

- implement and institutionalise cooperation at the structural level, across both kindergartens and schools (building bridges between sectors);
- establish complementary educational processes that formed the subject of ongoing reflection and development (bi-directional bridges);
- develop shared educational understandings and perspectives (bridges as meeting places);
- generate compatible approaches for observation and documentation of educational processes (meeting places and removal of barriers on the bridges);
- promote parental involvement, with a focus on assuming some shared responsibility within the transition to school (multi-lane bridges);
- engage in collective professional development, bringing together kindergarten educators and school teachers (meeting places); and
- support ongoing project work that has the potential to cement ties (extending beyond the bridges into the borderlands).

(Projekt Brückenjahr 2012)

**Australian and International Transition to School Position Statement**
The *Transition to School: Position Statement* was developed by an international group of researchers, during a series of intensive workshops held in Australia in 2010. The processes involved in developing the statement were designed to stimulate professional dialogue between researchers, educators and policy-makers, generating a document to inform and guide future research, policy and practice in the area of transition to school. The statement was both a response to the persistent international focus on the discourse of readiness, and an attempt to refocus attention to the processes of transition, as children started school (Dockett and Perry in press).

The *Transition to School: Position Statement* introduces the central constructs of:

- opportunities;
- aspirations;
- expectations; and
- entitlements

Each of these is explored in relation to children, families, educators, communities and school systems and the links (‘bridges’) among them.

The *Transition to School: Position Statement* was developed originally as a text document. As part of the process of synthesising the research that prompted the initial document and the feedback it generated, and as strategy to promote reflexivity, a visual artist was commissioned to represent transition to school. The image entitled *Many bridges* (Figure 1) now forms an essential part of the statement, providing a visual tool to stimulate reflection and discussion. This image highlights the many bridges that may be constructed and/or
traversed as children make the transition to school – as well as the many journeys made. In
Many bridges, some journeys follow well-worn paths; some are perilous; some have strong
supports; others seem very tenuous; some children make their way to the bridge alone; others
have company. There is no expectation that all children use the same bridge in the same
ways. As well, consideration is given to how other people traverse the various bridges they
meet during the transition to school process.
Discussion

In both Germany and Australia, the development of relationships between the prior-to-school and school sectors as children make the transition to school has been seen as a priority.

Strong relationships at this time go well beyond the limited “readying for school” relationship described by Moss (2013, 9), sometimes generating a “strong and equal partnership” (Moss 2013, 14), or extending to the “vision of a meeting place” (Moss 2013, 19).

The bridge metaphor used to describe the actual and potential connections between school and prior-to-school settings in both the Australian and German examples demonstrates the dynamic and diverse nature of transition experiences, while also acknowledging the roles of many players. The Brückenjahr project, by its name and actions, has generated spaces for the cultures of preschool and school to come together. These spaces can be conceptualised in
many ways as ‘bridges’, particularly as ‘meeting places’ between the two sectors; that is, as in integral part of the ‘bridge’ joining them. The Transition to School: Position Statement has used the notion of many bridges to prompt critical reflection on transition practices “in the context of social justice, human rights (including children’s rights), educational reform and ethical agendas” (ETC 2011, 1). Questions such as “Do children choose onto which bridge they embark?”, “How do families decide which bridge suits them?”, “Are all bridges seen as equal?”, and “Why do the bridges all appear to be one way, except, perhaps, for the most risky?” have all been raised in discussion with educators about the imagery contained in Many bridges.

Underpinning both of these projects is recognition that a divide still exists between prior-to-school and school sectors. The divide reflects many differences in the sectors and, despite calls for integrated and united services, the different histories, philosophies, structures and cultures of the sectors suggest that the divide will remain for some time. The need for a bridge or bridges to connect the sectors is clear given the aim to present transition to school as a time of continuity as well as change (Rimm-Kaufmann and Pianta 2000).

As well, there remains a sense of transition to school as a process of border crossing, moving from the known to the unknown. This is evident in the image from the Transition to School: Position Statement, where the ‘destination’ side of the ‘divide’ or ‘chasm’ traversed by the bridges is unknown.

Both the Brückenjahr project and the Transition to School: Position Statement indicate ways in which the metaphorical model of transition to school as a bridge, or bridges, constructed and traversed by children, families, communities, educators, and educational systems, is a
powerful way of viewing transitions and considering what makes them successful. However, they also provoke further questions.

The *Brückenjahr* project highlights the importance of connections between settings and seeks to provide some shared ground in which these connections can be developed. The various projects also illustrate the different starting points, or knowledge backgrounds, that educators from the different sectors bring with them. While the legislative impetus is to promote collaboration across sectors, the projects demonstrate that it is the willingness of individuals to share their expertise and to learn from others that are keys to building connections that support positive transitions to school.

Despite representing many ways to make the transition to school, the *Many bridges* image presents bridge-crossing as a one-way activity. This seems to be the way that children, as well as many adults, conceptualise the transition to school – children move from home or prior-to-school setting to school and, once at school, there is no going back – much as the linear notion of rites of passage can be conceptualised. However, the diagram does not represent the potential for ongoing relationships and exchange that characterised several of the experiences in *Brückenjahr* project. Such interactions may be based on efforts to promote curriculum continuity, continuity in relationships or support, as well as strategies to facilitate the genuine integration of prior-to-school and school programs. The Swedish pre-school class could well be an example of this.

The notion of the bridge as a meeting place, a location for the construction of shared meanings and new pedagogies, provides potential to explore not only the nature of the bridge, and how it is constructed, but also who is on the bridge – who is there to guide, steer, or even oversee the process of transition to ensure that all make a safe journey, are provided with
appropriate help on their way, and that any barricades or gates encountered can be navigated. Rather than suggesting that there is one person to facilitate, or one way to make the transition to school, this approach urges collaboration between those engaged in the transition – children, families, educators, other professional and community members – to co-construct a bridge that is relevant for the context and those who exist within that context. Such an approach rejects linear or hierarchical models of transition, and replaces these with a social model of transition, where relationships and connections are central.

**Conclusion**

There are many extant models for the bridge metaphor. The iconic Sydney Harbour Bridge was constructed simultaneously from both shores, with much rejoicing when it met in the middle. London Bridge has been many bridges, as new replaced old. The famous Krämerbrücke (grocer bridge) in Erfurt, Germany, has also been rebuilt many times. The most recent re-construction, around 1500, saw the wooden structure replaced with stone. As many other bridges, it has been a focal feature of the community – a place where people lived, shopped, and met. The subject of the novel, *The Bridge on the Drina* (Andrić 1945), has been the object of territorial disputes, witness to atrocities, the source of conflict and part of the resolution of conflict. Each of these bridges has also been a meeting place. Much is to be gained from conceptualising the transition to school as a theoretical, conceptual, pedagogical and professional meeting place. Such a meeting place can be visualised as being on a bridge, encouraging participants in the transition to school to meet on middle, neutral ground where participants are involved in the liminal phase of the transition process and are not trespassing on the territories of either the source or the destination. The ‘bridge’ takes on the important role of being the host of such meeting places and the responsibility of all involved in the transition to school. For, within this metaphor, the bridge is the central
construct that allows the various participants to come together in an equitable manner. This requires all involved in the transition to work together to build, maintain, repair or re-construct, the bridges. The strength of the bridges will depend on the connections made, the interactions encouraged, and the strength of the supports and anchors on either side.

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