

Briefings

Thought leadership for the independent schooling sector

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RESEARCH FEATURE: Leading for Continuity of Learning

Foreword

Across Queensland's independent schooling sector, school leaders share a common goal: creating the conditions that enable every child to thrive. While schools differ in size, context and philosophy, they are united by a commitment to supporting positive learning, wellbeing and engagement outcomes throughout a child's educational journey.

Increasingly, research is highlighting the importance of continuity of learning across the early years. Children's experiences before they enter formal schooling shape not only their readiness to learn, but also their sense of belonging, confidence and connection. As this *Briefings* demonstrates, continuity is not simply about preparing children for school. It is about recognising and valuing the rich experiences, relationships and knowledge they bring with them, and ensuring these foundations are acknowledged and built upon as they move between educational settings.

In *Leading for Continuity of Learning*, authors Fran Myers-Baird and Audrey Fellowes, with contributions from Dr Amie Fabry, explore the critical role educational leadership plays in strengthening connections between early childhood education and care services and schools. Their discussion highlights the growing evidence that collaboration, shared understanding and intentional leadership can enhance children's educational experiences and support positive long-term outcomes.

Particularly compelling is the concept of mattering; the notion that children flourish when they feel valued, recognised and connected within

their learning communities. The article illustrates how leaders can foster environments where children and families experience a genuine sense of belonging, while also creating opportunities for educators across settings to work together more effectively.

As schools continue to respond to the increasingly complex needs of children and families, the insights presented in this *Briefings* offer practical considerations for strengthening continuity of learning. By embracing collaborative and intentional approaches, school leaders can help ensure every child experiences a connected pathway that supports learning, wellbeing and lifelong success.



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Introduction

Across the independent schooling sector, schools operate within diverse contexts shaped by differing philosophies, pedagogical approaches, and community expectations. In many cases, this includes the provision of early childhood education and care. Schools share priorities focused on supporting positive learning, wellbeing, and engagement outcomes throughout children’s educational pathways.

Early childhood, broadly recognised as the period from birth to eight years of age, is a significant period of development. Participation in quality early childhood education and care, together with continuity between settings, provides a strong foundation for positive outcomes from school entry through to adulthood (Australian Government, n.d.; Schweinhart et al., 2005).

Children arrive at school with a rich history of experiences, relationships and learning that shape how they engage with new environments. Understanding these experiences is important for supporting continuity across educational settings. These experiences and relationships contribute to emotional regulation, which is strongly associated with social functioning outcomes (Dockett & Perry, 2020; Thümmler et al., 2022).

Early childhood services and schools contribute to children’s trajectories over time. Supporting children’s development requires attention to interconnected social, emotional, physical, cognitive, language, and communication domains. While these settings share a commitment to children’s learning and wellbeing, they operate within distinct frameworks, pedagogies, curricula and legislative contexts that shape how these are understood and enacted in practice.

As children move between environments, differences in practice may contribute to discontinuity of learning. Boyle et al. (2018) emphasise the role of intentional leadership and collaboration in strengthening continuity to support positive outcomes for children and families. Central to these efforts, is a shared understanding of the experiences and relationships that support children to feel that they matter within the places that shape their development.

This *Briefings* considers continuity of learning as a shared responsibility across settings and examines the role of educational leadership in strengthening connections between early childhood and school communities.

Mattering Across the Early Childhood Continuum

Early experiences form the foundation for lifelong learning and wellbeing. Increasingly, research indicates that high-quality early childhood education acts as a protective factor, supporting children’s development and mitigating the impacts of disadvantage (Australian Government, n.d).

Mattering is the experience of being valued and recognised as someone whose presence and contributions count. It reflects a child’s sense of importance and belonging within the relationships that surround them. The concept of mattering is gaining recognition as a vital component of children’s development, grounded in research and practice. More recent studies, across psychology, neuroscience, and education further confirm mattering as a core need, demonstrating its protective effects on wellbeing, stress, motivation, and prosocial development (Dahl et al., 2024; Flett, 2025).

Early childhood education and care services, including long day care, kindergarten and outside school hours care, form a foundational component of the broader education system. These environments are relational in nature, shaping children’s development through the opportunities in which they participate and fostering confidence, engagement, wellbeing and learning. As children’s outcomes are influenced by a range of interconnected factors, collaboration across education, health and community sectors is important in supporting children’s development and wellbeing (Moore, 2024).

Findings from the longitudinal study conducted by Schweinhart et al. (2005) demonstrate that the benefits of high-quality early childhood education can extend well beyond the early years, influencing



educational attainment, employment, wellbeing and social participation into adulthood. Population-level data from six cycles of the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) indicate that participation in kindergarten is associated with stronger outcomes for children. Children who attend quality education and care services tend to enter school with stronger developmental outcomes, with these advantages continuing through the early years of schooling (Australian Government, n.d).

Dockett and Perry (2021) note that children participate in multiple transitions throughout early childhood. These include horizontal transitions within routines, vertical transitions between educational contexts, and ecological transitions associated with changes in relationships and environments. Understanding transition in this broader sense positions the move to school as part of a child’s ongoing journey, rather than an isolated event. This perspective emphasises the importance of recognising that the pathway of children’s learning is shaped by the impact of multiple communities.

Recognising and building on children’s experiences, relationships and funds of knowledge can support a sense of belonging for children and families, which has been identified as a key

indicator of successful transition and a foundation for ongoing engagement and success at school. Alignment across settings, including relational approaches, shared understandings of children’s development and continuity of expectations, may further strengthen transitions and support positive outcomes for children (Fabry et al., 2022a; OECD, 2017).

Research consistently demonstrates that the quality of early childhood programs is a significant factor in children’s outcomes. Effective pedagogical leadership strengthens educators’ capacity to implement high-quality practices and supports positive outcomes. Given the relationship between quality and effective leadership, intentional leadership can support continuity of learning by building on children’s prior knowledge and fostering collaboration between early childhood services and schools (Fabry, 2024; Harrison et al., 2019).

For school leaders, an understanding of the early childhood continuum can inform decision-making. This may support more informed approaches to pedagogical and strategic decisions that strengthen children’s holistic development through responsive resourcing, service provision and future planning that meets the needs of children and families.

Participation in quality early childhood education and care, together with continuity between settings, provides a strong foundation for positive outcomes from school entry through to adulthood.

Australian Government, n.d.; Schweinhart et al., 2005

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The Role of Educational Leadership

Recent Australian research by Page et al. (2025) extends on the understanding that ongoing relationships among families, educators and communities can support continuity between the learning environments children engage with. This reinforces the critical role of educational leadership across early childhood education and schools in fostering quality provision and the conditions that support continuity in children’s development (Fabry, 2024).

Although leadership structures vary by context, both early childhood services and schools rely on leaders who can connect people and build shared understandings of children’s development. Fabry (2024) conceptualises leadership as extending beyond formal roles and responsibilities. Grounded in relational leadership, it is enacted through relationships and bringing diverse perspectives together to support shared understanding and purposeful improvement. Within school settings, deliberate attention to early childhood expertise may strengthen connections among children’s educational experiences and support continuity of learning.

The Education and Care Services National Regulations require approved early childhood services to designate a suitably qualified and experienced individual as the Educational Leader. This role guides the development and implementation of the educational

program within the National Quality Framework and supports practice through reflection and inquiry. Through relational and pedagogical leadership, Educational Leaders build educator capability and influence how they interpret children’s learning, make decisions and engage in professional dialogue across the service (Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority, 2019).

Within primary schools, educational leadership is typically distributed amongst principals, curriculum leaders, year or stage coordinators and specialist leaders. Within the early years, research highlights the contribution pedagogical leadership makes to strengthening reflective practice, supporting ongoing professional learning for educators, and facilitating meaningful pedagogical improvement (Fabry et al., 2022b).

Educational leadership can contribute to conditions that support the sharing of insights and more coherent approaches to children’s learning across contexts. This reflects the understanding that children’s development is shaped by the quality of relationships and environments, rather than occurring through a linear progression. By fostering professional dialogue, collaboration and the exchange of perspectives, leaders can strengthen shared understandings of children’s holistic development.

Opportunities to Enhance Continuity of Learning

At a system level, continuity of learning can be strengthened when early childhood and schools work together. In Australia, this collaboration has been associated with opportunities to strengthen children’s experiences as they move between environments. Fabry et al. (2022b) emphasise the importance of continuity of learning and development in supporting effective transitions, reinforcing the value of connected approaches that promote coherence across the continuum.

Educational Leaders in early childhood services and curriculum leaders in primary schools can play a key role in strengthening continuity of learning by bridging professional expertise from each setting, creating opportunities for more connected educational experiences. This is not about replicating practices, but rather recognising, building on and scaffolding approaches that support children during transitions.

Drawing on Diverse Perspectives

Multidisciplinary collaboration creates opportunities for education, health and community professionals to share knowledge, data and expertise. Bringing together diverse perspectives can deepen understanding, support responsive approaches and inform decision-making that strengthen learning and wellbeing.

The Whole Child

Building shared understandings of children’s development supports greater coherence between early childhood services and schools. This includes recognising children’s strengths and support needs in social, emotional, physical, cognitive, language and communication domains. Focusing on children’s development as a continuum can provide a shared foundation for transdisciplinary collaboration.

Strengthening Connections across Settings

Early childhood services and schools each hold valuable perspectives on children’s identities.

By working collaboratively across settings, educators can support more connected transition experiences, helping children and families experience greater connection and belonging, while contributing to positive lifelong outcomes.

Enhancing Transitions, Belonging and Mattering

When continuity of learning is maintained throughout children’s educational pathways, they are more likely to develop a sense of connection and mattering within their learning community. This can strengthen wellbeing and participation, supporting a successful transition into formal schooling for children and families.

The following case study illustrates how these principles can be enacted through an early childhood leadership role in practice.

Case Study

In one Australian independent primary school, a leadership role was introduced to support continuity of learning and pedagogy across kindergarten, outside school hours care, and the early years of school (P–2). The role formed part of a broader strategic effort to support more coherent experiences for children and strengthen connections across the settings that shaped their development.

Earlier in the year, the leader facilitated professional dialogue with teaching teams to support shared understandings of children’s development. These conversations encouraged reflection on the role of play, relationships, and progressions in shaping learning throughout children’s educational journeys.

The leader also met regularly with families and prospective parents, developing a mutual perspective of the significance of the early years. These interactions influenced how families engaged with the school, contributing to patterns of participation and connection over time.

At a whole-school level, the leader contributed to planning and resource allocation, providing an early childhood perspective on decisions relating to staffing, transitions, timetables, learning environments, and assessment practices. This supported consideration of how school structures and resources aligned with the needs of young learners and contributed to a more cohesive and connected experience for children and families. The role also served as a conduit between educators and school leadership, ensuring an early childhood perspective informed planning, decision-making and future directions.

Teachers increasingly engaged with the leader to support their practice as they balanced curriculum expectations with age-appropriate pedagogies. Through coaching, modelling, professional learning, and collaborative inquiry, the role contributed to building teacher confidence and capability.

By the end of the year, structures to support ongoing cycles of reflection and improvement had been established, with teachers engaging in shared inquiry and collective goal setting. Over time, approaches to improvement began to shift from individual effort towards a shared responsibility embedded within the school’s culture.

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Conclusion

Continuity of learning is shaped by the relationships that connect early childhood services and schools. Leadership supports collaboration, dialogue and shared understanding across environments. Within school contexts, leaders play an important role in recognising and building on children’s identities while fostering partnerships that support connected approaches to learning and wellbeing.

Variation in access to and quality of early childhood provision will influence children’s engagement at school entry. These differences highlight the importance of leaders understanding and responding to the variety of experiences and funds of knowledge children possess when they arrive at school.

As Australia approaches the 2027 AEDC collection, school leaders have an opportunity to reflect on the holistic picture of children’s development as they enter their first year of formal schooling. The AEDC provides valuable insights into how children are faring at school entry, informing local, state and national policy and investment priorities aimed at reducing developmental vulnerability over time (Australia Government, n.d.).

Strategically, school leaders can strengthen continuity by recognising children’s prior experiences and fostering collaboration across early childhood and school contexts.

Intentional leadership helps schools foster children’s sense of mattering and strengthen relationships across communities. As a result, schools can support shared understanding, promote continuity of learning, and contribute to positive outcomes for children and families.

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