

TOWARDS CONTINUITY OF LEARNING:

Rethinking Assessment



ourplace
education is the key to the door

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

Our Place acknowledges the First Nations people of Australia and Traditional Custodians of the lands that we live and work on, and recognise their continuing connection to land, water and culture. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, their Elders past, present and emerging. We are committed to working together for a brighter future.



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Foreword

Our Place seeks to remove barriers for children and families so that they have an improved chance of strong education outcomes. Continuity of Learning seeks to remove some of these barriers by creating a far more seamless learning experience for children.

The concept of continuity of learning is a key priority for Our Place. To ensure that children living in disadvantage get the best possible start in life, they must have access to high quality early learning services and schools.

The provision of high-quality education needs to involve early learning and schools coming together to support children in their learning journey. While these two systems currently achieve great outcomes for children in Victoria in their own right, there is still more to do to ensure children experience consistency and continuity in their learning journey. If children experiencing disadvantage do not experience continuity of learning in the pedagogy adopted and the curriculum implemented, then there is a risk that what they have gained in the early years may be lost when they enter the school system.

In 2021 Our Place published a paper called 'Continuity of learning: Pathways from early learning to school'. It raised awareness about the importance of such an approach and highlighted the evidence about its potential impact on children's educational outcomes. 'Towards Continuity of learning: Rethinking assessment' is the second in the continuity of learning series and explores the importance of a common approach towards assessment of children's achievement and progress across early learning and schools.

Throughout the development of this report there has been considerable interest in the concept of assessment continuity from teachers and educators, which has generated a great deal of conversation and genuine willingness to discuss the issue. While not a difficult concept to grasp conceptually, working towards this level of continuity in practice significantly challenges the status quo. The role of Our Place as the 'glue' working across both systems presents an ideal opportunity to support opportunities for open conversations to develop common understandings, shared strategies and solutions.

While this is very important work, it is not easy nor a quick fix. There currently exists two highly complex structures and approaches to assessment. To improve education outcomes for all students, particularly disadvantaged students, both sectors need to come together with a shared vision. This is only possible through a strong partnership, a shared understanding of the issue, clear communication and a common language. Nevertheless, so far, the topic has energised many and has provided a reason to come together.

I would like to thank the co-authors of this publication, Sir Kevan Collins, Professor Jane Bertrand, Associate Professor Cathrine Neilsen-Hewett and Shannon Newman, as well as Fiona McKenzie for pulling the publication together. I also appreciate the work of Judy Rose and Greg McMahon, the Our Place site teams and all the early years directors and school principals who have enthusiastically provided their insights and reflections during implementation discussions. The end product is another important piece in the conversation surrounding continuity of learning and assessment.



June McLoughlin,
Executive Director – Services, Our Place





Introduction

ABOUT OUR PLACE

Our Place is a unique cross-sectoral initiative of the Colman Education Foundation. Through the Foundation's ten-year partnership with the Victorian state government, it is implemented in ten school sites across Victoria, with the support of philanthropic partners.

Our Place's vision is to ensure that all children and families succeed in life, no matter where they live and believes that education is the key to achieving this vision. Our Place is a holistic place-based approach that uses the universal platform of schools to support the education, health and development of all children and families in disadvantaged communities. Through facilitated partnerships, schools become the central place for supports and services that can overcome many of the barriers to educational achievement.

The Our Place approach recognises that families must be able to meet children and young people's health, developmental and wellbeing needs, and that those closest to the child (especially parents) must value education and role model learning in ways that support aspirations and realise opportunities. The Our Place focus extends beyond the classroom to the broader environment for children and families, especially those experiencing disadvantage. Our Place facilitates partnerships between the school, local government, the early learning service provider and the community to enable schools to offer supports and services that will improve the lives and aspirations of children, young people and their families. Our Place also focuses on the wider service system and seeks to influence changes in policies and practices that address the structural causes of disadvantage.

This is achieved by taking a holistic approach to untapping potential – as reflected in the five elements at the heart of the approach:

- High-quality early learning, health and development

- High-quality schooling
- Engagement and enrichment activities for children and families
- Adult engagement, volunteering, education and employment
- Wrap-around health and wellbeing services

Each element is built on evidence of what actually works to improve life and learning outcomes. Importantly, Our Place is not a direct provider of services or programs. Our Place is the 'glue' that enables the parts of the integrated, place-based approach to work effectively as a whole. Our Place expertise builds long-term relationships and coordinates the engagement, consultation and data-informed planning that drive innovation, targeted service development and a changed way of working with families and the community.

PURPOSE OF THIS PAPER

Continuity of Learning: Pathways from early learning to school' (Our Place, May 2021) provides a framework, evidence and principles for a continuity of learning approach. It draws attention to the value of organisational, curriculum, pedagogical and assessment continuity that extends from early years settings into the first year of school (birth to 8 years). It presents the evidence that children's academic outcomes and social-emotional well-being benefit. The gains from participation in early learning settings do not fade when the approaches in early learning and school settings are aligned.

Continuity of learning is especially important for vulnerable children who have the most to lose from a fragmented approach, and the most to gain from alignment and cooperation between those that support them in their learning. The philosophies and practices of a continuity of learning approach informs how Our Place works with



early learning centres and schools to deliver an integrated and supportive experience for children across their sites.

This publication is the second in the series and dives deeper into the role of assessment as an anchor for Continuity of Learning. Continuity of organisation, curriculum and pedagogy across early learning and school settings is only possible if a common approach to assessment identifies what will be monitored in the early years and through to school. The paper highlights the importance of drawing on the strengths of assessment approaches in early learning and school settings to enhance learning and well-being outcomes for all children.

This paper is for teachers, educators and policy makers. It acknowledges that there are real challenges and constraints on how assessment is currently conducted and that change takes courage. It also acknowledges that there is a movement afoot to shift the way assessment works, with many teachers and educators already making progress along this path. With this growing interest and appetite, our goal is to provide both practical advice and encouragement to the many people dedicated to maximising the outcomes for children's learning by creating rich and responsive learning contexts.

WHAT WE MEAN BY ASSESSMENT

Our approach to assessment is not a focus on technical tools and tests. Rather we are focused on how best to gather a range of information to equip teachers and educators to understand and enhance the learning journey of individual children. This means knowing how they are developing and progressing across the early years and through to school. Assessment means discovering and documenting what children know, understand, and can do – and how they learn best. Evidence shows that a 'Continuity of Learning' approach to assessment is a key opportunity: to deliver

higher learning standards; to ensure that learning roadblocks are removed; and, to accelerate outcomes for all children. Paying attention to assessment is even more critical in contexts where children are either finding learning more difficult or where children are excelling. They will sit outside the 'average' and require attention and planning to enable their learning journey to deliver the highest outcomes possible.

With the learning journey split across multiple different education settings, effective assessment requires collaboration, consistency and harmonisation. Currently, too often, approaches differ greatly between the settings without sufficient attention to continuity. Early Years settings and schools have well developed assessment systems. The aim of this work is to encourage all adults to reflect and consider how best to align the approaches in each phase to accelerate learning.

The good news is that much of this work of alignment can be implemented now, within current policy settings. Finding the time for professional conversations between colleagues working in different stages of education and learning will help to inform and shape what we do. Culture, mindset and the quality of relationships between educators are usually more important than rules and regulations. By mobilising a continuity of learning approach within current settings, much greater value and progress can be delivered.

While this paper provides insights and suggestions, it is not about prescriptions. The goal is to generate conversation and thinking and to encourage teachers and educators across the early learning and school settings to come together and work out what a 'Continuity of Learning' approach to assessment would mean for them.

Continuity of Learning overview

WHY IS CONTINUITY OF LEARNING IMPORTANT

Continuity refers to the consistency of children's experience across diverse care and education settings as they grow up, from birth through to age 8. Continuity includes alignment of learning expectations; curricula; and other instructional strategies, assessments, and learning environments to ensure that they are coherent with each other and grounded in the science of child development and of best practices in instruction and other professional responsibilities (National Research Council, 2015).

Continuity of learning is critical for several reasons (Stipek, 2017, Reynolds, 2019, Stipek, 2019, Jacobson, 2019, Nicholson, 2019, Dunlop, 2003, OECD, 2017):

- Children's early experiences with education systems have lasting impacts
- Consistency and continuity matters
- Without continuity, the benefits of early learning can fade
- Learning should be cumulative

HOW IS CONTINUITY OF LEARNING CREATED?

A continuity of learning approach is enabled by four essential components:

1. Organisational and professional continuity – aligning governance, collaboration and consistency across the early learning and school workforces
2. Curriculum continuity – creating broad learning pathways with specific learning goals that extend through to age 8, with recognition that early cognitive, social-emotional and physical competencies are built on over time;
3. Pedagogical continuity – establishing common teaching practices that include direct instruction, intentionality and experiential/inquiry learning approaches and reflect place, families, histories and cultures of local communities;

4. Assessment continuity – promoting ongoing formative and summative assessment which allows early years and primary school teachers to work from where a child is to achieve identified goals, linked to learning pathways (Institute of Medicine and National Research Council, 2015). Assessment includes:

- **assessment for learning:** Collecting and using information about what children know, can do and understand in an ongoing manner that can inform pedagogical practices and enhance learning
- **assessment of learning:** Monitoring children's progress along learning pathways
- **assessment as learning:** Engaging children to monitor in monitoring their own learning pathways

Creating continuity of learning requires working to align these four essential components. As the learning journey from birth through to age 8 is split across two contexts, this can only be achieved through collaboration across the early learning and school systems in developing shared goals regarding knowledge, skills, values, attitudes and learning environments. •

“**Continuity of learning means that it's continuous. There are no breaks, there are no changes. Transitions are no longer necessary, because it's continuous. You don't have to go from this approach to that approach. You don't go from play-based learning to structured school-based learning. It is much more seamless and without boundaries.**”

Professor Jane Bertrand

“

Continuity of learning is about accelerating progress, but in a way that works with the child. Our job is to make sure that we support children to achieve their next important milestones. We start with children. It's not just a nice intellectual idea. It's about improving outcomes for all children and, in particular, those facing disadvantage.” *Sir Kevan Collins*



Assessment for Continuity of Learning

THE CHALLENGE

Assessment that supports continuity of learning means creating a consistent approach to child assessments from birth through to age 8. In Australia many current approaches to assessment are neither consistent nor harmonious. Substantive differences in the mindset and methods persist across early learning and school settings. The early learning space tends to focus on formative assessment, often through observational techniques. Within school settings, the focus tends to be on summative assessment, often achieved through quantitative testing. Assessment that is designed to discover what children know, understand, and can do should reflect a whole-child approach that may include their health and wellbeing, reveals their strengths, and shows what might next be learnt (VCAA, 2021).

Assessment here does not refer to the ranking or formalised achievement testing inappropriate for young children (OPSI, 2008). It goes beyond the screening of young children for identifying special needs or gathering research data (OPSI, 2008).

THE OPPORTUNITY

Comprehensive and aligned assessment across both early learning and school settings would underpin continuity of learning. Such implementation is possible now, within current policy settings. However, shifts in mindset and method are required. Aligned assessment enables teachers and educators to:

BUILD ON A CHILD'S PRIOR ACHIEVEMENTS

Early achievements are built upon by later ones and learning is cumulative, appreciating prior learning and recognising a child's existing learning styles and dispositions. Learning starts where the child is at (National Research Council, 2015).

INFORM AND ENABLE THE CREATION OF ALIGNED CURRICULUM

The child's interests and needs are prioritised by informing and enabling the creation of aligned curriculum. An aligned curriculum uses learning pathways to guide monitoring of individual children's progress, make curriculum decisions and inform conversations with families.

EMPOWER AND ENGAGE CHILDREN AS LEARNERS

Shared approaches to assessment (for example in expectations for different areas of learning) can help to build learning confidence and encourage children to engage in learning, take responsibility, monitor and regulate their own learning. This can empower children as learners and reinforce individualised learning journeys.

TAKE ADVANTAGE OF A LONGER RUNWAY

Taking a 'continuity of learning' view requires educators to develop a long-term view of child development and learning. This involves looking back to understand the needs of younger children who may be encountering learning concepts and strategies for the first time and looking forward, to understand and prepare children for the challenges they will face. With a more continuous and harmonious approach to assessment and curriculum, teachers and educators can consider the learning pathways of individual children over an extended period. This means there is scope to take advantage of a 'longer runway' by planning across boundaries and determining specific objectives that may overlap early learning and school settings.

BE INCLUSIVE

Assessment should be developmentally, culturally, and linguistically appropriate and provide accurate data that can inform the learning experiences or interventions needed to support a child (National Research Council, 2015). Methods and procedures should ensure that all children are assessed fairly, regardless of their language, culture, or disabilities, and with

tools that provide useful information for fostering their development and learning. This means assessment that is developmentally appropriate, culturally and linguistically responsive, tied to children's daily activities, and supported by professional development (OPSI, 2008).

BE INFORMED BY THE VOICE OF THE CHILD, PARENTS AND CARERS

Effective assessment provides vital information to guide and inform learning and teaching. For children, assessment helps to confirm understanding and direct learning activities towards areas in need of further attention. Listening to what children say and monitoring their responses provides vital feedback to support contextualised and responsive learning. This should be a continuous process and integral to teaching and planning. Embedding the voice of parents and carers as part of the assessment process acknowledges the impact of the home environment and children's development and learning journey (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006) •



“

Assessment isn't about ranking children. Assessment provides vital feedback to educators to inform and guide their next teaching move. Done well it's our window into the child's learning and is our chance to learn and adapt the curriculum and teaching approach.”

Sir Kevan Collins

Steps towards implementation: for teachers and educators

DEFINING CONTINUITY

Continuity of learning depends on early years educators and school teachers creating a comprehensive and aligned assessment system – this is essential across both early learning and school settings. The following outlines some initial steps towards that goal.

“

If we're really serious about continuity of learning, we will need to come up with a comprehensive way of talking about learning pathways, and the kinds of learning objectives or learning evidence that we can look for along those pathways. And I think we can do that in a way that is respectful of different views and different professional backgrounds but bring it together into a comprehensive approach.”

Professor Jane Bertrand

1. ESTABLISH COMMON FOUNDATIONS

THE THEORY

There are currently different approaches to assessment and learning in early learning and school systems. Alignment requires development of a common foundation of knowledge, competencies, norms, and processes for high-quality professional practice, collaboration and communication within and across professional roles and settings. Educators and teachers across early learning and school settings will need to be willing to experiment and demonstrate new ways of working together.

IN PRACTICE

A first step may be to find commonalities despite language differences. Educators and teachers can come together to actively compare frameworks and look for similarities that already exist across the two systems, often hidden underneath different language. A common professional vocabulary can help with communication and understanding. This might include unpacking certain assumptions to overcome biases. For example, play-based learning is often assumed to be unstructured play, rather than play-based pedagogies that includes intentional teaching and an entry to learning. Going beyond the language to what different approaches entail can often reveal common ground.

EXAMPLE ACTIVITY - TOWARDS COMMON FOUNDATIONS

Ensuring that children enjoy continuity in their learning experience is the result of shared professional beliefs and an appreciation that the approaches adopted by educators should recognise and attempt to build on the work of



colleagues to create a seamless learning experience. The following is derived from the UK Early Careers Framework (UK Department of Education, 2019) and is designed to support ongoing professional dialogue between colleagues educating children in early learning settings and the first years of school. They draw from the existing evidence to set out what educators and teachers need to know about learning and development and then exemplify the behaviours of early learning practitioners and teachers. It's important to note the examples are described as characteristics of practice. The aim is to encourage a conversation that begins with shared principles and moves on to appreciate the way adults engage with children differently as the children learn and develop.

Using the grids below, identify what all early learning and primary school educators need to know; what they need to learn how to do; and what they are already doing to support children's learning.

The following questions should be used to frame collective conversations around each of the grids:

1. What more can we do to use assessment to build on children's experiences to consolidate and extend learning?
2. What implications for assessment emerge from a focus on continuity of learning?
3. What current practices can be incorporated into practice in early learning and schools?
4. Can you identify a practical change to assessment that might improve the continuity of learning in your early years setting or school?

CASE STUDY:

CONTINUITY OF LEARNING IN ACTION Example from Our Place Westall

In conversation with Fiona Peterson, Westall Kindergarten, on her reflections about working towards a Continuity of Learning approach as part of Our Place Westall. Staff from the Primary School and Kindergarten have held visits to better understand each other's context and to learn about different approaches.

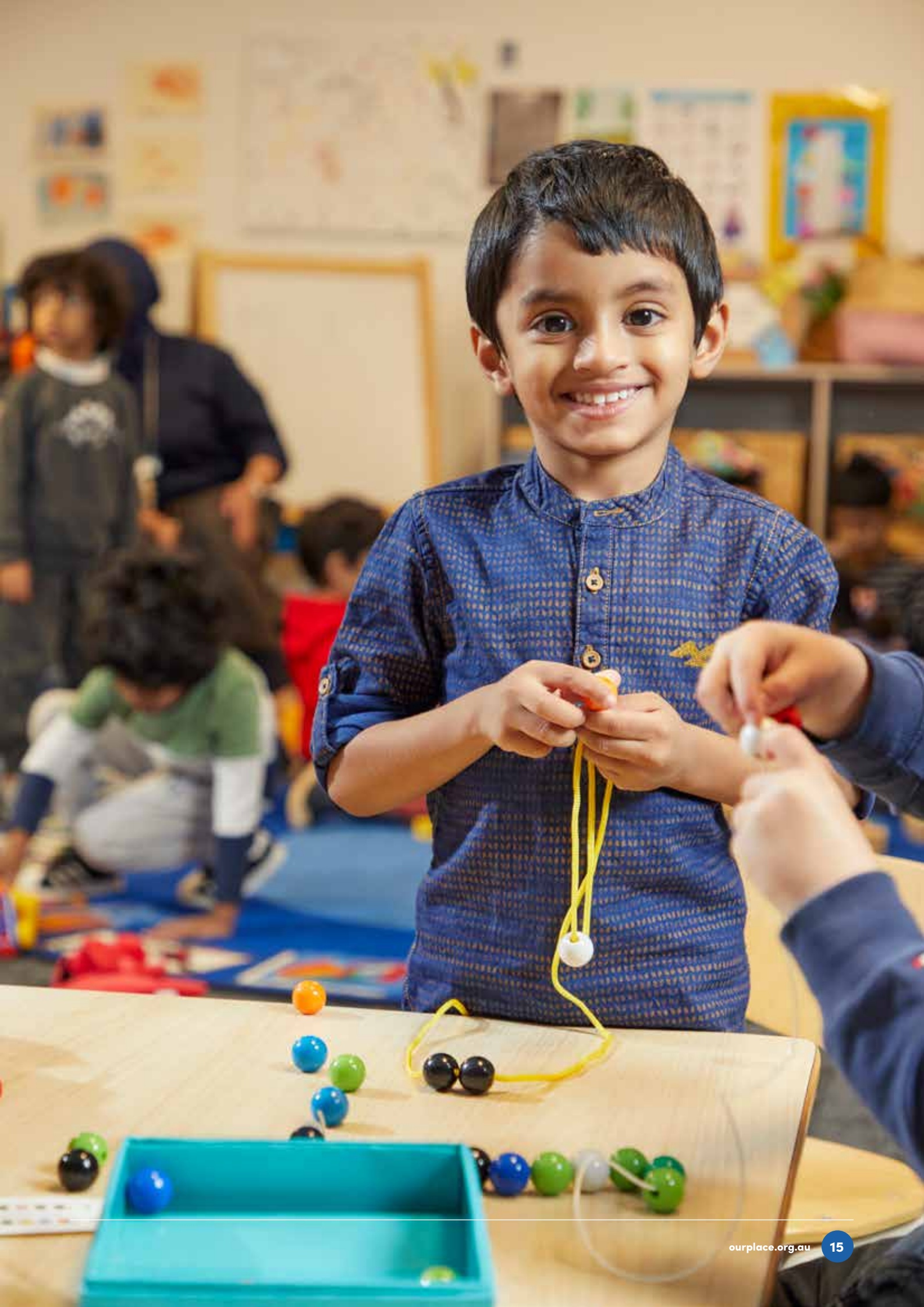
"I have to say the school had been great in facilitating it. I have spent one day observing there at the school. And we've had two or three visits from the teachers. It's step by step but we are seeing where the similarities are between the curriculums and building the relationship between our children and the teachers and the students from the school".

"Change takes effort. And a lot of the time we are time poor. So making a commitment is a good step in the right direction. And even though it does take time, we started to see benefits pretty early on. It made me feel heard and I think was the same for the school teachers".

"We talk a lot about school readiness, that kindergarten children have to do a certain number of things before they're ready for school. But I also think that it's time that we thought about schools being ready for children, and flip it the other way to 'how can we support the schools to be prepared for the children that are coming into them'?"

ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK

All educators need to know that...	All educators need to learn how to...	Currently, in early learning educators tend to...	Currently, in the first year of school, teachers tend to...
<p>ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING</p> <p>Effective assessment is critical because it provides teachers and educators with information about what understand children and need</p>	<p>Create formative assessment opportunities linked to learning objectives to assess children's understanding</p> <p>Look at patterns of performance over time and across a range of tasks to develop rounded judgements</p>	<p>Observe and document how children respond to the learning environment, their engagement in play and planned activities</p> <p>Create opportunities to make assessments against a range of contexts and over time</p>	<p>Create activities to include specific directed questions to identify knowledge gaps and misconceptions</p> <p>Prompt children to elaborate and extend their answers so that a correct answer stems from secure understanding</p>
<p>ASSESEMENT OF LEARNING</p> <p>To be of value, teachers and educators use information from assessments to inform the decisions they make: in turn, children must be able to act on feedback for it to have an effect</p>	<p>Use assessments to recognise what children know and can do, checking for prior knowledge and misconceptions</p> <p>Use validated resources or agreed standards to inform summative assessments</p> <p>Create opportunities for children to demonstrate their understanding of key concepts and provide enough time for them to respond to feedback</p>	<p>Direct feedback to focus on specific actions in real time and guide children's responses</p> <p>Use age related expected outcomes to inform judgements and guide opportunities for additional support taking into account cultural context</p> <p>Gather assessment information in environments with a balance of child initiated and educator led activities</p>	<p>Choose where possible, externally validated materials when required to make summative judgements</p> <p>Use examples from other children to highlight successful learning behaviours - making learning visible</p> <p>Continue to observe children in a range of child initiated and teacher directed activities to support formative assessment</p>
<p>ASSESEMENT AS LEARNING</p> <p>Over time, feedback should support children to monitor and regulate their own learning</p>	<p>Use dialogue to prompt and sustain feedback to identify knowledge gaps and misconceptions</p> <p>Scaffold self-assessment by sharing model work and highlighting key details</p>	<p>Place an emphasis on using talk to support sustained shared thinking as children play or tackle planned tasks to assess their understanding and misconceptions</p>	<p>Scaffold self-assessment by sharing model work with children highlighting key details</p>



2. CREATE SHARED COMMITMENT

THE THEORY

Early learning settings place more emphasis on observational assessments and documentation of children's progress, while school settings are more focused on achievement or performance-based assessment. Assessment that is attached to shared learning pathways is essential to authentic continuity of learning. This must be underpinned by a shared understanding of the strengths of different approaches to assessment and may require adaptation for professionals in both settings.

IN PRACTICE

Professionals in both contexts need to become better at using multiple assessment strategies, distinguishing between formative and summative assessments, and valuing observations that yield anecdotal evidence and work samples that can be meaningful. There are many ways to create appropriate opportunities for children to demonstrate what they know and can do in relation to key concepts and skills. Assessment may be based on how children move and regulate themselves, what they make, write, draw, say and can do, and what their family and professionals report about them. Shared professional development sessions across early years and school may be necessary, with a focus on adult learning and capacity building to enable ideas to come to life.

AN EXAMPLE ACTIVITY – SHARED COMMITMENT TO ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES

Professionals in both contexts need to become better at using multiple assessment strategies. To promote discussion and learning about alternative approaches, the following exercise may prove useful.

1. Convene educators and teachers across early years and school contexts together into a room
2. Encourage participants to reflect upon:
 - What are the important things you want children to know and understand and do?
 - What do you need to know about children in order to create differentiated and responsive learning contexts?
 - When you assess a child as being able to demonstrate they know something – how do you assess for mastery, flexibility and fluency?
3. As a group, encourage participants to compare approaches
4. To conclude, ask each participant to commit to one thing they will now do differently as a result of what they've learnt.

CASE STUDY

CONTINUITY OF LEARNING IN ACTION

Example from Our Place Northern Bay

In conversation with leaders from Northern Bay College's Wexford P-8 Campus on implementing the Continuity of Learning.

Ben McCredden, Principal, Wexford P-8 Campus, Northern Bay P-12 College

"The vision is that all our students will get good access to similar language and learning from kinder through to prep. None of us have said, let's change everything we're doing. But it just gives us a chance to tweak some of that language that we're using and to make that continuity really happen. It's all part of seeing what we are doing where and where we are similar, and then building on it that way". →



→ *“And we know that some parents here didn’t have great experiences at school themselves. And we’re putting lots of things in to place at the moment that will hopefully break down that barrier for parents and families before they start. So you know, I do some fun stuff like Storytime with the Kinder kids and we invite parents and I dress up and be a bit of a goose. That’s largely because I want to just break down that stigma I guess and show that school is a really positive place. And as the Principal we don’t have to be a negative person to deal with”.*

“We are in the early stages. Our prep teachers have walked through the kinder and our kinder teachers have walked through the prep and they’ve started sharing documents and planning and all that sort of stuff. I’m lucky as a Principal here that I know our two teams are really enthusiastic in maximizing continuity of learning. They are really keen to follow this wherever it goes. So we’ve got the perfect recipe. We’ve got a really good baseline and we can just build on it. We’re trying to formalise it as we go and document what we’re doing just so we have a sustainable approach moving forward”.

Carol Lymer, P-2 Learning community leader, Wexford P-8 Campus, Northern Bay P-12 College

“We’ve had opportunities to share some of the things that we do and what other teachers really want to know. What do the primary school teachers really want to know before those students start prep? What is it from the assessment that the early years educators do that we really want to draw on to then support those kids as best as we possibly can when they start school? What are some things that we can really do to make sure that we have a really successful start to this to the school year for those Preps so they’re not feeling that they’re moving from one completely different setting to another? What else makes it smooth and seamless? Can we make that that change or move it from their early years setting to a school setting?”

“One of the main things that we have found to be of huge benefit this year, in comparison to the past couple of years, is the open communication now happening. So having those opportunities to send emails and organise walkthroughs between each of the spaces, being able to share documents, and talk about some of the learning experiences that we would prepare for when our Preps are starting school, and how they’re so similar to their learning experiences that they’re getting in an early childhood setting. It’s actually quite reassuring to know that there are so many similarities, and we wouldn’t have known what the similarities were unless we had that communication. I think it’s that communication that’s key between both settings”.

“One of the other things that came up was that there’s a really high percentage of CALD families here, around 70%. And a lot of those CALD families find it tricky to communicate without the support of our interpreters. And we thought, well, we have a lot of resources and support here in our school setting. How can we use the CALD supports at our school campus to support those families that are coming through from kinder? And how can we communicate how similar the two settings are? I think a lot of the time we forget how anxious they might become around moving to completely different settings. So we have said to the early years team please feel free to tap into the resources that we offer because they don’t have translators. And hopefully with that extra support for those CALD families that will support continuity for them as well. It’s not just about the child. It is about having the whole family feeling supported in some way”.

“It’s the early stages, but it’s gathering momentum. And we’re really excited about where it may lead because we can already see benefits.”

3. DEVELOP SHARED LEARNING PATHWAYS

THE THEORY

Children's learning can be assessed against specific measures of identified learning outcomes. A critical step towards this is the development of shared goals regarding knowledge, skills, values, attitudes and learning environments (Shuey et al., 2019). Assessment then allows teachers and educators to work from where a child is towards achieving those outcomes, linked to learning outcomes for each domain (Institute of Medicine and National Research Council, 2015).

IN PRACTICE

Shared learning pathways can be jointly determined by educators and teachers. This begins with broad learning areas that are processes of thinking and well-being that are ongoing and evolving (e.g. language/communication, STEM, social-emotional learning, creative expression and well-being and belonging). Learning pathways within each area include agreed up on specific learning outcomes. Learning pathways are not always linear and vary within cultural and family contexts. Assessment involves collecting evidence of learning defined by the learning pathways. Various assessment methods can support continuity of learning from early years to school settings if common learning pathways are used.

AN EXAMPLE ACTIVITY - SHARED LEARNING OUTCOMES

Common foundations can be constructed through dialogue and relationship building (Dockett and Perry, 2014). Dialogue requires creating the space to engage in reflection, analysis and critique, developing joint understandings, and sharing expertise and alternative perspectives. Dialogue should include open and honest discussion about blocks to thinking and working in a more aligned way is needed. This is a critical time to hear practitioner voices on priorities and to discuss competing demands and how to meet them together. This could include those things in the either context which cannot be changed such as the physical environment and or a mandated curriculum (Jay and Knaus, 2018).

To promote such a discussion, the following exercise may prove useful.

1. Convene both early years and school teachers together in a room
2. Show a short video with practical examples of children interacting with open-ended, play-based learning materials.
3. As they watch, ask each participant to write notes in response to the following two questions:
 - what does this tell them about what that child knows, can do, and their progression in certain skill areas?
 - where would they go next in terms of the child's learning pathway and pedagogical approach?
 - what are the outcomes they would be seeking?
4. Afterwards, host a facilitated discussion to compare responses:
 - where is there common ground and difference? (noting that there is likely to be more in common than different)
 - what can be learnt from this in terms of developing and agreeing shared learning outcomes?
5. Ask participants to rewatch the video and see what they notice the second time.
6. As a group, discuss how might what they've learnt help create a common language for shared learning outcomes across the two settings?
7. What approach might then be applied in specific instances to agree shared learning outcomes?





4. SELECT ASSESSMENT MODELS

THE THEORY

Meaningful assessment involves thoughtful choices on the part of professionals among the many purposes, types, methods, and instruments available. Good practice means focusing on a few meaningful learning outcomes along learning pathways, connected to specific, beneficial purposes. More assessments and increased data do not necessarily result in better understanding of where children are in their learning journey. And some assessment instruments and procedures are better than others. Procedures to assess and monitor children's learning and inform pedagogy are refined over time.

IN PRACTICE

The issue is not a lack of assessment methods, rather it is the freedom and ability to work with the right tools. At a leadership level, changes may be required to empower school teachers and early childhood educators with choice – both in terms of the types of tools and the number of assessments undertaken. Educators and teachers should be supported come together to jointly select an appropriate range of robust, evidence-based approaches and practices. The following summarises the broader shift required in very simple terms.

Setting	Continue the practice of:	Begin or increase the practice of:
Early Years	Observations Formative assessment Assessment of learning environment	Summative assessment Direct assessment Shared learning pathways and outcomes across settings
Schools	Summative assessment Direct assessment	Formative assessment Observations Assessment of learning environment Shared learning pathways and outcomes across settings

EXAMPLE OF DIRECT ASSESSMENT OF INDIVIDUAL CHILDREN, FRANKSTON CKP KINDERGARTEN

Over the course of the first week of each term, each child has a turn with the early childhood teacher to do a self-portrait. The teacher also takes a photo that shows how the child is holding and manipulating a pencil. Depending on the child's skills, the teacher may print the child's name or ask the child to print their own name, noting evidence of emergent or early literacy skills. The teacher points to the self-portrait the child completed three months earlier, often pointing out the changes over three months.

Several skills one can be systematically assessed against a set of specified learning outcomes – assessment of learning. The teacher has concrete evidence that can inform planning

learning experiences in the new term – assessment for learning. At the same time, the one-to-one interaction is relaxed and conversational and contributes to reconnecting after school holiday break..

It's practical and doable – especially if the assessment is linked up to a set of criteria that are embedded in established learning pathways. The self-portraits are included in each child's portfolio and are valuable documentation of children's learning that can be shared with families. Children can see the concrete evidence of their own learning – *assessment as learning*.

5. ENCOURAGE CAREFUL INTERPRETATION

THE THEORY

Data gathered from assessment systems must be used responsibly to inform instructional practices as well as policy and strategic decisions that will ultimately benefit child outcomes (National Research Council, 2015).

THE PRACTICE

Appropriate data collection, analysis, interpretation and use will need resourcing. In many settings, a shift may be required from a focus on reporting and compliance to using assessment data to inform day-to-day instructional practices, professional learning, and organisational planning. And if data collected through child assessments are to lead to beneficial change, professionals must be trained not only in how to administer them but also in how to carefully interpret their results and apply that information in shaping instructional practices and learning environments. They will need the time and structures to support them (National Research Council, 2015).

“

“Good assessment is assessment that defies boundaries, whether they’re educational boundaries, or health boundaries. It presents data in a way that anyone who’s working with children can shift their trajectories for better outcomes. The strength in the assessment is what you do with the data, not the data in and of itself. It should be a package that empowers educators to support children.”

Cathrine Neilsen-Hewett





Supporting implementation: for policy makers and leaders

IMPORTANT ROLE OF POLICY MAKERS AND LEADERS

Teachers and educators can achieve only so much on their own. Broader changes are required across education settings, with implications for education leaders and policy makers. The extent to which individual and education professionals in these settings can foster greater continuity for children and families throughout the birth through age 8 continuum depends partly on their knowledge and competencies, and how they put these into practice in the settings where they work. However, it also depends largely on whether policies and systems at the local, state, and national levels encourage, require, facilitate, or impede continuity and alignment (National Research Council, 2015).

REDUCE FRAGMENTATION

The early learning and school systems are complex. While current efforts to create smoother transitions are important, there is a need to go beyond bridging contexts to actually reducing the difference between the two. When true continuity of learning is achieved, with unified learning pathways, transition will no longer be required. This is ambitious and will take time.

Unfortunately, fragmentation across both the early learning and school systems is perpetuated due to different policies, regulations, funding, philosophies and expectations for children and families (Cook and Coley, 2019). This fragmentation fuels inconsistent approaches to instructional practice, failure to build on learning gains, and inadequate support for children's achievement (National Research Council, 2015). The latest knowledge provided by the sciences of learning and development indicates the importance of rethinking institutions designed

a century ago based on factory-model conceptions of organisations (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020).

Over time, it will be important to ensure that policies recognise and reflect the full contribution that all phases of learning make to secure improved outcomes for all children.

ALIGN FRAMEWORKS

In many settings, assessment is directly linked to curriculum goals which, in turn, are aligned with overarching standards or a shared framework (OPSI, 2008). The challenge is creating an aligned framework for learning and development across the years birth to 8. Such a framework would help to ensure that learning activities and child outcomes can be aligned and provide a consistent point of departure for curriculum development, instruction, and assessment across both early learning and school settings.

Overtime, transition statements could be gradually replaced with an ongoing learning profile that is used by early learning and then school programs.

RETHINK PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

We need to develop and demonstrate other ways of working that will facilitate continuity of learning and assessment. Any efforts towards greater continuity must be backed up by essential supports for educators and teachers. This includes recruitment and compensation, professional preparation and ongoing professional development (OPSI, 2008). Professional development needs relate to both shared learning for educators and teachers across settings as well as building the capability to implement high-quality assessment and program evaluation practices and to connect those practices with well-defined early learning standards and



program standards (OPSI, 2008). Educators and teachers also need support to learn to use the data and data reports with integrity for their appropriate purposes.

Leaders in early learning and school settings should:

- review professional learning opportunities, ensuring they enable early learning and school colleagues to engage with each other;
- support the time and structures needed, for example, by providing paid time for joint professional learning and planning between educators in early learning and teachers at schools
- facilitate shared approaches to recording and documenting learning to enable teachers and educators to share knowledge and information

FORM NETWORKS OF LEADERS

We need to find, develop and support leaders in communities that will drive the changes needed and unlock the barriers to more appropriate practices that lead to achieving better outcomes for children especially those living in disadvantage. Leaders also serve as a point of linkage among different stakeholders, professionals, and settings. By sharing information, planning together, and introducing shared professional learning for their staff, a cross-sector cohort of leaders can play an important role in facilitating the communication and collaboration necessary to improve continuity (National Research Council, 2015).

“ **Good assessment plays a key role in validating what professionals believe to be true of the children they work with. It provides really strong evidence about where children are at, at given points in time, and empowers professionals to best plan for and support individual learning needs. The value of assessment extends from knowing how children are faring and what to do to support this, to enabling shared conversations by professionals across sectors and ultimately driving practice change that leads to improved outcomes for children. This is where the magic lies.**”

Shannon Newman

CASE STUDY

CONTINUITY OF LEARNING THE VICTORIAN CONTEXT

Recognising that 'Continuity of Learning' represents an aspirational approach that will evolve over time, progress is being made in many contexts. In the State of Victoria, where Our Place sites are located, the Victorian Government shares the vision of ensuring that all children and families succeed in life through continuity of learning and assessment.

To this end, there are a range of existing initiatives operating in Victoria that demonstrate a policy setting where the journey towards Continuity of Learning has already begun. These settings and initiatives help to reinforce the importance of continuity of organisation, curriculum and pedagogy across early childhood education and care and school settings. Examples include:

1. The 'Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework' (VEYLDF), which is the guiding document that supports early childhood professionals working with all children aged birth – eight. This has been enabled by both the Department of Education and Training (DET) and the work done by the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) to map the connections between the VEYLDF Learning and Development Outcomes and the first two levels of the Victorian Curriculum.
2. 'Transition: A Positive Start to School' also emphasises that continuity of learning is vital and provides a multi-faceted approach to improving continuity of learning for all children, including:
 - 'The online Transition Learning and Development Statement' (TLDS), which is completed for each child transitioning from a funded kindergarten service to school and is a requirement of kindergarten funding.
 - 'Transition to School Resource Kit' – which includes practical guidance for early childhood professionals working





with children and families while they transition to school, including chapters dedicated to 'Continuity of learning and development' (Chapter 4), 'Transition planning and evaluation' (Chapter 5), and 'Tools to support effective transition' (Chapter 6).

3. Assessment continuity is also a shared priority, with the government investing \$22 million to support quality practice, including the development of the 'Early Years Assessment and Learning Tool' (EYALT) to enhance best practice in the VEYLDF Practice Principle, Assessment for Learning and Development. The tool was launched in August 2022 and will enable early childhood teachers and their co-educators to make consistent observations and assessments of children's learning, helping with planning and delivering quality kindergarten programs. The EYALT has involved more than 300 early childhood teachers and their co-educators and draws on data from more than 5,000 observations of children across over 150 services. It will be rolled-out in a phased way, with up to 350 services gaining access in the first tranche from Term 1 2023.
4. Professional development is a key 'Quality' component of the 'Victorian Kindergarten Workforce Strategy'. This is particularly focused on building the capacity of teachers and educators to support children experiencing educational disadvantage through the School Readiness Funding which is a permanent and ongoing part of the Victorian kindergarten funding model. It funds a range of programs and supports that aim to build the capacity of services, educators and families to support children's learning and development. DET has also been seeking to address the challenges faced between settings in developing a shared vocabulary around play-based learning. In 2021, a free online professional development program was created in partnership with Deakin University. This program aimed to optimise opportunities for play-based teaching and learning in the early years of school and develop and strengthen teachers' knowledge and understandings of the role of play and inquiry in children's lives and learning.

With significant progress already being made, in coming months Our Place and DET will be exploring steps towards further system wide implementation of Continuity of Learning approaches. While Victoria may be further along the path than some other contexts, this is not a barrier to Continuity of Learning in other locations. Rather, it is an example of what is possible when systems and sectors work together.

Conclusion

A continuity of learning approach to assessment enables teachers and educators to:

- build on a child's prior achievements;
- inform and enable the creation of aligned curriculum;
- empower children as learners;
- take advantage of a longer learning runway;
- be developmentally and culturally inclusive; and
- be informed by the voice of the child, parents and carers.

We have the opportunity to implement a comprehensive and aligned assessment system across both early learning and school settings. However, implementation requires collaboration as well as shifts in mindset and methods. Good assessment defies boundaries. We need policy makers, leaders, educators and teachers to work together to defy boundaries too. We must draw upon the strengths of both early learning and school settings in order to align assessment in a way that accelerates learning outcomes for all children, in every postcode. And we need to start now.





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Address

Part of 64 Tristania Street, Doveton, Victoria, 3177

Contact

info@ourplace.org.au

ourplace.org.au

Our Place sites

Bridgewood

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