



# TRANSITIONS LITERATURE REVIEW

An overview of the literature across birth to Year 12

Published January 2026



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MELBOURNE

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## Acknowledgements

The Transitions literature review (2025) was prepared in partnership between the State of Queensland (Department of Education) and the Faculty of Education, The University of Melbourne.



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**Citation:** Page, J., McLean Davies, L., Ziebell, N., Mentha, S., Canobi, K., & Hinton Herrington, M. (2025). Transitions literature review. Faculty of Education, University of Melbourne, for State of Queensland (Department of Education).

## Acknowledgement of Country

The Department of Education acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the lands, seas, skies and waterways from across Queensland.

We pay our respect to the Elders, past, present and emerging, for they hold the memories, traditions, the culture and hopes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across the state.

For more information, see our [Commitment Statement](#).

# CONTENTS

Overview.....	4	Addressing changes in the learning environment .....	30
Transitions in Queensland.....	5	Promoting alignment.....	30
		Meeting the needs of diverse learners .....	32
Research methodology.....	6	Trusting partnerships.....	33
Thematic analysis of the literature.....	8	Introduction .....	33
Conceptualising transitions.....	8	Consultation and collaboration with families.....	34
Vertical and horizontal transitions.....	9	Consulting with learners.....	36
Visible and invisible transitions.....	9	Engaging communities through consultation and collaboration .....	37
Transitions as adaptations .....	9	Professional and interprofessional collaboration.....	39
Readiness for transitions.....	9	Facilitating inter-school/centre collaboration .....	40
Transitions as belonging.....	10	Developing cross-sectoral partnerships.....	41
Nurturing the learning spirit through transitions .....	10	Benefits of trusting partnerships.....	43
Transitions-as-becomings .....	10	From evidence to action .....	44
Circular and spiralled approaches to transitions.....	10	Using evidence to inform and strengthen transitions .....	45
Transitions as bridges: Connecting educational spaces.....	11	Contextually informed and differentiated decision-making.....	47
Transitions are complex and multidimensional.....	12	Developing an evidence base that draws on multiple perspectives on transitions.....	47
Theoretical frameworks.....	12	Building a robust evidence base through tracking and monitoring transitions.....	48
Findings: Knowing learners and families ....	14	Accountability and transparency.....	49
Introduction .....	14	Questions to guide decision-making .....	49
Cultural identity and knowing learners and families .....	14	Conclusion.....	51
Wellbeing and engagement during transitions .....	17	Key acronyms.....	52
Challenges in educational transitions related to knowing learners and families .....	19	Glossary.....	53
Families experiencing vulnerability.....	19	Bibliography.....	55
First Nations learners relocating to attend school.....	20	Appendix.....	61
Deficit views on the capabilities of learners .....	21		
Showing leadership.....	22		
Introduction .....	22		
Providing effective transition support.....	22		
Tailoring transition programs for individual needs.....	22		
Engaging with learners, families and communities .....	24		
Combining effective activities and strategies.....	25		
Supporting the development of transition teams .....	26		
Building strong teams .....	26		
Creating training and collaboration opportunities.....	26		
Modelling responsiveness to learners, families and communities.....	28		



# OVERVIEW

Children begin learning at birth, and transition into education settings already knowing and relating to the world around them. A learner's<sup>1</sup> engagement in education; therefore, involves broadening their immediate sphere of family and community and experiencing a range of transitions as they move developmentally, socially, culturally and geographically through the stages of early childhood, schooling and beyond.

The purpose of this literature review prepared in conjunction with the University of Melbourne, is to provide a comprehensive overview of Australian and international research on the transitions experienced by diverse learners as they undertake their educational journeys. Exploring a broad range of key findings on learners' transitions internationally and across Australia provides a strong foundation for making informed judgments about policies in Queensland. Therefore, the Queensland Government Department of Education (DoE) and the University of Melbourne have considered the potential implications of international and national research for Queensland learners as part of developing a Transitions Position Statement.

Guiding this review are the four principles articulated in DoE's *Supporting successful transitions: School decision-making tool* (DMT):

## Knowing learners and families

1

Recognising that each learner is unique and brings to their learning diverse knowledge, understandings, dispositions, and school experiences.

## Showing leadership

2

As leaders foster and maintain connections within the community to benefit learners and families.

## Trusting partnerships

3

Acknowledging that community organisations possess valuable insights into family and community contexts, including both strengths and challenges.

## From evidence to action

4

Using community and learner-level data to identify strengths and needs.

Building on these principles, this literature review further supports the department in evolving positive transitions from birth to Year 12 for learners, families, community members, teaching teams and school leaders and in progressing the vision to build a high-performing education system that realises the potential of every learner (DoE, 2022).

# Transitions in Queensland

The *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration's* goal of the Australian education system promoting equity and excellence (Education Council, 2019, p.4) is discussed through eleven commitments to action, including 'Embedding pathways for learning throughout life and supporting effective transitions' (p.14). As this literature review will demonstrate, while transitions represent opportunities for learners to grow and develop, supporting effective transitions requires a comprehensive understanding of the contexts and circumstances in which learning occurs.

Learners in Queensland experience transitions from birth in various contexts, including their first transitions to early learning settings. Learners have a range of requirements that educational settings and systems can plan for and address during transitions. Learners are situated in rural, remote, urban and inner city settings and have a range of strengths, skills and identities. They may live with their families, in out-of-home care (OoHC), or as boarders. Learners may spend lengthy periods in hospital, travel extensively, or re-engage after periods away from educational settings. Learners may have disabilities, be multilingual, hold cultural responsibilities, or all of these. All learners are assets to the education system and enrich the learning context.

Further, Queensland comprises a range of diverse geographical and cultural contexts. Distance and the challenges of terrain, seasonal patterns, and differences between urban, regional, rural, remote and very remote areas influence a wide range of experiences of transitions into and across the years of education. For example, First Nations-managed communities across Queensland, Torres Strait Islander communities across Queensland, rural families and remote islands contexts and very remote Cape York and Gulf region towns and communities all work within seasonal weather patterns and experience distinct educational opportunities and challenges regarding learners' educational journeys.

The range of distance, weather patterns and geography also impact available resources for education and communities (Wright, 2014). For learners and their

families, transitions to different settings and levels of schooling are sometimes a choice between home-schooling, distance education or leaving home to attend boarding school (Redman-MacLaren et al., 2021; Shay et al., 2023). In urban, regional and rural contexts, the daily distances can mean a long day using multiple modes of transport, including buses, boats, and/or trains.

There can be tensions between expectations of academic success and lifestyles, career and employment aspirations (Dockett, 2014). Research suggests that moving from home contexts (for example, life on a large cattle leasehold, small regional town or remote community), to educational settings can be experienced as discontinuity, with tensions between the routines and expectations in education, and aspirations for 'success' (Babić, 2017; Guenther et al., 2024).

Queensland has the second-highest number of boarding schools in Australia and several residential hostels (Redman-MacLaren et al., 2021). However, the literature suggests a knowledge gap for transitions across the boarding experience. Boarding colleges can offer valuable educational experiences that may not be available in learners' home communities (Lloyd, 2020; Macdonald, 2018). Residential hostels offer opportunities for those attending some secondary state schools, although these were not the focus of the research reviewed. Alongside the valuable opportunities, boarding away from home comes with various transition challenges. Bobongie (2017b), for example, found that transitions from the Torres Strait Islands communities to boarding school presented challenges in bringing together a robust set of support networks necessary for learners' successful educational experiences and outcomes.

While each of the above contexts does not represent all families, learners and their learning environments, they attest to the strength and resilience of learners and their families in working with often limited resources and achieving educational success (Bobongie, 2017a). Much of the research tends to focus on concerns and obstacles for smooth transitions for all learners, and the resilient identities of learners can be missed (Gillan et al., 2017; RCAAQ, 2020).

<sup>1</sup>The word 'learners' is used in this review to refer to all children and young people aged from birth through to Year 12 who are negotiating transitions and the word, 'teachers' is used inclusively to refer to all professionals who educate children, including professional educators who do not have a degree in teaching. This report includes international and Australian research from Indigenous researchers and nations. The terms 'First Nations', 'Indigenous' or 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander' have been used interchangeably to reflect the diversity of Aboriginal peoples and diverse preferences for terms of address. 'Aboriginal' and 'Torres Strait Islander' have been used when in use in the research, or specific names where it is given in the research. It is acknowledged that there are diverse preferences regarding the use of names and terminology across nations and communities.

# RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This section outlines the methodological approach and decisions taken with regard to preparing the literature review. Research considered for this review included both peer-reviewed academic literature and 'grey' or policy literature. Appropriate search and retrieval of relevant literature for the review followed a rigorous and replicable protocol. We used specific keywords to search the SCOPUS database (resulting in 1379 identified items) and Google Scholar (17800 items identified). Additional search criteria included publication date (2014–2025), referee status (peer-reviewed), format (journals, books, or book chapters), and language (English). The authors collectively negotiated the criteria for retaining, discarding, or expanding items.

To ensure we correctly included Indigenous perspectives and research, the research team identified researchers' contexts and whether an Indigenous researcher and author were evident. This involved cross-checking where authors had positioned themselves in their papers, including non-Indigenous or Indigenous, and web searches of public and professional profiles. This process was only completed for research and reviews about Indigenous and First Nations communities. As Rogers (2024) found, an Indigenous author may be misidentified without the knowledge shared in a location statement.

The final selection of peer-reviewed papers identified as suitable for analysis totalled 72 (see Appendix). Using NVivo 14™ software, the research team conducted a detailed thematic analysis of the curated body of academic literature. We developed a thematic codebook to define the scope of our analysis, enabling us to organise and categorise the data effectively. Similar codes were then synthesised to create overarching themes and subthemes. The codebook also informed a targeted search of the global grey literature related to educational transitions. This data-driven approach allowed us to identify common themes across diverse populations and contexts, which informed the key findings presented in this report.

The following figures and tables offer high-level insights into how the key literature on transitions can be organised. In Figure 1, we see that transition literature often focuses on a particular stage of schooling (such as early childhood education to primary school, or secondary to post-secondary school, as examples), and only eight of the 72 papers identified addressed transitions more generally. Also noteworthy is the focus of research on what is often considered the first transition, from kindergarten or early childhood education into school. Notably, it was only in the literature gathered on rural and very remote contexts that this early transition was not foregrounded. In addition, more than half of the peer-reviewed papers analysed represented Australian perspectives and contexts, and that specific themes regarding transitions emerged, these being

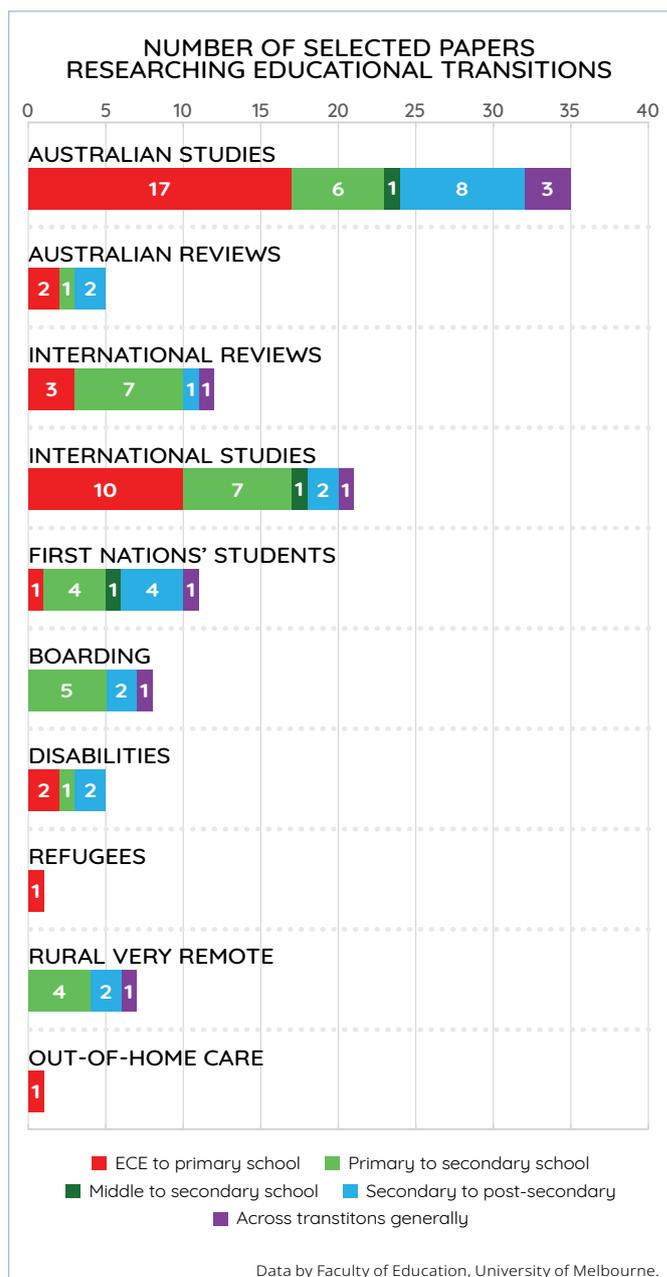


Figure 1: A summary of selected peer-reviewed published literature focusing on various educational transitions [n = 72], from 2014 to 2025.

the experiences of particular learners facing transitions (learners with disabilities and those with refugee backgrounds) and the geographical and social contexts which can exacerbate the challenges of transitions: boarding, rural and very remote locations and learners living in OoHC.

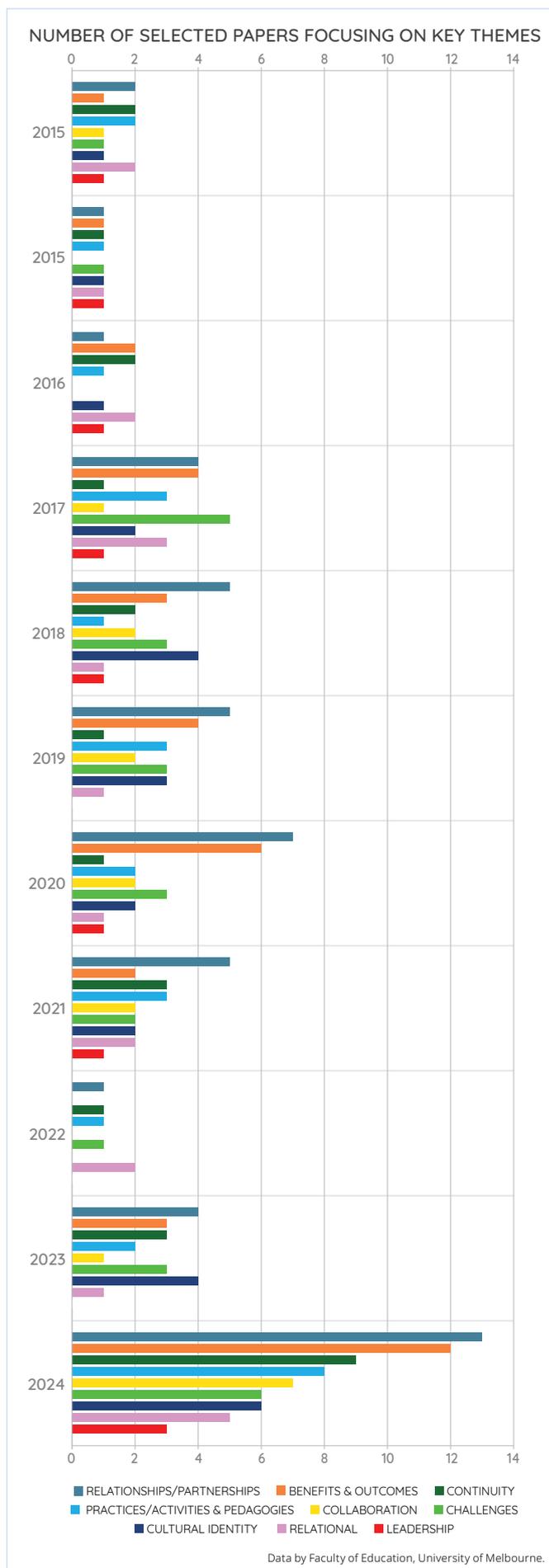
The following table offers further insight into the common themes identified across three transition points (that is, early childhood education and care [ECEC] to primary school, primary to secondary school and secondary to post-secondary) in the selected academic peer-reviewed published literature between 2014 and 2025 [n=72].

Taking account of the greater number of papers focusing on the transition from early childhood education to the primary years of schooling, it is worth noting that the transition from primary to secondary schooling sees a greater focus, proportionally, on socio-emotional wellbeing, on the challenges and barriers to successful transition, and on the perspectives of families, teacher and learners on belonging (which is not taken up in the secondary to post-secondary transition point).

**Table 1:** Common themes identified in the academic literature focusing on educational transitions

	ECEC to primary school n=33	Primary to secondary n=25	Secondary to post-secondary n=12
Relationships	49	28	20
Practice & Pedagogy	19	6	2
Continuity	18	6	1
Benefits	17	13	8
Relational	12	6	4
Barriers	12	11	8
Cultural identity	18	14	12
Perspectives families, teaching teams, learners	13	17	9
Leadership	8	1	1
Intervention & Progression	8	10	6
Belonging	6	7	0
Professional training	5	5	3
Policy	9	5	4

Finally, Figure 2 offers insight into the ways in which consistently represented themes are taken up over time, and more generally shows the increase in research concerned with transitions since 2014. It is instructive that the theme of 'relationships and partnerships' has had the most significant growth over time, closely followed by the theme of collaboration. This review will emphasise that transitions should be considered from the perspective of individual learners within the context of partnerships with their families, communities, and others important to the learner.



**Figure 2:** The key themes around educational transitions in the selected academic literature from 2014 to 2024.

## Thematic analysis of the literature

In the following sections, we present the findings of our analysis of the academic and grey (policy) literature. The themes set out in the findings align with the four principles identified in the DMT:

knowing learners and families

showing leadership

trusting partnerships

from evidence to action

Each section outlines the ways in which the research literature aligns with the identified theme, and when appropriate, identifies gaps in the literature. We also offer reflective questions that arise in each aspect of the literature to support the preparation of successful transitions. We punctuate the sections with practical strategies and spotlights on practice that have been effective in various Australian and international contexts and end the sections with a set of reflective questions.

## Conceptualising transitions

Given the variation in the social and geographical contexts of learning and the unique interplay between educational settings and communities in different locations, the international research literature does not offer a universal definition of transitions or a single measurement for what constitutes a successful transition for learners (CESE, 2021). Moreover, a review of over two decades of empirical research by Jindal-Snape and colleagues (2021) found that despite a global interest in transitions, researchers often did not analyse or discuss what they meant by 'transitions'; instead, their understanding of the term was often assumed rather than explicitly addressed. When conceptualisations of transitions are left unquestioned, our understandings remain limited. As Boyle and Wilkinson (2018) highlighted in their research, this oversight can lead us to neglect the realities of the learners' lived experiences.

In the following section, we outline some of the main ways transition is conceived in the research literature.

These include notions of:

- ▶ vertical and horizontal transitions
- ▶ visible and invisible transitions
- ▶ transition as adaptation
- ▶ readiness for transition
- ▶ transition as belonging
- ▶ nurturing the learning spirit through transitions
- ▶ transition-as-becomings
- ▶ circular and spiralled approaches to transitions
- ▶ transitions as bridges.

In doing so, we highlight the concept of transition's variability and complexity, as well as the importance of cultural context and recognising one's own positionality (Phillips & Archer-Lean, 2019) when seeking to understand transitions for individual learners.



## Vertical and horizontal transitions

Understandings of transition vary in complexity, ranging from simple explanations to more nuanced accounts that consider the underlying and intersecting components of the term. A prevalent understanding of transitions relates to those occurring over time from home or early childhood education and between the main school system levels. This vertical process is characterised by an image of progressing higher through the levels of education as learners also go through changes as they grow older – vertical transitions are a shift from level to level. Research literature brings more complexity to this simple image and highlights the limitations in a simple definition (Dockett & Perry, 2021).

'Viewing transitions as both vertical and horizontal can offer a more holistic and nuanced understanding of pathways between the different settings and contexts navigated by learners and families.'

Boyle & Wilkinson, 2018  
Homerin & Dodds, 2024

Transitions are often simultaneous, encompassing cultural, linguistic, social, academic and personal contexts (Dockett & Perry, 2021; Ziebell et al., 2025), and occur with life changes (Cook et al., 2024). Daily transitions include those from home, early intervention centres, kindergarten and school, outside school hours care (OSHC), sporting and other clubs, and community settings (Branson & Bingham, 2009). These horizontal movements between settings may or may not be organic or smooth for learners or their families. Shifting between settings can introduce tensions of differing expectations and roles, disjuncture between worldviews, and codeswitching for learners.

## Visible and invisible transitions

While some vertical and horizontal transitions are known, understood and planned (Dockett & Perry, 2021), 'invisible' transitions occur when new settings lack familiarity for learners and families, potentially leading to significant adjustment challenges (Dockett & Einarsdóttir, 2016). Not all learners and families experience an expected pathway from early childhood education to formal schooling through a transition program. Sudden arrival at school and a change of school are examples of unexpected times of transition for learners and families. The invisible refers to the adjustments and challenges learners, their families, and teaching teams face.

## Transitions as adaptations

Multidirectional factors influence a learner's circumstances and encompass biological, social, and environmental contexts, which demand dynamic adaptation. Jindal-Snape and colleagues (2016; 2018; 2023) reflected this complexity and explained transitions as ongoing processes involving psychological, social, cultural, spatial, and educational adaptations in response to changes in various contexts (home, work), interpersonal relationships (with school staff, family), and multiple identities and roles (for example, learner, trainee, cultural-based responsibilities).

Framing transitions as adaptations to change rather than simply the changes themselves emphasises the importance of a learner's active role in navigating their experiences.

Further, recognising that transitions can occur at various times and are not limited to predetermined 'vertical' patterns (such as the starting of school, or the move to secondary education), enables us to consider variation and complexity in the nature and timing of transitions and identify how families, learners and teaching teams experience them.

## Readiness for transitions

One of the most common ways of viewing transitions has been through the lens of 'readiness' of learners in entering school (Boyle & Wilkinson, 2018). However, international and Australian research literature and frameworks, including The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989; 2005), note that focusing solely on readiness for school places an unfair weight on families and learners to have achieved capabilities according to academic and social demands.

An ecological systems approach conceptualises readiness as 'ready schools, communities, ready families, for ready children' (Krakouer, 2016). This recognises the broader spectrum of influences and relationships impacting learners' wellbeing and health as they experience change.

Each of these spheres plays an active part in transitions, although traditionally, transitions have been thought of as 'happening to' the learner. It also suggests responsibilities as a collective and wrap-around effort, recognising the rights of all children to an education that respects their evolving capacities, languages and identities (UNCRC, 1989; 2005).

## Transitions as belonging

'Transitions are a highly interconnected, relational, and holistic process for Indigenous learners that require all stakeholders to work together.'

Krakouer, 2016

In the current context of 'super-diversity' in classrooms (Morrison et al., 2019, p.v.), culturally responsive transitions recognise the interconnected relational obligations toward learners and the aspirations of community and families. Learners are connected to family and other key people in their lives and 'learning to belong' (Rahman, 2013) in new settings with potential friendships, mentors, and identities. Transitions are experienced within relational roles and responsibilities; the first transition from home involves a bond between primary caregivers, extended family, learner, teaching teams, and others in a service. Both learners and families look for connections, and teaching teams and leaders help connect new families to existing ones. Fostering connections with families and communities can assist in creating culturally responsive learning environments (Gapany et al., 2022). Transitions can be thought of as a process of belonging and becoming, where welcoming and safe environments affirm social, cultural and linguistic identities for all learners (AERO, 2023b).

## Nurturing the learning spirit through transitions

Drawing on the work of Mi'kmaw educator Marie Battiste, Sutton (2012 in McGregor, 2019) identified the importance of capturing the learning spirit in the child, nourishing and nurturing it as a lifelong attribute, and rekindling this spirit during transitions and changes.

The eager learning spirit of young children has been noticed as dropping once children enter the early years of school (Krakouer et al., 2017). In nurturing learning spirits across the educational experience from birth to Year 12, there is a relational responsibility toward each learner, communicating and demonstrating a spirit of caring and a significant person in their lives.

## Transitions-as-becomings

From a First Nations perspective in Australia and a Māori perspective in Aotearoa, transitions stem from Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing and reflect local community knowledges. Transitions-as-becomings understands 'becoming' through time as cyclic rather than linear. This conceptualisation captures learners' connections with 'country, culture, languages, ancestors and the spirit world around them' (Browne et al., 2022, p.2). From birth, learners are already understood as knowing and capable beings, and 'always-in' relationship to 'becoming-with/through-self, interconnected in-flux and in-being with the more-than-human-world' (Browne et al., 2022, p.8). Becomings in this sense refers to strengthening these relationships and acknowledging and learning about responsibilities as learners grow. In the highly diverse Queensland context, this perspective is helpful to planning for all learners. Understanding young learners as always-in-relationships and already-knowing is a strength-based lens that can help teaching teams position themselves as learners (Bobongie & Jackson, 2019).

Recognising the connection between becoming, belonging, and engagement has informed many transition practices to include more than academic and routine expectations. Emphasising a sense of belonging within a community raises important questions, such as:

How do we view the learners joining us at the service/school?

Are expectations high for all learners, or are there unconsciously low expectations for some?

How these images transfer to the learner during transitions can negatively impact a sense of self, engagement and disengagement from learning.

## Circular and spiralled approaches to transitions

Building on the processes of always-in relationship to all that is around, transitions can be viewed as occurring through circular and spiralled time and processes. Country et al. (2022) discussed the nature of time and knowing through Yolngu Bawaka Country knowledge, time-place relationship and song spirals. The authors note the connections to Indigenous people's use of spirals in Zuni (Grand Canyon, US), Potawatomi Anishinaabe (Great Lakes, North America), and Mushkegowuk Cree (Canada), noting that in these worldviews, spirals are considered as part of an infinite process of 'bringing the world into existence' (2022, p.437). This conceptualisation brings an obligation to share across the generations in transitions and movements across place. Spirals trace connections across time, past and future, teaching about responsibilities toward learners

and those to come, drawing from ancestors and older generations in teaching-learning relationships. Rogers (2024, p.1598) discussed a framework that Gay'wu women (Yolngu, NT) constructed on connections from home, boarding, learner experiences and evaluation. With the learner at the centre, spirals link the generations, roles and obligations 'throughout time and place. And bring those times and places together, the land and the people' (Gay'wu Group of Women, 2019, in Rogers, 2024).

Moreover, while this is in the Yolngu Bawaka Country context, the idea of spiralled and circular ways of looking back to see the past, present and future (Country et al., 2024) remind us that expectations and obligations in transitions can have a deep past, with ways of viewing time, relationships, responsibilities and processes as cyclical or spiralled rather than linear.

The linking nature of these processes throughout time can support reflection on the overall continuity through education, family and community and beyond.

## Transitions as bridges: Connecting educational spaces

The metaphor of transitions being a 'bridge' (Huser et al., 2016) has been used in the literature to capture the journey learners and families undergo during the transition process (Boylan et al., 2024). The bridge 'space' has been identified as vague (Dockett, 2014) with many connotations; these include understanding a 'bridge' as a one-way 'holding period' as children become conditioned to being 'school students', or as a borderland or as a liminal space with rites of passage (Garpelin et al., 2008 in Huser et al., 2016).

Moreover, a bridge metaphor prompts further questions regarding who travels on the bridge, the role or presence of gatekeepers, when or where a bridge starts, and where it ends. While some schools believe transition is complete when a learner starts school, many acknowledge that the process continues for some time after this point. The bridge metaphor and its questions can help recognise the complex nature of transitions and the relationships, processes, and time entailed.





## Transitions are complex and multidimensional

This review of research identified twelve conceptualisations of transitions across and within educational settings, with two of these placed with the corresponding term (for example, vertical/horizontal; continuity/discontinuity).

Transitions are multidimensional, complex and experienced in multiple ways (Jindal-Snape et al., 2023). Correspondingly, no single definition or universal experience of a 'successful' transition exists (Jindal-Snape et al., 2021). This presents an opportunity for conversations about what transition might look like from various perspectives and how these can reflect, build on or enrich the work of stakeholders to benefit learners.

Transitions occur at various times within diverse contexts. They are not limited to predetermined patterns, which encourages reflection on the nature and timing of support for learners, their families, teaching teams and the physical settings (Jindal-Snape et al., 2021; Lukey et al., 2022). They encourage a view of learners as holding knowledge and skills in areas of their lives that are meaningful to them. They can act as signposts or reflection points on challenges, strengths, and intersecting circumstances for learners, such as re-entering a setting after extended absence, what might need to be in place, and who to partner with to help put such measures in place (Frawley et al., 2017).

## Theoretical frameworks

Research highlights that robust theoretical frameworks are necessary to understand transitions when multiple knowledge systems and cultures are involved (Kelly & Rigney, 2022; McGregor, 2019).

Systems-based theories can assist us in recognising the complexity of transitions and the interplay between layers and dimensions of a child's spheres of influence, the expansion of these as learners grow, and the bi-directional nature of the impact of these influences.

The bi-directional aspect acknowledges individual agency and influence within intersecting contexts, whether physiological, cognitive, social, or cultural. Systems theories of learning and development call for collaborative and cohesive support networks for optimum growth and wellbeing of individuals (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, in Dunlop, 2014). Dynamic ecological models

account for the interactions between learners, settings, and institutions, advocating for a coherent systemic view that transcends individual skills (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2000, in Boyle & Wilkinson, 2018).

The spheres of influence lens can help identify significant relationships and networks influencing transitions in learners' lives. For example, a sphere of influence approach in early childhood might recognise the main spheres of child, family, ECEC/school, and community (Akhlagh et al., 2024). Critical questions ask what might be needed as learners move into different environments and relationships. The interactive (also called bi-directional) principle can help recognise that learners need to be involved in decisions about the directions and options affecting them: from the type of activities they are interested in, to determining career paths based on their interests.

Systems theories can also help identify the range of contexts for everyday transitions. In Figure 3, Dunlop (2014) illustrated how the relationships of a learner across transitions are situated within a range of systems. With an ecological systems approach, Dunlop's model positions the learner at the centre of the range of transitions occurring in the context of the home and educational settings where they spend time. The relationships learners build within these contexts include their families and communities, as well as teacher and peer relationships. These relationships may overlap or interact with differing amounts of influence as learners grow, as represented by the outer chronosystem. School and centre policies will directly influence opportunities for learners, with local and government policy and cultural, societal and wider influences playing a role.

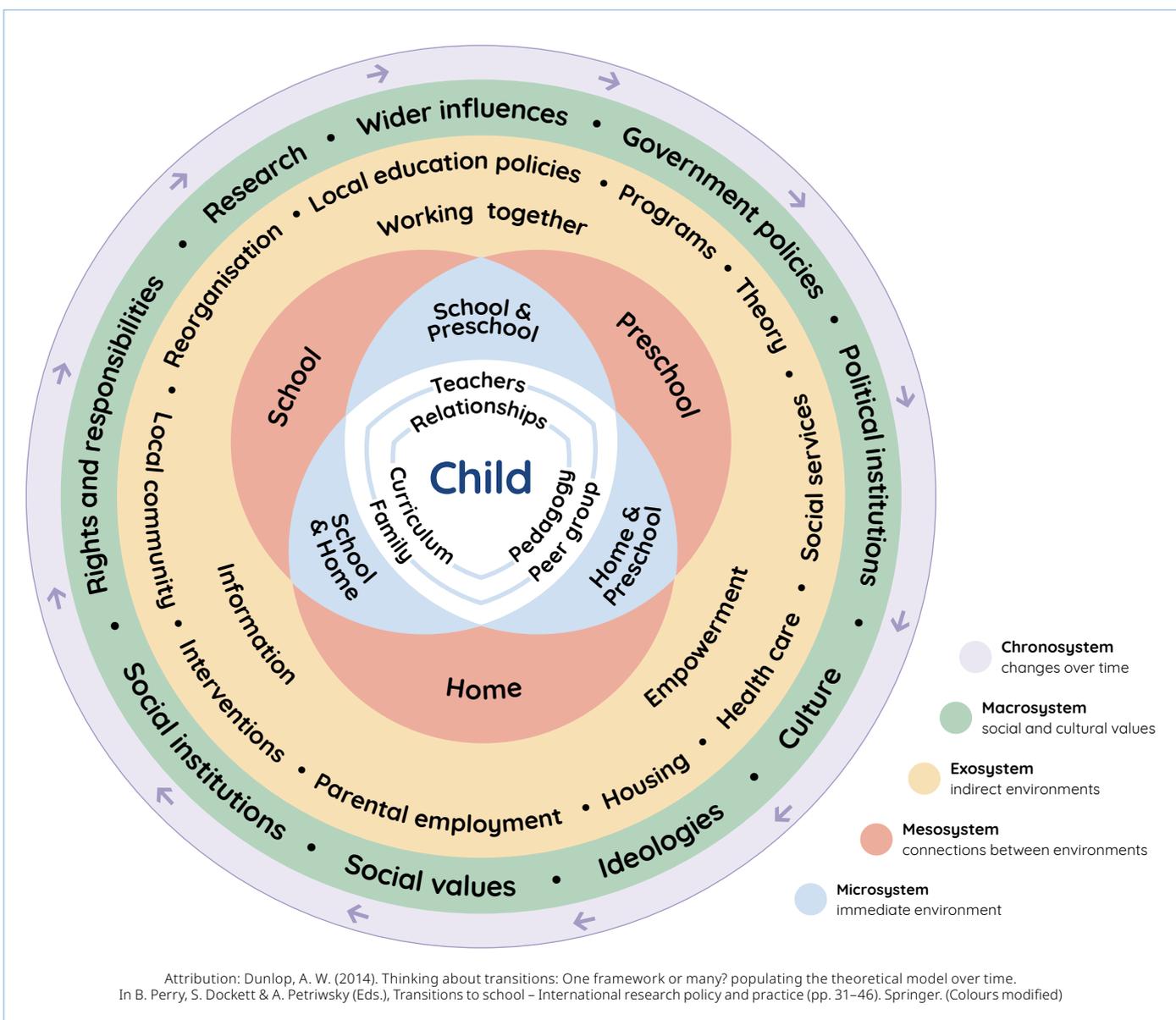


Figure 3: Dunlop's (2014, p.42) representation of transition as an ecological system

# FINDINGS: KNOWING LEARNERS AND FAMILIES

## Introduction

Knowing learners and families includes building strong relationships that can support continuity of learning, developing an awareness of potential vulnerability in populations, and providing targeted support to mitigate barriers during transitions. The following section highlights ways we might conceive of knowing learners and families to support transitions and help learners take up the growth opportunities that they present. In particular, it addresses:

- ▶ cultural identity and knowing learners and families
- ▶ wellbeing and engagement during transitions
- ▶ challenges in educational transitions related to knowing learners and families.

The following sections further explore these concepts in response to the themes of showing leadership, developing trusting partnerships, and moving from evidence into action.

## Cultural identity and knowing learners and families

Knowing learners and families requires close engagement with cultural identities. Learners can be empowered through transition practices that affirm their cultural identities and encompass deeply embedded shared knowledge, languages, values, traditions, and worldviews.

Supporting learners to be 'strong in culture' provides a shift from perceived deficits to strength-based approaches that can reinforce resilience, motivation and a more profound and continuous engagement in education.

Armstrong et al., 2012;  
Krakouer, 2016;  
McGregor, 2019

Traditional transition programs often require learners to conform to existing systems, expecting them to fit in; however, attention should be given to where the system can change to support learners' cultural identities (Bobongie and Jackson, 2019).

Queensland is culturally diverse, and learners bring different life experiences, languages and ways of 'knowing, being and doing to their learning' (EYLF v2.0) (AGDE, 2022). Supporting diverse cultural and linguistic identities begins with creating culturally safe spaces and using culturally responsive practices in educational settings. Valuing cultural and linguistic diversity can promote a sense of belonging. For learners with refugee backgrounds, the transition to education in Australia can come after periods of transience and educational disruption, creating potential for opportunity and/or vulnerability during transitions

as they navigate a new cultural context and education system (Sanagavarapu, 2024).

A learner's knowledge systems and philosophical values can holistically inform pedagogies (Hodgson-Smith, 2000) and have the potential to make the critical link between home language and culture, as well as education settings.

Successful transitions can facilitate engagement with kindergarten and school, leading to positive academic, developmental, physical, socio-emotional and wellbeing outcomes. Furthermore, broader engagement can be encouraged between families and their children's education, promoting a sense of inclusion for the whole community (SNAICC, 2013). McGregor (2019) highlighted that this is particularly important for all involved in education, as 'we can often become comfortable again in our own knowing and beliefs. A visit to community and a reminder of our relations with the land, its spirit and history, will move us forward in a good way' (p.57).

Knowing learners and families, therefore, extends to recognising the centrality of relationships, the importance of family, community and local Elders' participation, and building all relationships with respect, trust and care (Lukey et al., 2022; Sanagavarapu, 2024). Showing an understanding of learners and their families, in terms of cultural identity, will impact how learners are connected and supported within education settings. In the case of First Nations learners, actions which reflect an understanding of the culture of the child might result in prioritising family connections and preferences into account when enrolling or registering learners, for example: the opportunity for learners from the same Aboriginal kindergarten to be in the same class when

beginning school; and extended family members being able to attend the same school as their cousins, irrespective of enrolment zones.

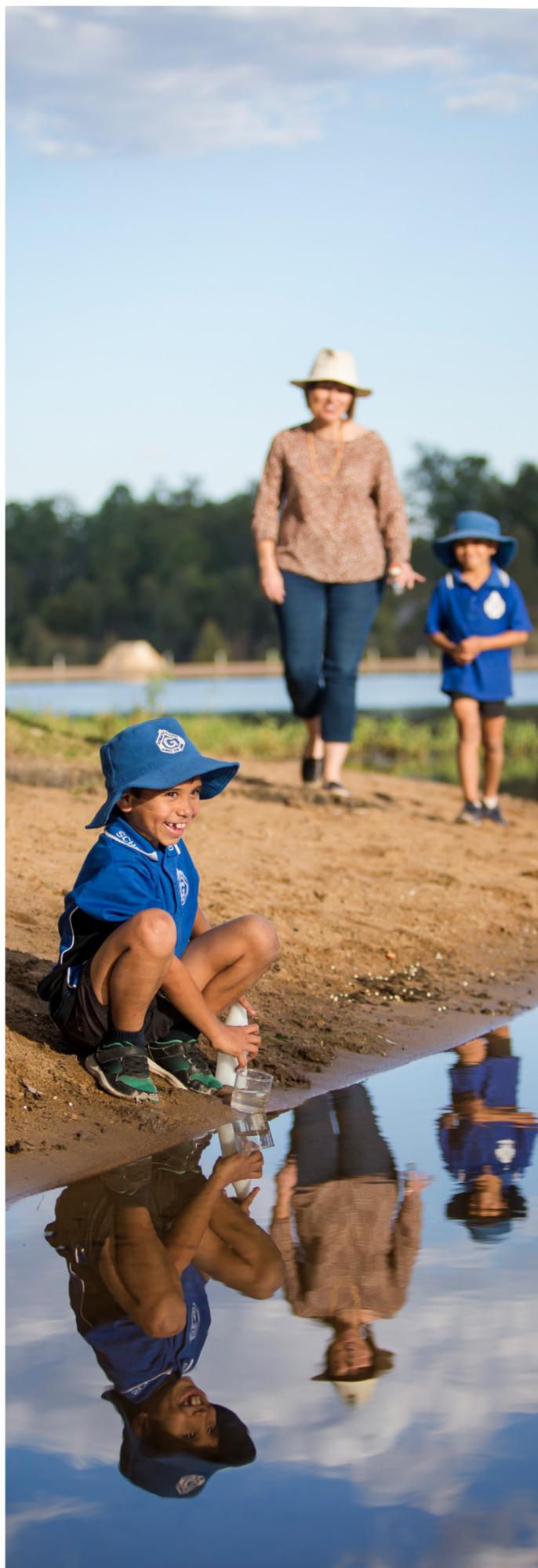
Indeed, a key aspect of knowing learners is ensuring they have the support needed within school contexts to negotiate the vertical and horizontal transitions they encounter. Indigenous learners supporting each other has been identified as a critical factor in successful transitions. Buddy programs (in which older learners mentor younger learners) and connecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners within the same year level (State of Victoria, 2024, p.74) have been implemented with good results. Acknowledging the critical importance of cultural knowledge in fostering resilience should also be recognised as an essential protective factor (Armstrong et al., 2012).

In addition, affirming cultural identity and enabling learners to express their culture through various practices can foster a sense of belonging, learners' agency and development (Armstrong et al., 2012).

In McGregor's 2019 study, successful initiatives to support transitions required ongoing efforts to connect with the community, maintaining dialogue and establishing continuous learning opportunities in connection with local families, their stories and perspectives. What matters most is building genuine and trusting relationships, which is critical to supporting learners in transitions.

Lukey et al., 2022;  
McGregor, 2019

First Nations learning has strong interconnections between place, community and language, and research shows that incorporating these components into schooling results in First Nations learners experiencing higher degrees of engagement and success (Edzerza et al., 2017; Hamel, 2017). However, there are critical challenges for learners from rural and remote communities as they move away from home to attend secondary schooling. In the Canadian context, the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples (2010) described the transitions of rural and remote Aboriginal Peoples as 'rocky' as they lose direct contact with family and extended family and are introduced to urban/city life that is largely foreign to them (McGregor, 2019).



## REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

Generated from the research

**Cultural identity and knowing learners** and families involves building trusting relationships, understanding strengths and needs, and creating culturally responsive and supportive environments. These environments should be culturally safe spaces that enable expression of culture and build learners' sense of identity and belonging. Questions raised in the literature can be used as discussion starters for services and schools, and as follow-up or check-in questions, and are **relevant across the education levels**.

### HOW DO WE ...

**Identify cultural strengths** and encourage cultural pride, incorporating cultural knowledge and understanding in all aspects of service/school life?

**Provide continuity of support** through structured orientation programs and mentoring?

**Build relationships** with families and incorporate cultural perspectives in education to strengthen belonging, identity and resilience?

**Support engagement** through sustained cultural and community connection?

## SPOTLIGHT ON PRACTICE

Knowing learners and families

### Preschool Readiness Program (PRP), Alice Springs, NT.

The PRP is a place-based initiative supporting children's transitions to preschool implemented by the Central Australian Aboriginal Congress in Alice Springs. The model includes:

- 1 Finding and connecting with families.
- 2 Health checks, developmental assessments and intervention work to determine and address child needs.
- 3 Preschool enrolment and adjustment support.
- 4 Intensive pre-preschool intervention.
- 5 Partnerships between health and education providers to enhance the child's wellbeing and participation in preschool.

Moss et al., 2015, pp. 14

The PRP brought together integrated services designed as a 'universal town-wide approach' to support early transitions, with a focus on strong relationship, culturally sensitive practices and addressing barriers to participation in preschool.

Moss, Harper and Silburn 2015

### Transitions for infants, Brazil

In a centre in Sao Paulo, Brazil, first transitions are organised carefully 'for this moment to occur as smoothly as possible' (Key educator, Brazil). The centre educators arranged a gradual transition to childcare using staggered entry so that they could prioritise giving care to each new infant during the transition phase. The centre requests that a parent or another adult family member stays with the infant during their first week or so. This ensures that the infant feels safe and also provides an opportunity for families to become more familiar with the setting. The transition period also enabled the educators to gain a deeper understanding of the child and how they interacted with their family.

White et al., 2022, pp. 12

### Years 9–10

#### Peace River North School District, BC, Canada

Staff members, transition coaches and members of the Aboriginal Council including Elders are involved in initiatives such as 'Learning from the Elders', which is a strengths-based approach to connecting with culture, promoting pride and community connections. Students participating in the initiative are offered school 'credits' to acknowledge their learning during the transition phase from Year 9 and Year 10.

McGregor 2019

## Wellbeing and engagement during transitions

Knowing learners and families involves ensuring they can actively participate and have a voice in transition conversations, recognising the importance of their prior experiences in ensuring coherence during transitions (Cronin et al., 2022). Studies have shown clear links between learners' sense of belonging and wellbeing, their perceptions of school climate, and the level of teacher support provided during transitions (Hanewald, 2013). Teachers' ability to support learners is crucial for quality learning environments and transitions. Learners who feel supported by teachers are found to have a positive motivational orientation to schoolwork and they experience positive social and emotional wellbeing (Bru et al., 2010, pp.519–520).

One of the most significant and potentially stressful disruptions to a learner's life and wellbeing involves the transition from primary to secondary school, which for many learners is associated with a 'marked decline in school connectedness, school engagement and sense of belonging'.

Beatson et al., 2023

In a study involving students from 20 schools in Western Australia, 70% of students found the transition from Year 6 to Year 7 'easy or very easy' and 25% found the transition 'difficult' (Waters et al., 2014). However, research findings vary, with some studies indicating that most students experience difficulties, while others estimate that between 15% and 31% experience difficulties (Beatson et al., 2023). Waters and colleagues (2014) found that girls looked forward to making new friends, expanding peer networks and participating in new activities more than boys. Significant disruptions to friendships for learners during transitions pose a greater risk of impacting their wellbeing and engagement.

Spernes (2022) identified a connection between wellbeing and transitions, indicating that family, teacher, and peer support are critical.

Waters, Lester, and Cross (2014) found that 'peer support was the most powerful predictor of learners' positive transition expectations in Grade 7, while parental presence in Grade 7 was most predictive of a positive transition experience.' (p.163).

Relationships 'perceived and real' can positively or negatively impact learners' experiences (Jindal-Snape et al., 2020).

Difficulty navigating school transitions has been linked to increased disengagement and potentially leaving school early (McDermott et al., 2018). Examples of difficulties leading to disengagement include mobility (for example, relocation), family (for example, making money to support family), peers (for example, bullying), school engagement and environment (for example, failing subjects, being bored), health (for example, pregnancy, mental health) and crime (for example, incarceration) (McDermott et al., 2018). Disengagement is often a complex process that happens over time and is impacted by individual and contextual factors. Some of the long-term consequences include negative impacts on health outcomes and economic status well into adulthood (McDermott et al., 2018). Sniedze-Gregory et al. (2021) suggested supporting learners in developing a 'wellbeing buffer' and developing skills and strategies for navigating challenges during transitions. Transitions that involve a move to a new setting inevitably change learners' relationships with teaching teams and peers. However, research shows that supportive relationships – maintaining or developing new relationships – can mitigate transitions' potential challenges and adverse effects (Benner et al., 2017). One of the most critical aspects of successful transitions is a learner's sense of belonging, which can support learning, wellbeing and engagement.

Belonging is core to the Early Years Learning Framework (AGDE, 2022). At school, belonging includes feeling accepted and valued by teaching teams and peers, engaging with relevant curriculum, knowing they can succeed at school, having a respected cultural identity, and expressing themselves authentically (AERO, 2023b).

Further, successful transitions play a significant role in supporting the continuity of learning. Knowing learners and families involves ensuring they can actively participate and have a voice in transition conversations and recognising the importance of their prior experiences in ensuring coherence during transitions (Cronin et al., 2022). Studies have shown clear links between learners' sense of belonging and wellbeing, their perceptions of school climate, and the level of teacher support provided during transitions (Hanewald, 2013). Teachers' ability to support learners is crucial for quality learning environments. Students who feel supported by teachers are found to have a positive motivational orientation to schoolwork, and they experience positive social and emotional well-being (Bru et al., 2010, pp.519–520).

## REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

Generated from the research

**Wellbeing and engagement during transitions** is strengthened through building strong relationship, ongoing clear and open communication and being responsive to learners social, emotional, physical, intellectual and developmental needs. Questions raised in the literature can be used as discussion starters for services and schools, and as follow-up or check-in questions, and are **relevant across the education levels**.

### HOW DO WE ...

**Support social and emotional learning** and build resilience through learning that fosters self-regulation and interpersonal skills?

**Understand the importance** of school and home contexts, peer influences and the family's role in sustaining wellbeing and engagement?

**Recognise the importance of trauma awareness**, and health and family circumstances experienced by learners?

**Use culturally safe and inclusive teaching practices**, drawing on trauma-informed and strengths-based strategies?

**Continue monitoring wellbeing** indicators and provide support at the service/school, group/class and individual levels?

**Encourage open communication** about mental health and facilitate discussion and support for managing stress and overall wellbeing?

## SPOTLIGHT ON PRACTICE

Knowing learners and families

### Midwestern Public School District, USA.

In a large-scale intervention with 1304 students in Year 6 in a Midwestern Public School District (USW), the key message was:

*'worries about students' belonging in middle school are normal, that they are short-lived, and that support is available.'*

Seeing worries as 'common and surmountable' enables young people to perceive challenges as nonthreatening and temporary. The purpose of the intervention was to enhance students' sense of wellbeing and positive attitudes towards schools. The longer-term aims were to provide strategies to manage stress and hopefully, lead to reduced behavioural challenges, disengagement and school absences. The interventions involved writing tasks completed during regular classroom lessons based on students reviewing survey results of the previous year's cohort.

The following sample Year 7 quote was provided to Year 6 students who responded to questions such as, 'Name 1 or 2 reasons why a sixth grader like you might worry at first about whether you "fit in" or belong at [school name]'; 'Name 1 or 2 reasons why a sixth grader like you might feel like you "fit in" or "belong" at [school name] after a while.'

*'I felt like I had a knot in my stomach in my first few months at [school name] and was afraid to talk to my teachers. I didn't know them, and the classes are harder. I worried that they thought I was dumb. But they believe in you even when you get bad grades. They want to help you get better, and they helped me do better in the second quarter. Teachers are there for you at [school name].'*

Borman et al. 2019

## Challenges in educational transitions related to knowing learners and families

Below we summarise three key barriers to understanding learners, families, and transitions. These include experiencing vulnerability, relocating to attend secondary school, and having deficit views on the capabilities of young learners.

### Families experiencing vulnerability

The *Australian Early Development Census Report 2024* (AGDE, 2024) identified four priority groups most likely to experience developmental vulnerability in their early years: children with a language background other than English, children living in remote and very remote geographic locations, families experiencing socio-economic disadvantage, and First Nations children who may be living in the most socio-economically disadvantaged communities. The findings reinforce the critical need for targeted support in early childhood and highlight the specific groups that may need additional support to navigate transitions.

Dockett and Perry (2021) established 'belonging' as a key indicator for effective transitions and supporting wellbeing, with the transition to school being a key period in which young learners build a sense of belonging. One of the key issues for learners at risk of vulnerability is that they are less likely to attend formal ECEC settings, which can have significant implications for the transition to school compared to their peers who have had access to ECEC (Krakouer et al., 2017).

In concert with the Australian Government report above, Krakouer et al.'s (2017) literature review similarly showed that learners experiencing vulnerability during the transition to school will likely have more complex needs. Their review examined the support needs of children who have experienced trauma, children living in Out-of-Home Care (OoHC), children with refugee backgrounds, and children who experience intergenerational poverty. This research identifies learners at risk of experiencing vulnerability during transitions, including transitions from home, OoHC and/or other programs/services to ECEC services and school. This draws attention to four key issues and priorities:

- ▶ Identifying families experiencing or at risk of vulnerability highlights the importance of knowing learners and families and improving ongoing education support.
- ▶ Building partnerships and developing transdisciplinary networks, resulting in a more holistic approach to transition for learners and families.
- ▶ Professional learning for ECEC, OSHC and school professionals, including 'trauma-informed practice, transdisciplinary engagement, skills to foster resilience in learners, family engagement and empowerment' (Krakouer et al., p.39).
- ▶ Support further research to address gaps in the evidence base, including the development of profiles for learners not enrolled in ECEC and the possible impacts for the future (Krakouer et al., p.39).





In reading and attending to data on 'at-risk of vulnerability', research cautions that it is essential to respond with a strengths-based approach for individual learners rather than seeing 'groups' of learners the same way. For example, Gillan, Krakouer and Mellor (2017) addressed this point, stating that First Nations Peoples across Australia are a highly diverse population, and the gains made by specific communities and regions are often missed in aggregated data. The authors also noted the successes of and continuing rise in Year 12 and equivalent attainment, with 20% growth in the last decade (ABS, 2022).

### First Nations learners relocating to attend school

In Australia, 40.8% of First Nations people live in major cities, 43.8% in regional areas, and 15.3% in remote locations (ABS, 2021). For young Indigenous people in rural, remote and very remote communities, leaving home to attend boarding schools is a significant transition away from core aspects of their identity, such as community and family, culture, language, geography and food. Bobongie (2017b) noted that 'receiving a quality education while being so far removed from the security of a home community comes with a personal cost' (p.130). These major geographical transitions can influence personal factors associated with life and living, such as sense of belonging, engagement and resilience, further highlighting the divide between the two different worlds learners must navigate (Bobongie, 2017a). The Victorian Government points out that ongoing communication is essential beyond the compulsory school years, to fully inform learners and their families of all senior secondary and post-school pathway options, including those provided by local First Nations organisations (State of Victoria, 2024, p.74).

A review by Guenther et al. (2024) noted 'a reasonable assumption' that the factors supporting transitions for First Nations could apply to non-Indigenous and non-remote students (p.7). Redman-MaLaren and colleagues (2021) reviewed the transition support services of the DoE Transition Support Services (TSS). A total of 294 primary, secondary and re-engaging students responded to surveys.

They noted that all secondary learners relocating to boarding school 'identified that TSS had assisted their transition to boarding school' (p.95). Among those re-engaging, learners identified that the TSS support had 'increased their capacity to cope when things go wrong' through culturally sensitive services (p.100).

The TSS model emphasises the relationship between the support staff and learners alongside resources. One area countering the satisfaction was distance and the impact this had for access, highlighting the need for further support of the TSS work for more equitable provision. The high levels of satisfaction led the authors to argue that the model could inform similar approaches in other areas of Australia.

## Deficit views on the capabilities of learners

A significant barrier to effective transitions is the misconception that learners lack the capability to understand their own needs and contribute to discussions about them.

In contrast, a strengths-based approach recognises learners' wisdom, resilience, and capabilities in making decisions about issues that directly affect them.

In the early years, this involves teaching teams and families working together to plan transitions, including the learners' perspectives and experiences and exploring what they would like to know about the transition (Hopps-Wallis et al., 2016).

Dockett and Perry (2016) stated that 'strengths-based approaches invite us to move beyond assessments of what learners can—or cannot do—as they start school, looking instead to their strengths, capabilities and potentials. This shifts emphasis from a focus on what a child brings with them to school, to a focus on what teachers and children can achieve—how can we help all children achieve their potential' (p.139). For example, Niemiec and Tomasulo (2023) highlighted the importance of a functional approach to strengths for disability, drawing on research showing that amplifying strengths reveals greater benefits than remediating/correcting deficits. A learner's sense of agency and confidence is enhanced by including their voices in decision-making and acknowledging that learners and their families have a perspective on their transitions. Transition initiatives drawing on strengths include peer mentoring and activities that build school culture and support inclusion.

Sniedze-Gregory et al. (2021) recommended that learner-centred transition approaches build upon an 'emerging sense of responsibility and agency' and develop their wellbeing buffer.

Facilitating successful transitions involves multifaceted and transdisciplinary initiatives to achieve the core goals of the department's policy (DoE, 2022).

## REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

Generated from the research

**Challenges in educational transitions** can include significant disruptions to continuity of learning. Using strength-based view and approaches that recognise learners' capabilities and build strong relationships with families, communities and services, ensures more inclusive and supported transitions. Questions reading in the literature can be used as discussion starters for services and schools, and as follow-up or check-in questions, and are **relevant across the education levels**.

### HOW DO WE ...

**Recognise and understand barriers** related to learner identity and development?

**Recognise external factors** that impact on learner engagement in education?

**Understand the impact of family circumstances** and parental involvement on a learners' academic outcomes and overall wellbeing?

**Identify the dynamics** impacting on student motivation, particularly during transitions?

**Address barriers to wellbeing** that might affect a student's ability to engage in school, such as disability, mental health concerns or trauma?

**Support learners in managing school workload** and other commitments, particularly for students experiencing family or financial pressures?

**Provide support for students with disability**, those facing mental health challenges or trauma that could impact on their educational and post-school pathways?

# SHOWING LEADERSHIP

## Introduction

Showing leadership, or engaging in relationships that empower others, in the context of the transitions undertaken by learners, is a demanding, complex process. Transitions represent opportunities for growth; they also present a range of challenges.

The varied, dynamic, multifaceted nature of learners' transitions calls for strong, strategic, sustainable, agile and responsive leadership.

Sustainable leadership has diverse effects on learners in transition by affecting the development of policies, organisational leadership and curricula that form the context for learners' transitions (Peng et al., 2024).

Leadership in relation to transitions is shown in different ways. For example, every teaching team member plays

an important leadership role in their relationships with learners in transition, and with their families and communities. In addition, these teaching teams need support from their leaders, encompassing both the managerial practices of supervisors and the development and implementation practices of education leaders (Boyle & Wilkinson, 2018). The learners may also play leadership roles as members of their families and communities. Research into how teaching teams show leadership in fostering learners' transitions is the focus of this section, although studies exploring the benefits of sharing leadership among learning communities are also addressed (Sisson et al., 2021).

Showing leadership involves:

- ▶ providing effective transition support to all learners
- ▶ supporting the development of transition teams
- ▶ addressing changes in the learning environment.

## Providing effective transition support

Teaching teams show leadership by providing a range of evidence-based approaches to transition support to help learners and their families make successful transitions. For example, ongoing, authentic, high-quality transition activities positively impact learners' experiences in the first year of school; the effectiveness of their transitions can either exacerbate or ameliorate the disadvantages they experience (Cook et al., 2024). The transition activities explored in Cook et al.'s study involved: preschoolers spending time in school classrooms; shortened school days at the beginning of the year; family and child visits to school classrooms; home visits by teachers; parent orientation held by schools; staggered school entry plans; teaching teams sending information home about the transition to school; preparing children regarding school topics and skills, such as what to do when a child is late or absent; and, advice regarding contacting the school about concerns. In keeping with these results, research emphasising the importance of transition activities for learners' transitions into primary school suggests that interventions in primary to post-secondary transitions have positive effects on at least some indices; for example, social-emotional programs help prepare learners for transitions, and post-transfer mindset interventions enhance learners' sense of belonging and improves outcomes (Beatson et al., 2023; Evans et al., 2018).

However, programs and resources are often targeted at learners who transition in expected ways, such as participants in transition-to-school programs moving from early childhood education to primary school. In this

context, effective leadership involves adapting to the needs of learners, making 'invisible transitions' visible, such as arriving unexpectedly at school, as well as those taking more common pathways (Dockett & Perry, 2021). Transition programs must also promote a positive, welcoming learning environment and support cultural diversity among learners (SNAICC, 2014). There are three key, interrelated ways for teaching teams involved in various stages/aspects of transitions to show leadership in providing effective transition support for learners:

tailoring programs for individual needs

combining effective activities and strategies

consulting with learners, families and communities

### Tailoring transition programs for individual needs

Successful transition programs are not based on a 'one-size-fits-all' approach; they consider each learner and family's uniqueness (Kauerz & Schaper, 2021). In keeping with more recent research into sustainable leadership in education, which focuses on practices like resilience, ethical leadership, and inclusivity (Peng et al., 2024), transition support needs to be built on high expectations for learners and contribute to a welcoming environment for all (CESE, 2021). Te Riele et al. (2020) pointed out that

alternative learning contexts provide examples of tailoring support through practices like adopting personalised learning plans for all students. Such plans enable leaders to support current transitions by understanding and responding to learners' interests and learning styles. They also provide a framework for students to develop learning goals that will help them negotiate future transitions. Through flexible, tailored strategies, leaders can respond to the changing needs of diverse learners, including learners from various cultural, linguistic, geographic and socio-economic backgrounds and those with disabilities.

Responsive leadership of learners in transition encompasses identifying and addressing potential barriers to effective transitions for various groups. For example, when designing transition support for schools supporting learners from low socio-economic status and ethnic minority backgrounds, leaders need to work towards inclusive, caring environments where learners can develop positive connections with teaching teams and peers. In a USA study of 252 learners of around 15 years of age with mainly Latino backgrounds, Benner et al. (2017) found that learners' grades and wellbeing deteriorated across the transition from middle

to high school. However, strong friend support and school belonging were protective factors. Similarly, in Australia, teaching teams working with young learners and families experiencing vulnerability during the early years argue for the necessity of timely transition programs and practices that are 'appropriate, accessible and responsive' (Nolan et al., 2017, p.77). In keeping with this idea, researchers in the USA have called for early years transition policies and practices tailored to rural families' particular challenges (for example, Iruka et al., 2020; Sheridan et al., 2020). Good examples of appropriate practices that help facilitate the transitions of First Nations learners into school in Australia are training and employing local Aboriginal education staff in schools and communicating the value of Indigenous learning through curriculum priorities (Krakouer, 2016).

A valuable framework for teaching teams to show leadership by tailoring transitions involves considering learners' funds of knowledge and identity (Boylan et al., 2023). Boylan's research also illustrated how the three leadership strategies for making effective programs, practices, and resources available (that is, tailoring programs, engaging with learners and families, and combining various activities) are closely linked.

## SPOTLIGHT ON PRACTICE

### Showing leadership

#### Making effective programs, practices, and resources available

Three- to six-year olds' *funds of knowledge and identity* (ie. understandings of self, family, community and their experiences and use of this knowledge to understand, situate and express themselves) were explored to help teachers in Western Australia tailor transition practices. A thematic analysis of interviews, professional learning days, teacher coaching sessions, document analyses and observations indicated the importance of the following:

Teachers collecting information to know each child (for example: by questionnaires about their backgrounds, personality, needs, routines, strengths and interests before they start school) and using it to plan transitions with a child-centred curriculum (for example: involving items and activities that children had indicated they enjoyed).

Teachers viewing transitions through a child lens, leading to flexibility in timetabling (for example: more time for play) and making time for communication with anxious parents and children (for example: through staggered entry times).

A shared focus on developing reciprocal relationships between children, teachers, families and schools through orientation events (for example: parent workshops and teddy bear picnics) and conversations between teachers and parents.

A shared vision created for all stakeholders underpinned by consistent communication through action plans and two-way communication.

Teachers advocating for the importance and ongoing nature of transitions to school leaders.

Schools leading and supporting staff involved in transitions, valuing and trusting their expertise (for example: in pedagogical decisions).

Boylan et al 2023

However, further research into the effects of tailoring transition programs and practices is critical. Researchers exploring primary-to-secondary transitions have pointed out that surprisingly few transition intervention studies have analysed the impact of transitions on learners with severe conditions, or explored marginalised learner populations, such as those of lower socio-economic status (Beatson et al., 2023). These gaps in the literature are significant, given indications from early years research that learners from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to experience transition difficulties (Jiang et al., 2021) and have limited opportunities to access varied transition activities and resources (Krakouer et al., 2017).

## Engaging with learners, families and communities

Effective leaders develop transition programs in consultation with learners, families, and communities and work to foster their ongoing engagement. In young children's transitions to school, practices facilitating strong relationships between learners, families, and teaching teams promote family involvement in schools and enhance learner outcomes. Thus, Cook and Coley's (2017) large-scale examination of the specific types of practices used in the USA to ease children and families' transitions into primary school found that transition activities aimed at parents were linked to enhanced academic skills among learners in their first year of school.

Indeed, Sisson and colleagues (2021) suggested that co-constructing shared leadership in early childhood settings leads to a democratic learning environment. In support, training early childhood teaching teams and leaders in culturally responsive pedagogy led to a restructuring of their power relationships with Aboriginal families; the resulting co-constructed leadership approach involved deep listening, dialogue and agency for social justice (Sisson et al., 2024). An example of this is a shift away from strategies for engaging families and learners in transition, which reinforce conventional power relationships (for example, parent-teacher interviews and surveys), to more culturally appropriate approaches.

'I can send surveys home, but I know the parents, I know that's not going to work, it's not going to come back. It's about casual yarning in the morning and making them feel comfortable and safe in the environment first (Aboriginal teacher, final interview).

Sisson et al., 2024, p.25.

One key aspect of showing leadership is for education leaders to ensure that community leaders have input into decisions about supporting learners in transition. For example, in a review of practices and programs that enhance primary-to-secondary transitions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners, families and communities, Lukey and colleagues (2022) highlighted the importance of relationships between schools and local Elders for supporting Indigenous learners' cultural identities, belonging and involvement in high school.



This review indicates the following:

Inspirational leaders who understand Indigenous cultures can facilitate positive changes and promote learner-centred, culturally responsive practice, enhancing Indigenous learners' successful transition to high school.

Mentoring programs that include adults and older learners provide essential support and guidance during the transition to high school; effective mentoring improves school attendance, achievement, and social connections.

Empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners through involvement in decision-making, leadership opportunities, and cultural activities enhances their self-esteem and confidence, influencing their engagement in school.

A multi-site case study of playgroups in Queensland indicates that playgroup facilitators play an important leadership role in learners' and families' horizontal and vertical transitions (Williams et al., 2016). Strong local connections enable playgroup leaders to refer families to community child health checks, library programs and services. Playgroup leaders also report acting as an information gateway for health professionals. In addition to facilitating learners' and families' horizontal transitions, school-based playgroups support learners and families in making vertical transitions to school. Such leadership is crucial for families unfamiliar with local resources and

schools due to having recently relocated from other parts of Australia or internationally and/or speaking languages other than English.

## Combining effective activities and strategies

Offering all learners comprehensive support is an important way for teaching teams to show leadership in supporting transitions in the kindergarten and school years. In a study of over 45 school classrooms in the USA, more than 70% of learners had difficulties in at least one area (that is, making friends, following schedules, meeting academic demands, working within groups, and/or being organised) when they were transitioning into their first year of school (Jiang et al., 2021). Also, teacher and parent reports from a large longitudinal study in the USA indicated that groups of learners starting school and their families experienced different combinations of transition activities (Cook et al., 2024). For example, learners from low socio-economic backgrounds (based on household income) tended to be involved in fewer transition activities. In contrast, those from higher socio-economic backgrounds tended to participate in broader transition activities involving more face-to-face experiences.

The combinations of transition activities experienced by learners predicted their initial adjustment to their first year of school, their parents' school involvement, and parental satisfaction with school. These findings highlight the need for leaders to develop policies and practices that help learners and families from lower socio-economic backgrounds access comprehensive transition support. This study also underscores the importance of developing transition supports for families and learners.

## REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

Generated from the research

**Providing effective support** in transitions is complex and dynamic and needs to be responsive to the needs of learners. Showing leadership involves identifying and addressing barriers that impact on learners' wellbeing and engagement. All educators demonstrate leadership during transitions, but they also need to be supported from leaders at all levels of the schooling system. Questions raised in the literature can be used as discussion starters for services and schools, and as follow-up or check-in questions, and are **relevant across the education levels**.

### HOW ARE WE ...

**Using the funds of knowledge** and identity learners bring into transition programs?

**Tailoring ongoing, authentic transition activities** and strategies to the unique needs and strengths of learners, their families and communities?

**Supporting parental and community involvement** in the transitions?

**Supporting engagement** through sustained cultural and community connection?

**Designing transition supports** that promote inclusive, caring, student-centred environments?

**Developing transition activities** in ways that acknowledge and foster learners' connections with educators, peers, families and communities?

## Supporting the development of transition teams

Just as it is essential to implement effective transition programs and practices, it is equally important to build, train, and support leadership teams involved in learners' transitions. Showing leadership in learners' transitions during the early childhood education and school years involves ensuring that the transition programs and teams are well-equipped to meet the diverse needs of learners, especially those experiencing vulnerability or disadvantage (Pitt et al., 2021).

Teaching teams involved in early years transitions for learners and families experiencing vulnerability in Victoria highlighted the importance of building professional knowledge, skills, and attitudes related to transitions. They also stressed the importance of accessing appropriate practices and resources to support these efforts (Nolan et al., 2017).

Teaching teams can demonstrate leadership when developing teams that support learners in three interconnected ways:

- ▶ building strong transition teams
- ▶ creating opportunities for training and collaboration among members of teaching teams
- ▶ modelling responsiveness to learners, families and communities.

In the following sections, we will expand these points to explore how each strategy contributes to creating a more effective and responsive transition experience for learners and their families.

### Building strong teams

The transition experiences of learners depend on their access to affordable, high-quality education opportunities with a well-trained workforce. Therefore, successful leadership in a policy, managerial, and education context depends on the recruitment, compensation and retention of staff who can facilitate smooth and responsive transitions for learners with diverse needs and backgrounds (Butler, 2023). Indeed, a key indicator of the importance that leaders of educational institutions place on transitions is their care in appointing appropriate teachers for transitioning learners (ERO, 2015). However, leaders attempting to build teams that can foster learners' transitions face several barriers including shifts in policy direction, workforce instability and administrative burdens that detract from the ability of teaching teams to focus on facilitating learners' transitions (Ziebell et al., 2025).

Interviews with teachers and administrators in eleven school districts in the USA highlighted the structural barriers to supporting learners' transitions into school. Key obstacles involved: a lack of communication about

learners' experiences before their first year of school; practical challenges related to collaboration between early childhood educators and school teachers; and external policy factors, such as quality rating systems (Purtell et al., 2020). Similarly, an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2017) report on transitions into school emphasised the importance of local leadership backed by a clear national policy framework for meeting the needs of local learners. It highlighted the necessity for school and early childhood leaders to be knowledgeable about the latest reforms and policies and how they affect learners' transitions (OECD, 2017).

### Creating training and collaboration opportunities

Preparing teaching teams to support transitions enhances learners' experiences (OECD, 2017) and is a key responsibility for leaders. In a review of the literature on transitions across early childhood and compulsory school settings in Europe, Balduzzi et al. (2019) pointed out that heightening awareness of inclusion, diversity and multilingualism among teaching teams and practitioners is vital for implementing inclusive transitions and addressing inadvertent exclusion mechanisms that may be built into established practices.

Moreover, creating opportunities for joint professional development pathways and inter-professional exchanges is foundational to the effective leadership of transition teams (Balduzzi et al., 2019; Dockett, 2014). These opportunities may include face-to-face meetings, professional conversations, and reciprocal visits.

Such activities contribute to collaborative professional relationships involving mutual respect and shared understanding that are crucial to the success of learners' transitions.

Leaders need to overcome various barriers to effective training and collaboration to foster learners' transitions. These obstacles may be structural (for example, timetable misalignment and resource constraints, such as a lack of time and space), attitudinal (for example, unwillingness of professionals from different settings to engage with each other), pedagogic (for example, differences in learning environments and strategies) and/or process-based (Boyle & Petriwsky, 2014). Boyle and Wilkinson (2018) addressed a research gap noted by the OECD (2017) by exploring the direct effects of leadership on transitions.

## SPOTLIGHT ON PRACTICE

### Showing leadership

#### Supporting the development of transition teams

The study explored the leading practices of a group of early-years professionals. They worked at a co-located NSW long day care centre and primary school that had a history of infrequent interactions. Historically, interactions surrounding children's transitions from early childhood settings to school have been influenced by rigid power and authority dynamics across sectors. However, the leaders in this study established conditions for shared understanding, challenging the power dynamics that hinder cross-sector collaboration.

'I'm very conscious of the fact that sometimes preschool teachers have a perception that, not that we look down on them, but that their perception is not the same as a primary school teacher and I'm conscious of wanting to, you know we're peers in this and we're learning together.'

Kate, Assistant School Principal

'School has the power and it's seen as education and we are still vying for that respect ... early childhood deserves to be respected, we would like to share that knowledge and power.'

Paula, Long Day Care Director

Kate suggested that the group of early-years professionals negotiate a set of norms (protocols). These included: regular meetings of transition teams, visits by kindergarten teachers to school classrooms and vice versa, open honest sharing, respectful listening, mutual recognition of professional expertise and joint decision-making. In this way, the early years professionals worked together to develop policies for their site, such as mutually framed transition statements. This required negotiating a shared language and validating diverse sets of expertise.

Boyle and Wilkinson 2018



## Modelling responsivity to learners, families and communities

Leaders can positively influence the culture of their schools and early childhood organisations when they model collaborative practices. This involves building strong, respectful relationships with learners in transition, their families and their communities (Dockett, 2014). Family support for transitioning learners is key, and even in transitions into high school – when peer relationships are emphasised, parental presence before and after school predicts that learners are likely to experience a positive transition (Evans et al., 2018). When leaders model a welcoming approach, they help establish the conditions for reciprocal communication between teaching teams and families based on mutual respect and trust, supporting families as they support learners (AERO, 2022).

However, leaders face numerous challenges in developing reciprocal communication with learners, families and communities. For example, environmental discontinuities across the primary and secondary school systems can act as barriers to connections between schools, families and learners, affecting how these groups view transitions and impeding their responses (Bagnall et al., 2020). Furthermore, leaders need to consider the range and specific nature of challenges experienced by learners in transition. Specifically, learners with disabilities and their families report multiple obstacles when moving from intervention services to ECEC and school (Jiang et al., 2021). In addition, leaders must promote responsive, inclusive transitions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners by supporting their identity and belonging, challenging dominant narratives and stereotypes, and promoting inclusive resources (Dockett, 2014). It is also vital for learners from rural and remote communities that teaching teams foster family

and community connections. A study of transitions from an Aboriginal boarding school to the workplace indicated that family support and positive role models motivate Aboriginal learners to pursue education and prepare for the workforce (Shay et al., 2023).

The literature on OSHC highlights the need for leaders' responsivity to learners making horizontal transitions. Learners regard OSHC as a context that supports friendships, a shift from the busyness of school to an opportunity for play (Moir & Bruncker, 2021; Simoncini et al., 2015). They have pragmatic, actionable ideas about improving their transitions into OSHC, but inflexible leadership practices for managing risks can act as unnecessary constraints (Simoncini et al., 2015).

In contrast, when OSHC leaders listen to learners and give them opportunities to make active decisions, this enables learners to exercise leadership in their transitions, making choices about what they wish to do.

AERO, 2023a; Milton et al., 2025.

Leadership of OSHC that is shared with learners, for example, in co-designing programs and spaces, fosters a sense of empowerment, belonging, engagement and strong relationships (Milton et al., 2025; Westoby et al., 2021). However, in a review, Cartmel and Hurst (2021) pointed out gaps in OSHC transitions research concerning leaders' responsiveness to diverse groups. They argue that there is a need for further research into how OSHC leaders can support the transitions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and respond to the needs of older learners and those with higher support needs.



## SPOTLIGHT ON PRACTICE

### Showing leadership

#### Leaders' responsiveness to learners in outside school hours care

Outside school hours care (OSHC) leadership shared with learners, facilitates their transitions by helping to build their engagement and belonging. The following co-designed activities were trialled at five OSHC sites in NSW.

##### Woodwork café

Supported learning to use tools to build two go-karts to race in teams at a community event. The program developed planning and communication skills, teamwork and community connections.

##### Movie maker

Drama sessions with a volunteer drama teacher (skilled mentor) to build learners' confidence and community links with the local drama school.

##### Get active

Lawn bowls with volunteers at the local community club developed community connections, intergenerational bonds and teamwork.

##### Art space

A young local artist ran an art class with the children, and peer-to-peer mentoring also took place with older children supporting younger ones. Children worked collaboratively to create an art project for exhibitions at the OSHC.

The co-designed programs: connected children with each other and their community; facilitated transitions into OSHC; strengthened learners' relationships; and enhanced their engagement and wellbeing.

## REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

### Generated from the research

**Supporting the development of transition teams** involves building collaborative teams and creating opportunities for professional learning and shared practice. Transition teams can support learners by being responsive to learners, families and communities. Questions raised in the literature can be used as discussion starters for services and schools, and as follow-up or check-in questions, and are **relevant across the education levels**.

#### HOW ARE WE ...

**Developing teams** that can support responsive, inclusive transitions and community engagement?

**Supporting ongoing professional learning, collaborative practices and community engagement** among professionals involved in transitions?

**Addressing the 'invisible transitions'** learners experience?

**Promoting family and community support** for transitions through leadership practices?

**Modelling reciprocal communication** with learners, their families and communities?

**Enabling learners to show leadership** in their own transitions?

## Addressing changes in the learning environment

Showing leadership in helping transitioning learners and their families involves developing a vision of learners flourishing within changing contexts. This vision needs to be built in partnership with stakeholders and communicated in a shared language. It should incorporate the features of wellbeing, engagement and belonging discussed in the *Knowing learners and families* section of this review. As diverse groups of learners progress through various transitions, they require leadership support to negotiate shifts in their daily experiences and the philosophies and expectations of those around them.

There are two crucial and related ways for teaching teams to address such shifts:

- ▶ promoting alignment
- ▶ meeting the needs of diverse learners.

### Promoting alignment

Efforts to build pedagogical, curriculum and other forms of alignment occur within broader sociocultural, historical, policy and systems contexts.

Alignment involves many aspects of instructional policy, including changes in classroom learning environments, assessment approaches, pedagogical strategies, and curriculum.

Kauerz & Schaper, 2021;  
AERO, 2023a;  
Milton et al., 2025.

Taking these into account, effective leaders use the discontinuities that learners experience to reflect on the distinguishing features of their learning environments, leading to growth and improvement in transition planning. Transitioning learners need some degree of continuity to develop, use, transfer and adapt their existing knowledge in a new learning environment (CESE, 2021). International research suggests that alignment at the broader level of goals or strands of education can promote such continuity; the learning areas covered need not be the same when curriculum frameworks or other documents provide shared goals (Shuey et al., 2019).

When learners' transitions involve moving from one learning environment to another, at least two 'sides' are engaged: a 'sending side' and a 'receiving side'. Thus, joint 'buy-in' involving collaboration between the leadership of the two 'sides' is vital.

Kauerz & Schaper, 2021

The central importance of leaders prioritising communication across contexts also applies to the regular horizontal transitions learners experience.

In a study of Belgian families with migrant backgrounds, participants expressed their wish for more continuous care of their two-to four-year-olds across home and ECEC. Their worry and uncertainty about their children's experiences of these transitions were exacerbated by a perceived lack of reciprocal communication with preschool staff (Van Laere et al., 2018).

In its broadest sense, alignment involves developing cultures, structures and practices that strengthen the links between a transition's sending and receiving sides so that learners can confidently move forward. For example, in the transition to high school, learners need to negotiate larger class and school sizes, greater academic independence, new relationships, higher teacher expectations and a more intense focus on outcomes, and all this occurs in the context of a perceived drop in social support (Evans et al., 2018). Year 6 and Year 7 teachers believe that curriculum continuity and awareness, communication between primary and secondary schools, and teacher support are essential to fostering effective transitions from primary to secondary school (Hopwood et al., 2016).

Current research into pedagogical alignment and continuity does not always reflect the breadth of the transitions learners experience. For example, there is a gap in the research relating to learners' transitions into ECEC and their horizontal transitions in the early years (for example, between rooms, routines, and ECEC educators), despite their potential importance for learners' emotional security. Thus, in a review of the literature on care in ECEC transitions, McKenzie (2023) pointed out, 'the need to consider transitions occur all across and throughout ELC, and not simply from ELC to school' (p.15). However, she noted that consideration of the alignment of pedagogical approaches in the literature tends to be confined to learners' transitions into formal schooling, rather than their transitions into or within ECEC.

## SPOTLIGHT ON PRACTICE

### Showing leadership

#### Addressing shifts in learning environments

A three-phase study was conducted with over 400 UK students and teachers. It indicated that government guidance to limit the circulation of Covid-19 through year-group 'bubbles' led to a greater alignment of students' experiences in Year 7 and primary school, helping meet the developmental needs of students starting school. Though it was restrictive, 'bubbling' also had considerable benefits, particularly for students with difficulties facing the social, practical, emotional and cognitive demands of starting a secondary school environment designed for older adolescents.

'Coronavirus makes it seem like primary because we stay in the same classroom for every lesson, so it has eased the transition, and hopefully soon, it will be easier to move around and discover the school. On the first day, I wouldn't want to encounter a Year 11, but now, it would be much easier, and I have adapted to secondary life.'

Student at the end of Year 7.

Holly, a teacher in a school in which the leadership adopted a staggered approach to transition, noted the importance of this continuity during remote learning:

'You felt like you were in it together, you were a team. I think that the relationship with this year group is very, very strong, and I think that's why, when they came back, they had this safety net, and they just attacked their learning. They really did. I feel they're fearless, and that's across the board. Even my very vulnerable children.'

Saville et al. (2024)



## Meeting the needs of diverse learners

Curriculum alignment is a complex and dynamic enterprise, and contextual factors influence the coherence of learners' learning journeys (Ziebell et al., 2025). Consequently, teaching teams must address diverse learners' needs and foster links with learners' families, communities and cultures. For Indigenous learners, a culturally inclusive, holistic curriculum will address areas beyond those traditionally addressed in Western schools, such as ancestral knowledge and knowledge that emerges from connection to the land (McGregor, 2019). Ziebell and colleagues (2025) pointed out that effective leadership among Australian teaching teams involves adapting to the opportunities and constraints posed by diverse metropolitan, regional, remote, and very remote communities. For example, focus group discussions among Northern Territory teachers highlighted the challenges of attending to the needs of diverse learners in different contexts:

'...even though we're teaching Year 7 curriculum, we have kids that are still at Year 2 level. So there needs to be a huge level of differentiation. (Teacher)... I think part of middle school here is just keeping them engaged in the schooling system because as they get to Year 9, there's lots of other distractions and there's potentially a fair bit of loss between Year 9 and Year 10.'

Middle years teacher, Ziebell et al., 2025, 'Understanding Continuity of Learning: Coherence' section, para.4

Supporting the transitions of remote Aboriginal learners involves recognising that Aboriginal learners face challenges such as cultural dissonance and identity issues when leaving their communities for secondary education; effective leaders help develop appropriate strategies to deal with these (Guenther & Fogarty, 2018; Shay et al., 2023).

### REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

Generated from the research

**Addressing changes in the learning environment** requires leadership to: promote curriculum and pedagogical alignment; cater for the diverse needs of learners; and use evidence-based approaches to support decision-making.

Addressing changes in the learning environment requires leaders to identify strengths and address challenges that impact on learners' transitions.

Questions raised in the literature can be used as discussion starters for services and schools, and as follow-up or check-in questions, and are **relevant across the education levels**.

#### HOW ARE WE ...

**Reflecting** on the distinguishing features of learners' shifting learning environments to improve transition support?

**Reviewing existing transition** to school programs in the light of recent research?

**Fostering communication and alignment** between the 'sending side' and 'receiving side' in learners' transitions?

**Tracking learners' progress** to support their transitions and their relationship with educators and peers?

**Facilitating smoother, more equitable transitions** for learners by adapting the learning environment to their strengths and needs?

**Adapting learning environments** to support children with challenges associated with social, emotional and educational adjustments during transitions?

**Tracking and sharing data** on the wellbeing of different groups of upper secondary school students preparing for transitions?

# TRUSTING PARTNERSHIPS

## Introduction

Meaningful relationships are the foundation for positive school-family-community belonging, and building trust when strengthening relationships is integral to forming authentic partnerships for smooth and positive transitions (AERO, 2022a).

Transitions extend over time and involve many stakeholders (AERO, 2022a). Working in partnership with each stakeholder group requires positive, genuine, and professional relationships. Partnerships include those with learners and families, as well as key people in local and cultural communities, and school and centre networks.

Successful transitions lead to learning and growth; they hinge on continuity of relationships and practices across educational settings, whereby transitions should support learners' social and emotional wellbeing.

Dockett, 2014.

Partnerships do not just happen naturally; they take planning and agreement on shared goals that wrap around a central focus, such as transition processes and activities. Trusting partnerships are built on meaningful relations centred around shared goals for learning and wellbeing. Maintaining contact and communicating across the year keeps relationships alive and counters the tendency of new initiatives to drop off or wane in interest. There are multiple phases in taking relationships to a partnership. Boyle and Wilkinson (2018) identified building relationships as forming 'linkages' that were either functional or systemic linkages. Their analysis revealed that most relationships involved 'functional linkages' characterised by one-way information transmission, while the 'systemic linkages' involving bi-directional communication were limited (Boyle & Petriwskyj, 2014).

Thinking of the transition into education settings and beyond requires planning and action, accounting for the diverse and local population, and rethinking assumptions of abilities and ways of learning. For instance, given past failures of the system in ensuring safe and positive environments for First Nations learners (Krakouer, 2016; Moyle, 2019), a 'ready system' could be added as an encompassing, macro-level responsibility to support schools and communities in actively working toward smooth and positive transitions across a learner's schooling life. Another example of the need for sensitive

and careful reflection in the planning and implementation of transitions is the unique set of transition challenges that many Queensland learners encounter when undertaking distance education. A recent literature review of distance education suggested that the programs most likely to support effective transitions rely on interactive teaching methods, collaborative interactions, and family involvement (NSW Department of Education, 2025).

Indeed, two key practices to support transitions are developing collaborative partnerships among stakeholders and utilising learner-centred approaches (AERO, 2022). In education, stakeholders are learners, families, and key community figures, each of whom makes up the broader local community and link together for supportive transitions around learners, as represented in the following diagram.



The literature review identified subthemes related to trusting partnerships relevant to all education levels. These are:

- ▶ consultation and collaboration with families
- ▶ consulting with learners
- ▶ engaging communities through consultation and collaboration
- ▶ professional and interprofessional collaboration
- ▶ facilitating inter-school/centre collaboration
- ▶ developing cross-sectoral partnerships
- ▶ the benefits of trusting partnerships.

This section aligns closely with the first section, 'Knowing learners and families'.

## Consultation and collaboration with families

Relationships with families help build confidence in positive transitions and empower family members as knowing and contributing partners and teachers as trusted figures in families' lives. Families are typically the main influences in learners' lives and are key stakeholders. A scoping of the literature undertaken by the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) (2022) indicated that transition extends over time, a social process unique to each learner and family. Relationships with families can be easy or difficult, and some may not get off the ground, often due to hidden tensions or simply differences in communication. These differences in experience and standpoints explain why authentic partnerships with families are contingent on personality preferences.

The different people in learners' lives are knowledge holders of children and young people. Each brings their expertise to understanding learners' strengths and ways to build them in and through transitions.

It is crucial to recognise that families are also experiencing the transition process. The Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) (2013) noted that this inclusive practice during transitions can encourage First Nations families to engage with their children's education and promote belonging. First Nations research suggests families notice when relationships are taken seriously. This includes extended family members, often central in learners' lives (Krakouer et al., 2016).



Actively fostering connections between current and new families at transition events and across the transition phase can help demonstrate a relational approach (Krakouer et al., 2016).

Partnerships take planning and effort and are essential for equitable and full family engagement. Trust takes time for all families, which is vital in the first transition from home to early learning or early intervention settings (Hartle et al., 2023; Selby et al., 2018). In the USA context, the engagement of families was defined through stakeholder collaboration as 'full, equal and equitable partnerships among families, educators and community partners to promote children's learning and development from birth through college and career' (Connecticut Department of Education, 2018, p.2). In this co-constructed definition, families clearly state that *all* families should feel they are 'welcome partners in learning'. Trusting partnerships involve collaborative relationships, for example, for co-designing transition programs.

Listening to questions and concerns raised by families and identifying practical ways to communicate and engage is important. Not all families feel comfortable with the formal education environment and may consider the school environment inaccessible and 'hard-to-reach'. Meeting with families in a community setting to consult and discuss individual transition goals can help alleviate a family's anxiety about the school environment (Boyle & Wilkinson, 2018). Further, families change schools for diverse reasons, often unique to each family, and do not indicate shortcomings. Even within the same schools, not all families access transition support equally due to factors such as event scheduling and school communication methods (Cook et al., 2024).

Opportunities for engaging learners and their families during transitions can increase the likelihood of continued engagement and attendance at kindergarten and schools. Positive attendance patterns can be set in motion during horizontal, vertical or complex transitions. Difficulties experienced by learners can be invisible, leading to assumptions about the learner's personality, readiness, learning or attitude (Briggs, 2017; O'Bryan & Fogarty, 2020). Similarly, difficulties experienced by families may remain unknown or assumed. Effective transitions create a welcoming atmosphere for all families, suspending judgement, harnessing the power of word-of-mouth and connecting families. However, the difficulties may be within the setting, in attitudes or assumptions of the new environment, such as overt or covert racism. This can place double tension on learners seeking belonging (O'Bryan & Fogarty, 2020). Co-construction of strategies/plans for regular attendance can help lessen chronic absence and empower families and teaching teams. Regular attendance patterns have been shown to support continuity of learning, and a

focus on appropriate transition programs, point-in-time and duration may avoid setting patterns of absenteeism (Dockett & Perry, 2021).

Building on these ideas, the academic and social environment level will impact a sense of belonging and possible disillusionment with school. This is especially so for learners re-engaging after juvenile detention, or extended absences impacting their learning achievements compared to their same-age peers. Learners state they do want to learn, and they do want to return to school and fit in socially and academically (State of Queensland, Family and Child Commission, 2024). Disillusionment can influence a learner's choices of attendance, boredom, and further disengagement, which could be identified or managed in discussion with family and intersectoral partners during re-engaging transitions.

Homerin and colleagues (2024) suggested that navigation involves both vertical and horizontal transitions. Vertical refers to shifts from early intervention programs to preschool settings, while horizontal transitions are simultaneous, everyday routines and interactions with various service providers. Researchers also highlighted a lack of in-depth research on transitions for families and learners with multiple disabilities.

Families involved with early intervention programs find navigating the transition to preschool complex and frustrating.

Families emphasised both:

▶ **'feeling lost in the system'**

experiencing confusion with the educational system and uncertainty with the transition process, next steps and who was best placed to assist

▶ **'being heard within the storm'**

the desire to be understood and acknowledged 'amidst the chaos of transitioning services' (p.28).

Waters and Friesen (2019)

The challenges are compounded by navigating multiple services, heightened by the stress of negotiation and advocating for the learner's requirements (Morgensen et al., 2024). One challenge families report is the stress and emotion in demonstrating that a learner is seemingly 'bereft' of skills or capacity to receive additional support. While families see their child in a strength-based, holistic way, when advocating for support, they report feeling pressured to focus on the condition rather than their child as a person first.

## Consulting with learners

Exploring learners' perspectives on the multiple transitions they experience is essential. Schools often offer a range of transition activities, and it can be challenging to ascertain the impact on learners and families of one experience over another. Gath et al. (2024) and Nolan and Kilderry (2021) pointed out that previous studies overlooked the importance of the various combinations of transition practices that learners and families experience, which they refer to as the 'received transition experience'. Engaging children's perspectives is crucial for recognising their competence and rights, as it often reveals a disconnect between adults' assumptions and intentions regarding transition activities (Morgensen et al., 2024; Ruscoe, 2024).

The relationship between learners and teaching teams is considered a significant influence on learners' engagement, as well as their sense of identity and capacity across all levels of education. Ruscoe's (2024) study found three themes drawn from children's perspectives of transitions:

- ▶ There is often a disparity between adult and child expectations of school.
- ▶ The influence of adults upon children's perceptions of school varies.
- ▶ Children identified their power to sustain or disrupt a discourse through dis/engagement.

The reviewed literature strongly advocates for child-centred approaches to support smoother transitions from home to kindergarten and into school.

Interestingly, AERO (2022) found that consultation about transitions and approaches with young learners was identified as integral for adults to understand the successes and challenges of transitions.

However, while some research includes learners' voices, often only older students' voices appear when focusing on transitions. Most recently, learner's perspectives have been a distinct voice among major stakeholders in the process of hearing about self-determination, including education transitions (State of Victoria, 2025). Learners appreciated opportunities to voice positive experiences, concerns and suggestions for transitions. The following section further explores the findings and method noted by participants as an appropriate way of creating close connections while giving opportunities to hear from young people as experts on their experiences.



## Engaging communities through consultation and collaboration

Collaborative partnerships begin with knowing local communities as stakeholders and knowledge holders. Wherever schools and early learning centres are located, they sit on traditional Country as well as among diverse cultural communities. At the local level, cultural communities share a common identity and histories, although individuals may or may not. Mindful partnerships reflect where the work is located and the individuals participating in partnership work. Seeking local protocols through school-based cultural community members has been highlighted as a first step to more significant work with Traditional Owners and includes relevant community organisations. Some research has identified a burden placed on staff, such as education liaisons and/or Aboriginal Education Workers, to do much of the partnership work. Alleviating the burden by sharing roles and responsibilities helps avoid losing knowledge and relationships if one person leaves.

Lukey and colleagues (2022) identified bridging practices for transitions between primary and secondary school for First Nations learners. These practices are built around relational connections to link school, culture, and family, helping to create connections that enhance the educational experience. Relationships among learners, teaching teams, families, and communities are foundational to the success of Indigenous learners. Trust-based and supportive relationships help create a positive school climate that encourages participation and belonging for all learners. Bridging practices include establishing relationships, community partnerships, and culturally relevant pedagogies which recognise languages and cultural identities as strengths. Each of these necessitates reciprocal roles and responsibilities in formal partnerships. Co-designing transition relationships also helps build school staff's confidence and trust in community and family partnerships.

To seek stakeholder voice on self-determination in education in Victoria, a series of Koorie 'Campfire conversations' was held across the state. Participants included Koorie education organisations such as the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc (VAEAI), learners from different levels of education, families, teaching teams and leaders. Around campfires, they highlighted self-determination in education as a critical feature of learners' and communities' aspirations (VAEAI, 2024). They suggested that actively connecting existing and new families helped build cultural security and confidence that learners are in a supportive environment and that they have other learners and adults to connect with in the new environment. This might look like 'Mentor and buddy programs for Aboriginal students, drawn from peers, alumni and the local Aboriginal community with a

focus on education, developmental and cultural transition points' (p.74). Further, those involved in secondary schools identified the need for middle school learners to have earlier exposure to a range of diverse work environments:

'[Learners need] exposure to different work/business environments. Work experience is not enough; they need to see alternative pathways for the future.'

VAEAI participant (State of Victoria, 2024)

A significant point was that these practices could benefit **all** learners during transitions. Further, school leaders stated the desire to continue the approach of conversations around campfires with their school community.

### REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

Generated from the research

Collaborations with families are supported when all families feel welcome in the learning environment. There are various possibilities when working to support transitions. Some include developing culturally inclusive resource production, including visible home languages, planning orientations and check-ins, or facilitating 'meeting halfway' activities using open community spaces. These strategies have helped build beginning relationships between families, school and centre staff, and could include community figures or champions. Questions raised in the literature can be used as discussion starters for transition teams as follow-up or check-in prompts and are **relevant across all education levels**.

**How can our environments** be welcoming for all families?

**Which families are strongly connected** with us and how can we leverage these existing relationships to connect with other families?

**What community spaces can be used** to meet and enjoy collaborative time with families?

**Which past transitions practices** have seen success? How did we measure this success?

**Are our goals** for collaborations designed with families? In what ways are they reciprocal relationships? What are the benefits for families?

Partnering with key community members can support transitions because they are often significant people in learners' lives. The life worlds of families may involve sporting, cultural, religious or other social activities involving leaders who can be harnessed as familiar people and role models across contexts. Research also suggests that community leaders often hold a more strength-based image of learners than might be experienced in schools (State of Victoria, 2024). This could be due to less authority gaze and an increased potential for demonstrating roles and responsibilities in the wider community.

Education systems have traditionally drawn from western traditions of what knowledge and ways of learning are preferred, influencing what programs and outcomes are prioritised. Schools and early learning settings demonstrate their commitment to the diverse meaning-making of young people's learning and development when they recognise ways of knowing and learning as equal, rather than subordinate to their learning in school. Home, community and community clubs or activities are learning settings that have valid experiences and views of transition points. Showing support and affirmation of these settings in learners' lives is foundational for strengthening identities in transitional times.



## REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

Generated from the research

To build a visible ecosystem of transition supports, questions raised in the literature can be used as discussion starters for services and schools to help build interprofessional and community partnerships. These 'check-in' questions are **relevant across the education levels:**

**Who are our existing transitions partners?**

**Which partnerships have faded** and what were some of the reasons for this fading?

**What are our shared goals** for our partnerships, and what expertise do we each bring?

## SPOTLIGHT ON PRACTICE

Trusting partnerships

### Bridging practices

Collaborations between schools and community organisations enhance learners' transition and participation and demonstrate to learners that their community belonging is taken seriously. In Lukey et al. (2022), teaching teams, learners, and community discussed linking practices described as bridging the space between school, culture, and family, helping to create connections that enhance the educational experience for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners. These include establishing relationships, community partnerships, and culturally relevant pedagogies.

Two key effective practices were identified:

Cultural activities and participation from Elders help strengthen learners' connections to their culture and community. These connections help form bridging practices linking school, culture, and family across a web of relationships.

Further bridging practice lies with the school environment. Creating designated school spaces for Indigenous learners develops a sense of belonging and provides a safe environment to express their cultural identity.

Lukey et al., 2022

# Professional and interprofessional collaboration

'If partnerships are to be successful, they must have a clear purpose, add value to the work of the partners, and be carefully planned and monitored.'

VicHealth, 2016, p.1

Within services and schools, participating in collaboration acknowledges shared responsibility to support positive experiences for all learners. This might be through professional learning communities (McGregor, 2019) or transition teams (AERO, 2023a; Lukey et al., 2022) involving school regional networks. Interprofessional collaboration involves community organisations in the allied health and social sectors working with families and learners, consultants and advisors, and education organisations, such as OSHC. Historically, these collaborators may work independently of each other, or they may visit individual learners and their teachers for planning or information sharing. Interprofessional is also called 'intersectoral' or 'cross-sectoral' partnership.

Partnerships evolve, and research identifies phases or a continuum of partnership capacity from informal networking to embedded, formal and co-designed partnership (VicHealth, 2016). Formalising a partnership ensures that all parties agree and negotiate directions. Discussing protocols, specifying roles, agreed ways and spaces of working, and 'check-in' points are key factors in successful intersectoral and interschool or sector partnerships (State of Victoria, 2024). Successful

partnerships are those that stay active when, for example, a staff or organisation member leaves. Such changes in a partnership can hold tensions, but tensions should be considered natural factors of the process of settling into the relationship. Community sector feedback has revealed significant loss of information, contacts and relationships when a key over-burdened member has left or retired (SNAICC, 2014). Involving more than one staff member from each party avoids a knowledge drain if one leaves.

Partnerships are a significant factor in supporting learners of all ages to access and participate in the learning and social environment that schools and kindergartens provide. Inclusion programs require specialist expertise and knowledge of individual learners' requirements and strengths. Working together in close relationship asks for trust between those involved. When trust develops, partnerships can be formalised. Krakouer and colleagues (2017) found that formally linking schools and communities for partnerships involves having a key focus and shared aims, and the benefits are two-way. Their study, along with others such as VicHealth (2016) emphasise the following steps for sustaining awareness around transitions. These are also markers of converting relationships to partnerships:

- ▶ Co-developing a memorandum or partnership agreement.
- ▶ Clear and agreed monitoring/evaluation processes to identify areas to strengthen or change.
- ▶ Acknowledging pathways into early learning and school can be multiple and will look different according to the requirements for inclusive practices, supports, and learning.

## SPOTLIGHT ON PRACTICE

### Trusting partnerships

#### Professional inquiry teams for transition

Teaching teams in a large secondary school collaborated improve transitions (McGregor, 2019). While this focused on First Nations learners, the process and questions are relevant for teaching teams of all learners. They can help teams focus on particular cohorts, such as learners with refugee backgrounds and help teams question their assumptions and consider unconscious biases. Teams were formed across junior, middle and senior levels. Within these teams, teachers paid attention to details about learners' experiences. Discussions centred on the learners' experiences of transitions and across the year. Through reflection conversations, they identified some ongoing key questions that applied beyond the first few weeks at school.

Across the inquiry, teams ask themselves three important questions:

What's going on for our learners?

How do you know?

Why does this matter?

'The first two questions prompt inquiry teams to constantly check that learners are at the heart of what they do, giving multiple opportunities to hear from learners, and that 'all decisions are based on thoughtful evidence from direct observations and formal evidence sources. The third question helps to ground teams in the importance of the direction they are pursuing' (p.7). These have become the grounding questions for each phase and evaluation of transition collaborations.

## Facilitating inter-school/centre collaboration

Planning for inter-school and inter-centre transition partnerships helps with goal setting and increases coherence across the duration of transitions. Building relationships between teachers involved in transitions promotes continuity and belonging (Hartley et al., 2012, in Dockett, 2014).

When teachers collaborate, transitions can be regarded as opportunities to forge partnerships and to create potential meeting places.

Moss, 2012; Shuey et al., 2019

However, building trust and understanding takes time. It requires common goals – something easier done between same-level networks, such as schools, but more difficult between external networks. Nolan and Kilderry's (2021) review identified potential sources of difficulty, such as conceptual and procedural mismatch. The implications are that it is beneficial to take time initially to discuss what these difficulties will be and develop terms of reference to formalise a partnership around a central goal, such as supportive transitions.

The OECD (2017) flagged the importance of sharing information about learners' development from early childhood settings with primary schools. The transition statement is an example of the potential knowledge-sharing between settings that, with a shared goal of benefit for each child, also helps build a supportive relationship around learners. However, in practice, the

transition statement can remain one-way information unless professionals come together to gain further insights into the future. Transition statements present a rich opportunity to form collegial kindergarten–school teaching teams with the goal of a supportive transition for learners. Framed around the five learning outcomes (including learner and family perspectives), given appropriate consent, the statements offer a strengths-based resource for sharing information and planning holistic conversations about learners.

A further OECD report (Shuey et al., 2019) examined curriculum alignment for smoother transitions between early childhood contexts and the first school year. Efforts to revise and align curricular documents for ECEC and primary school are essential but require alignment at regional and higher levels of the system. Furthermore, curriculum continuity influences and is impacted by pedagogy, structures, and processes in different environments, and these aspects can be managed at a local level. Collaborations between early childhood and school teams can identify continuity in some of these approaches and lead inquiry into curriculum (OECD, 2017; Shuey et al., 2019). Further, meeting together around transition statements can provide a foundation for curriculum continuity based on learners' strengths and identified areas of support. Family participants shared concerns about the change from the close-knit child-centred approach in Koorie-run kindergartens to the different school approaches (State of Victoria, 2024). Their views demonstrate that context is important and that transition processes must reflect and respond to these. Recognising the importance of context, these strategies emphasise the need for adaptable and ongoing collaboration tailored to each child's situation, as recommended by AERO (2023a).



Three collaborative partnership strategies are recommended by AERO (2023a) to support effective transitions:

- 1 Build a team around the child.
- 2 Sustain collaboration throughout the transition.
- 3 Share clear, consistent, accessible information.

Regarding the third strategy, transfer information sharing, the Victorian Auditor General (2015) found that records and learner transfer information are problematic. This report noted inconsistencies in transferring learner information, further hampered by a 'lack of understanding about use and disclosure of information' (p.xii). This makes planning for the unexpected arrival of families especially difficult. Ad hoc sharing of essential information or delays in accessing records add to the experience of the 'invisible' transition.

## Developing cross-sectoral partnerships

Nolan and Kilderry's review (2021) found that teachers know the value of building trusting inter-sectoral relationships. Strong and supportive partnerships (from partnerships literature) recognise the steps to create two-way benefits: sharing information, setting goals, reaching agreements and allocating clear roles, evaluating and monitoring ways of working, and providing space are each significant elements for effective partnerships and ongoing successful transitions.

Cross-sectoral collaborations recognise that each party has practices rooted in their institutional cultures. Community sector professionals have reported feeling bewildered at often-invisible school processes and practices. Balduzzi et al. (2019) found this extended to assumptions and pedagogical understandings. To help alleviate the assumptions and frustrations that can lead to relationship or partnership failure, each step or phase of a partnership requires space for inter-professional exchanges to 'deconstruct given-for-granted assumptions and negotiate new meanings through joint professional development pathways sustaining collective decision-making processes' (Balduzzi et al., 2019, p.21). For example, knowledge of child development is experienced differently by professions, such as health and social services, where experience is gained working with individual learners rather than class groups of diverse learners.

Partnerships with the health sector for supporting health and wellbeing can bring several partners with differing expertise together to create a support base for all learners and accessibility to targeted expertise. Research also shows that health, wellbeing and engagement in learning

The report also identified increased reliance on written information when transitioning between schools (p.xii).

A shared framework defining vulnerability in terms of structure, not individuals, provides a strong basis for inter-school and cross-sectional partnerships that support learners' transitions between mainstream and alternative settings. Based on a survey of teaching teams and learners transitioning from alternative provision to post-16 mainstream English education settings, Clarke and Thompson (2024) proposed mapping the sites of systemic vulnerability that influence learners' relationships, metacognition and geography/environment. An example of a possible such vulnerability is when the setting size requires learners to negotiate different rooms, floors or sites. Although partnerships based on this framework will likely facilitate holistic support for transitioning learners (Clarke & Thompson, 2024), research exploring evidence-based examples of horizontal transitions from alternative learning programs to mainstream education settings is needed.

are closely linked. Bornfreund et al. (2020) explained that learners are more likely to experience transition success when they enter kindergarten and school healthy. Health sector partners play an important role in identifying barriers to learning. Additionally, education is a social determinant of health. This bi-directional relationship can be supported by formalising cross-sectoral networks to facilitate effective transitions from home, into early learning and school. Bornfreund et al.'s study (2020) pointed to critical health services that can profoundly impact learners' long-term health and academic success. Those services include screenings and treatment or referrals for concerns related to physical and mental wellness, including oral health, asthma, vision and hearing, and social and emotional support.

A review commissioned by the Department of Education Victoria (Krakouer et al., 2017) focused on transitions for learners who may be at risk of vulnerability, such as those who have experienced trauma, learners living in OoHC, learners with refugee backgrounds, and learners who experience intergenerational poverty. Among the highlighted priorities, such as professional learning for school and centre staff on understanding trauma and trauma-informed pedagogy, the report found the need to build a transdisciplinary and holistic approach to transitions. This highlights the opportunities of cross-sectoral partnerships for co-developing professional learning and resources. Key transition teams at schools to support each learner and families experiencing vulnerability could include school and community members working together to ensure the expertise of each is leveraged.

## SPOTLIGHT ON PRACTICE

### Trusting partnerships

#### From collaboration to partnership for Indigenous learners in Quebec

A collaboration between a community service and urban secondary school found that valuing the links between various community networks was one of the most effective supports for learners who had recently moved from regional and remote communities for their education. First Nations (Anishinaabeg, Quebec) learners' multiple and frequent transitions were recognised as different in nature to those of many non-Indigenous learners. Previously, schools had viewed the 'hypermobility' of their First Nations learners as a disjunctural problem. The collaboration recognised three spheres of 'best practice' support: the local community service, collaborative actions, and the school sphere. The collaboration involved weaving a thread between the three spheres and the school and service decided to formalise a partnership by developing a Memorandum of Agreement.

#### COMMUNITY ORGANISATION

The Maniwaki Friendship Centre provided learners a culturally based support space and assistance. Help was available for homework and language needs; also provided were sports, lunches, and several workshops.

These were available as planned and ongoing support, and as a drop-in option.

The centre also provided a gathering space for extended families to have a space to find each other.

Noted outcomes:

- ▶ Learners found others with a common history and culture.
- ▶ They supported one another, building belonging with increased engagement in school learning.

#### COLLABORATIVE ACTIONS

The Friendship Centre developed several awareness-raising workshops for school staff on culturally safe practices and spaces. The school provided the facilities for the workshops and hosted service staff.

Noted outcomes:

- ▶ The workshop raised the various non-Indigenous participants' awareness of Indigenous realities.
- ▶ School liaison officers were made available in the Friendship Centre.
- ▶ Resources were developed to support school staff and teaching teams.

#### SCHOOL

The school began substantial efforts to create belonging and deepen engagement at school. The school saw the benefit of:

- ▶ learners having a space for shared histories and cultures, creating spaces where Indigenous learners came together
- ▶ hiring Indigenous staff in schools
- ▶ revisiting the methods used to make diagnostic assessments and assess Indigenous learners
- ▶ valuing the maintenance of the Indigenous language in schools.

The teaching teams also:

- ▶ formed a high-school teachers' committee for Indigenous people
- ▶ adopted Indigenous pedagogy and valued Indigenous cultures (pp.53–54).

*'It's because of being all together, they find each other. It seems that when they come, the pressure drops, and they can be themselves... absenteeism is going down'*

(School staff member) p.54.

**Key take away:** Rather than viewing hypermobility as 'rupture', the partnership helped the school staff to value potential and real links in learner's lives as a web of supportive relationships, and to value the strengths and resilience of learners (Regroupement des centres d'amitié autochtones du Québec (RCAAQ) 2020).

## Benefits of trusting partnerships

While improved and positive outcomes for learners are the main objective of building trusting transition partnerships, there are other clear benefits to collaboration and taking steps into formal partnerships. These include:

- ▶ shared problem-solving that eases the burden of sole responsibility and feeling isolated
- ▶ increased resources for each partnership party
- ▶ development of capacity in strategic decision-making, quality improvement
- ▶ strengthened monitoring and evaluation.

However, trust is at the foundation of all effective partnerships. Such partnerships recognise that schools are positioned within communities rather than existing as distinct, fenced-off institutions.

Furthermore, when relationships between families, communities, schools, and centres are sustained, collaboration and co-design become partnerships, and education settings become better integrated into their local community.



# FROM EVIDENCE TO ACTION

The analysis of the literature on transitions has underscored the challenges, tensions, possibilities and enablers for positive transitions alongside the opportunities for learning and development represented by transitions. Enabling positive transitions for diverse learners across various settings and contexts requires deliberate, purposeful and reflective planning, trusting, authentic relationships and partnerships and embedding culturally meaningful and responsive practices in ongoing consultation with learners, families and community members.

A National Indigenous Youth Education Coalition report highlighted the importance of moving from evidence to action in supporting learners' transitions (Hand et al., 2024). The report's findings indicated that difficulties in accessing current school exclusion data prevent the development of a complete understanding of post-school transitions among First Nations students. This is because First Nations students have been systemically excluded from public schools, partly through the disproportionate use of disciplinary exclusion measures within schools (Hand et al., 2024).

Additionally, this review also revealed that less published research focuses on transitions between the higher levels of schooling, such as from primary to secondary school, between levels of secondary, or between school and

training to employment and careers. There is also a lack of attention paid to cross-sectoral perspectives, particularly among teaching teams in pre-compulsory and compulsory education sectors, which face significant systemic splits. This presents challenges to draw robust decisions about building effective transition programs across these settings and higher levels of schooling.

Accordingly, translating research into practice is complex (Levickis et al., 2025). Supporting teaching teams and leaders in effectively applying research findings in their transition practices requires whole-of-service/school approaches that encourage a culture where evidence-based practices are consistently integrated across all institutional levels.

Clear definitions and shared understandings of transitions and 'evidence use', and tailored professional development, are also crucial, as they equip teaching teams and leaders with the specific skills and knowledge needed to utilise evidence in their contexts effectively. Furthermore, to enhance evidence-based decision-making within educational settings, it is vital to consider



systemic factors that influence how these practices are embedded, ensuring that organisational structures, resources, and support mechanisms align. Together, these strategies create a robust framework that can effectively narrow the gap between research and practice and support the successful translation of evidence into action across communities and contexts (Levickis et al., 2025).

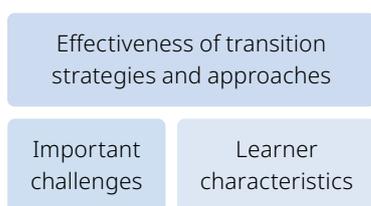
In the following section, we distil key principles that support leaders and teaching teams in translating research into practice and ensuring they build an

evidence base to inform approaches to the complexity of transitions, as identified in this review through:

- ▶ using evidence to inform and strengthen transitions
- ▶ practising contextually informed and differentiated decision-making
- ▶ developing an evidence base that draws on multiple perspectives on transition
- ▶ building a robust evidence base through tracking and monitoring transitions
- ▶ encouraging accountability and transparency.

## Using evidence to inform and strengthen transitions

Supporting learners through shifts in learning environments requires using the available evidence. A broad range of data may be relevant. Key information includes evidence for the following:



Opportunities for teaching teams to reflect on and evaluate their implementation of learners' transitions are vital. This involves teaching teams assessing their objectives, the perspectives of different stakeholders, and transition outcomes as the basis for refining transition strategies and approaches (Dockett, 2014). This is demonstrated in that, for example, the leadership teams of very responsive New Zealand schools are distinguished by strong and comprehensive systems for reviewing transition programs based on current research (AERO, 2015).

Similarly, evidence that a positive sense of belonging in Year 6 is related to a positive sense of belonging in Year 7 suggests that leaders in primary schools should be attentive to Year 6 learners' relationships with teaching teams and peers, providing strong school support.

CESE, 2021.

Data indicates that most learners failing Year 7 have poor social, emotional and educational adjustment, but are not identified as developmentally vulnerable. This is key evidence to inform learners' transitions (MCRI, 2018).

Indicators like academic progress, disengagement, wellbeing and peer relationships could be used to identify and track student progress through mid-childhood (MCRI, 2018). Based on this evidence, teaching teams may employ actions that promote social inclusion, positive emotional development, school engagement, and prevent bullying to help prepare learners for the transition into secondary school.

However, the Murdoch Children's Research Institute (MCRI) (2018) also pointed out that a strong policy and research emphasis on transitions in the first five years of life over recent decades contrasts with the lack of attention to learners in the final years of primary school transitioning into secondary school. In other words, there is limited knowledge about the most effective programs/strategies leading up to secondary school. There is also a gap in the literature regarding learners' transitions to different learning styles and environments, such as moving from classroom-based learning in a small primary school to online or distance education learning for secondary school. MCRI (2018) argued that findings regarding major modifiable determinants of successful transitions for learners in the upper primary years point to the importance and usefulness of focusing on such transitions in policy and research.

Another important practice in using evidence to foster learner transitions is the appropriate collection and sharing of key data about individual learners. Such data includes but is not limited to information about academic skills and should lead to an increased knowledge of incoming learners' strengths and needs. For example, recommendations on improving Indigenous learner transitions across Canada, Australia and New Zealand emphasise the importance of data that tracks Indigenous learner wellbeing in fostering learner pathways (OECD, 2017). Moreover, USA researchers pointed out the need for systematic processes like screening, tracking, data monitoring, coordinating oversight and preparing families and teaching teams to support the educational shift of learners with disabilities (Kasari, 2020).

## SPOTLIGHT ON PRACTICE

Evidence to action

### Using evidence to inform and strengthen transitions for young learners with disabilities

In a study of early childhood educators' perspectives on the transitions of young learners with disabilities in NSW into ECEC centres, educators viewed the following two sets of evidence as vital for implementing successful transitions.

#### KEY INFORMATION FROM FAMILIES:

'I find that parents are very keen to share information about the child so the service can be as informed as possible to best meet the needs of the child.'

(educator)

#### INPUT/LIAISON WITH ORGANISATIONS AND PRACTITIONERS ALREADY FAMILIAR WITH CHILD:

'I do try and invite as many other people that are involved with that child as possible or sometimes they will invite me to their meetings.'

(educator)

An educator evidence package is needed, including the theoretical basis for inclusion, pedagogical approaches to ensure a successful transition into the ECEC centre, and templates for specific processes, such as communication dictionaries (summaries of communication attempts), individualised education program goal setting, and other orientation information.

Warren et al. (2016)



## Contextually informed and differentiated decision-making

Understanding the importance of context when supporting learners and families during transitions is crucial, as a cookie cutter approach can overlook unique needs and circumstances. Tailoring strategies to individual situations ensures that the diverse experiences of learners and families are acknowledged and valued in transitions.

It is important to view transitions as multidimensional and explore a range of measurements for evaluating what constitutes a successful transition, as learners' experiences and contexts vary widely (CESE, 2021). Collaborative and coherent support systems are agile and responsive to the multidimensional and complex nature of transitions in and across diverse settings and contexts are important.

### SPOTLIGHT ON PRACTICE

#### Evidence to action

#### Contextually informed and differentiated decision-making involving transitions out of detention

An examination review conducted by the Queensland Family and Child Commission (QFCC) used a mixed methods approach to assess the degree to which current supports and processes support learners' transitions from youth detention back into the community. The interviewees wanted activities that:

- relate to learners' lives and communities in a meaningful way
- address learners' individual and diverse needs and causes of offending
- reflect learners' interests
- include more sports and recreation, culture, life skills and practical supports
- feel less repetitive
- continue in the community (for programs commenced in detention)

The State of Queensland (Queensland Family and Child Commission), (2024)

## Developing an evidence base that draws on multiple perspectives on transitions

While the research provides some clarity around the active components of effective transitions across a range of settings and contexts in Australia and around the world, building rich and nuanced evidence of transitions relies on teaching teams and leaders drawing on the lived experiences of learners, families/carers, and community members.

Further, incorporating diverse voices in the evidence is crucial for effective decision-making. It is important to critically assess whose perspectives are represented in the data, ensuring that the experiences of learners and their

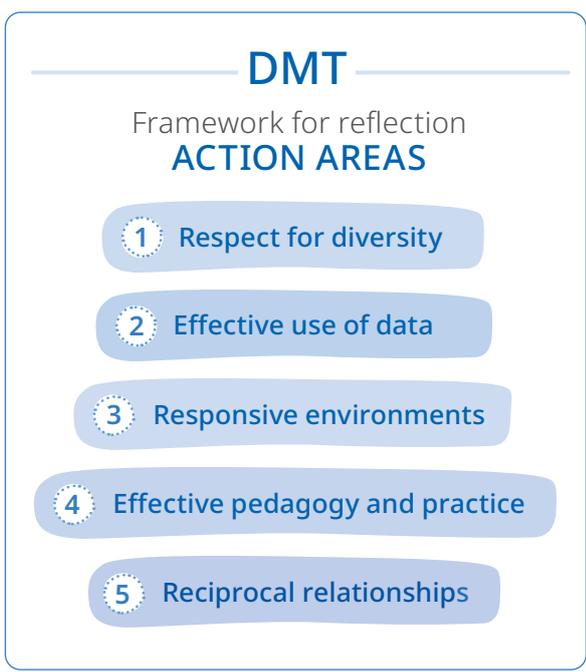
families are at the forefront of the narrative. By prioritising learners' and families' voices, decision-makers can better understand the unique needs and contexts of those they serve and build trusting relationships and partnerships to co-design transitions. Moreover, effective use of evidence is supported by several key factors, including strong leadership, a shared vision among stakeholders, opportunities for continuous learning, and robust systemic support. Together, these elements create an environment where evidence can be effectively utilised to improve transition outcomes for learners and families.

# Building a robust evidence base through tracking and monitoring transitions

Tracking and monitoring evidence can provide insights into how well transitions are supported. AERO (2022) pointed out that valuable data for supporting children's transitions into schools is gained through assessing their capabilities:

- 1 Nationally, across five domains (physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills, and communication skills and general knowledge) in the Australian Early Development Census (AGDE, 2025).
- 2 At a state level, with tools addressing progress in literacy, numeracy, wellbeing and health-related factors, or identifying gaps that point to the need for early intervention.
- 3 At the ECEC service/school level, through teachers' and educators' assessments and observations.

In Queensland, the DMT is used as a framework for reflection and action to help schools strengthen their approach to transition and select transition-to-school strategies based on the four principles that structure this review, namely: knowing learners and families, showing leadership, trusting partnerships and from evidence to action (DoE, 2025). The DMT has five action areas:



Planning transitions and supporting learners and families involves acknowledging diversity and responsiveness through differentiating practice.

Furthermore, evaluation of practices is important to determine what works well and areas for improvement. By continuously assessing outcomes and adapting strategies based on feedback, through cycles of inquiry, reflective practice, and a range of targeted and differentiated measures, stakeholders can enhance their approach to transitions, ultimately leading to more effective and meaningful support for learners and families.

The assessment of transitions will be strengthened when stakeholders draw on the perspectives of learners, family members/carers, teaching teams, and other professionals working in partnership with them.

### SPOTLIGHT ON PRACTICE

#### Evidence to action

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#### Evidence-based decision-making during key transition stages in the early years

Research emphasises the importance of evidence-based decision-making, especially during key transition stages in the early years (Dockett, 2014). Teaching teams generate evidence using:

- ▶ Holistic and strength-based approaches that take into account the child's identity, family context, prior experiences and interests; and
- ▶ Continuous cycles of inquiry involving communication and collaboration between early childhood teaching teams and primary school teaching teams, kindergarten transition statements, transition interviews, portfolios and family conversations to inform decision-making.

These evidence-based practices are not static, moment-in-time checklists, but constitute starting points for inquiry and ongoing cycles of planning that include observations, assessment documentation, planning, implementation and evaluation documents, and ongoing adjustments.

## Accountability and transparency

An evidence-based approach to transitions ensures transparency and accountability in transition planning, practices, partnerships, and evaluation. It also leads to informed decision-making and grounded initiatives that promote a culture of continuous improvement and engagement within and across services, schools, and communities.

Evaluating learners' and families' perceptions and experiences of transitions can form an evidence base

for future transitions. In developing an evidence base, it is valuable for leaders and teaching teams to consider both vertical and horizontal transitions and the stages of education holistically beyond their immediate contexts. To understand the impact of previous transitions and aspirations for future transitions, it is necessary for data to be shared effectively through the learning journey, and for families and communities to have direct input into both reflection on and planning for transitions with teaching teams (Ziebell et al., 2025).

### QUESTIONS TO GUIDE DECISION-MAKING

#### From evidence to action

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The following questions can act as a starting point to guide an evidence-based approach to transitions that draws on the research experiences and lived experience of learners, families/carers, community members, Elders, teaching teams and leaders across diverse settings and contexts in Queensland:

What evidence do we need to **support** transitions?

What evidence can be **generated and shared** within and across services and schools?

How do we use evidence to **support continuity of learning** through transitions, in our purpose, our processes and for our actions?

Whose perspectives will **inform transitions** (learners, families, teaching teams)?

How can we **use the data we have to support evaluation** of transitions and to inform future transition initiatives?

How can we **provide stability and consistency** during periods of transition?

How can learners' wellbeing, social and emotional learning, and relationships be **monitored and supported** through transitions?

How do we provide **curriculum coherence to support continuity** of learning?

How can we **strengthen relationships and partnerships** with learners, families and communities when planning and co-designing transitions?

What evidence do we need to determine whether we are **meeting the diverse needs of all learners** in transitions?

Who are the **individuals, groups, or stakeholders with whom we have not yet engaged** in our transition conversations?

How do we use **cycles of inquiry, feedback and reflective practice** to ensure continuous improvement in our transition processes?



# CONCLUSION

Overwhelmingly, the research surveyed in this literature review points to the vital role of transitions in supporting learner engagement through the stages of education. The literature has underscored the complexity of transitions and the ways in which all stakeholders – including leaders, teaching teams, families, communities, and health/wellbeing professionals – play a significant role in bringing complementary knowledge and expertise to enable supported transitions.

Transitions are much more than movement between stages of schooling; they are connected, relational, and contextual.

Strong transitions nurture the learning spirit and a sense of belonging and becoming.

The contemporary research surveyed in this review shows that some established notions of transitions (as linear, and primarily the responsibility of learners and their families) are not suited to the rich and diverse contexts experienced by learners in Queensland. While notions of readiness are important when considering learners' transitions, the literature clearly shows that these concepts must be applied to all involved in a learner's transitions and that early childhood teachers, school teachers and leaders must be ready to address individual learning circumstances, capabilities and potential. Accordingly, the responsibility for transitions is always collective, undertaken in partnership, and nuanced for individual learners. While there is substantive evidence about the importance of partnerships, there is further opportunity to identify how sectors and agencies work together sustainably to support transitions for all learners.

Specifically, research drawing on the experiences of Indigenous learners shows that transitions are more productively understood as spiral, recursive, circular, and continuous rather than linear. These rich understandings

of transitions also acknowledge the important role of learners, their agency and voice in transitions, and their connections to their families and communities. Much research understands transitions in terms of progress through the established stages of education, and within this, further focuses on learners' movements from early childhood settings to school. Less research focus has been placed on transitions to secondary school and beyond this to university, vocational training, or the workforce. In addition, there is a paucity of research regarding less visible or expected transitions, such as between detention settings and schools, boarding schools and community settings, hospitals and early childhood settings/schools. Future research must prioritise the voices of those who have not been the focus of transition research, such as learners in rural or remote areas, those with refugee backgrounds, those with disabilities and those in OoHC. While there is an emerging body of work attending to transitions for Indigenous and culturally diverse populations, there is a need for a deeper understanding of how local cultures, geographies, and community contexts influence transition experiences.

Much of the Queensland Government's focus is on the quality of evidence and on leaders and teaching teams drawing data to inform and guide decision-making. The literature presented has demonstrated the importance of building a strong evidence base in local contexts to support successful transitions, and the spotlights on practice in this review emphasise the connections between research and the lived experience of learners in their bespoke contexts. Ultimately, for learners to be supported through complex and varied transitions, teaching teams and leaders must work in concert with families and communities so that they understand their contribution to a learner's educational journey over time. Further, they must consciously build the capacity, skills and relationships required to respond to individual learners' circumstances and contexts with agility, commitment and dedication, recognising the centrality of successful transitions to nurturing a lifelong learning spirit.

# KEY ACRONYMS

## ACECQA

### [Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority](#)

An independent statutory authority that assists governments in implementing the National Quality Framework (NQF) for early childhood education and care throughout Australia.

## AERO

### [Australian Education Research Organisation](#)

An independent body funded by federal and state governments, tasked with advancing education research in Australia. Its goal is to improve learning outcomes for all children by promoting evidence-based practices that ensure excellence and equity in education.

## DoE

### [Department of Education](#)

DoE provides strategic leadership and guidance across Australia's education sectors, including early childhood education sites and services, schools, higher education, and research, and advises the Australian Government on education matters.

## DMT

### [School decision-making tool](#)

Queensland framework for reflection and action, designed to assist schools in strengthening their approach to transition and their selection of transition-to-school strategies.

## ECEC

### [Early childhood education and care](#)

ECEC includes services that support children's development before primary school, including Long Day Care for ages birth to school age, Preschool (Kindergarten) for children from 3 to 5 years old, Family Day Care in home-like settings, and Outside School Hours Care for school-aged children before, after, and during holidays.

## OECD

### [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development](#)

A forum and knowledge hub for data, analysis and best practices in public policy.

## OoHC

### [Out-of-home care](#)

OoHC provides alternative accommodation for children and young people who are unable to live with their parents. In most cases, children in out-of-home care are also on a care and protection order.

## OSHC

### [Outside school hours care](#)

Commonly used Australian term for school-age care (SAC).

## SNAICC

### [The Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care](#)

A national non-governmental peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners.

## TSS

### [Transition Support Services](#)

Assists Aboriginal students and Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities in Cape York and Palm Island, who have to leave home in order to complete secondary schooling, to transition into secondary boarding schools and residential facilities throughout Queensland.

## VAEAI

### [Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc](#)

Peak organisation for Aboriginal education and training in Victoria.

# GLOSSARY

## **Belonging**

A sense of connection, inclusion, and acceptance within a community or setting that supports a learner's identity and engagement.

## **Bridges (metaphor)**

Symbolic representations of transition pathways, often envisioned as physical or liminal spaces connecting one setting to another, emphasising support, connection, and movement.

## **Co-design and co-construction**

Processes in which stakeholders – including learners and families – actively participate in designing, planning, and implementing transition supports and programs.

## **Cultural identity**

The sense of self rooted in cultural background, traditions, language, and community, which influences a learner's experiences and needs during transitions.

## **Culturally responsive practices**

Approaches that recognise, respect, and incorporate learners' cultural backgrounds, languages, knowledges, and worldviews into educational settings and transition processes.

## **Culturally safe pedagogy**

Teaching practices that affirm cultural identities and address power imbalances, creating environments where all learners feel safe, respected, and valued.

## **Culturally safe spaces**

Environments where learners feel respected, valued, and free from discrimination, enabling authentic expression of cultural identity.

## **Cross-sectoral and interprofessional collaboration**

Cooperative efforts involving multiple sectors (for example, education, health, social services) and professions working together to support learners' holistic needs during transitions.

## **Ecological systems theory**

A framework (originally by Bronfenbrenner) that describes how learners are influenced by and interact with multiple interconnected systems, such as family, school, community, and broader society.

## **Evidence-based practices**

Approaches underpinned by research and data systematically collected, analysed, and used to inform transition decision-making.

## **Fund of knowledge (funds of knowledge)**

The knowledge, skills, cultural practices, and experiences that learners and their families bring from their home and community contexts.

## **Holistic approach**

In transition planning and support, considering all aspects of learners' identities, including cultural, emotional, social, academic, and physical.

## **Horizontal transitions**

Movements within the same level or between settings that happen simultaneously or concurrently, such as transitioning from home to preschool, or from one community activity to another.

## **Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing**

The unique epistemologies, ontologies, and methodologies rooted in diverse Indigenous cultures, emphasising interconnectedness, spirituality, land, language, and community.

## **Invisible transitions**

Unanticipated or less visible changes, such as sudden school entry, relocations, or shifts that lack formal planning, often resulting in adjustment challenges.

## **Knowledge systems**

The ways of knowing, being, and doing rooted in specific cultures or communities, such as Indigenous epistemologies, which inform pedagogies and transition practices.

## **Liminal space**

A transitional, threshold zone where learners or individuals are in between identities or settings, often characterised by change, ambiguity, and potential for growth.

## **Orientation**

The process and attitude of adjusting or aligning one's positioning with one's circumstances, ideas, and learning. Orientation also refers to events during transition that build familiarity with the new learning environment, such as parent and family orientation evenings.

## **Policies**

Sets of principles and statements that guide organisations, governments, or institutions towards specific outcomes. Policies provide a frame for determining future decisions and actions, and can encompass reform initiatives and policy and curriculum documentation.

### **Preparation and readiness**

The extent to which learners and families are equipped physically, socially, emotionally, and culturally to move into new educational settings.

### **Reciprocal relationships**

Mutual and two-way interactions that foster trust, understanding, and shared responsibility in transition processes.

### **Reflective practice**

The ongoing process of critically analysing one's actions, assumptions, and outcomes to improve practice and inform future transition strategies.

### **Relational and community-based approaches**

Strategies prioritising building respectful, reciprocal relationships with families, communities, Elders, and key stakeholders to support meaningful transitions.

### **Spiralled and circular time**

Indigenous or culturally specific concepts of time that view processes and relationships as ongoing, cyclical, and interconnected, often represented through spirals or cycles rather than linear progressions.

### **'Spirals' of time**

A metaphor from Indigenous knowledge, describing ongoing, overlapping, and interconnected relationships and learning that extend across past, present, and future, emphasising continuity and responsibilities across generations.

### **Strengths-based approach**

An orientation that focuses on learners' resilience, capabilities, and assets rather than deficits or limitations, promoting empowerment and agency.

### **Systemic and structural barriers**

Organisational, policy, or societal factors that hinder smooth and equitable transitions, such as resource limitations, staffing issues, or discriminatory practices.

### **Teaching teams**

Professionals who educate children, including professional educators without a teaching degree.

### **Transitions**

The processes of moving or shifting from one educational setting, stage, or level to another, such as from early childhood to primary school or from secondary school to further education or work. They encompass planned and unplanned, visible and invisible, vertical and horizontal shifts.

### **Trusting partnerships**

Collaborative relationships built on mutual respect, shared goals, open communication, and cultural competence among educators, families, communities, and agencies.

### **Transition teams**

Groups of educators, families, community representatives, and specialists collaboratively working together to plan and support successful learner transitions.

### **Vertical transitions**

Movements between different levels of education that typically involve progressing higher through the educational system (for example, from preschool to kindergarten, primary to secondary school).

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# APPENDIX

Selected academic literature from 2014 to 2025 has been organised into groups based on educational transition points and key themes relevant to this literature review.

	ECE to primary	Primary to secondary	Secondary to post secondary
RELATIONSHIPS PARTNERSHIPS	Akhlagh et al 2024 [AUST] Dockett & Perry 2021 [AUST] Nolan et al. 2021 [AUST] Warren et al. 2019 [AUST] Boyle & Wilkinson 2018 [AUST] McLean et al 2017 [AUST] Huser et al 2016 [AUST] Boyle et al. 2014 [AUST] Gonzales et al. 2024 Homerin et al. 2024 [USA] Raittila et al 2024 Cook et al. 2024 Haruj et al. 2024 Skehill et al. 2024 Garber et al. 2023 Balduzzi et al. 2019 Boyle et al. 2018 Krakauer et al. 2017 [AUST] Holsted 2015 [NZ]	Bobongie 2017 [AUST] Jindal-Snape Bradshaw 2024 [UK] Saville et al. 2024 [UK] Lukey et al. 2024 [AUST] Jindal-Snape Symonds 2023 [UK] Beatson et al. 2023 Jindal-Snape Hannah 2020 Jindal-Snape et al. 2019 Evans et al. 2018 van Rens et al. 2018 Bagnell et al. 2023 Bagnall et al. 2020 Visser et al. 2023 Breuer & Tai 2020 Purtell et al. 2020 Benner et al. 2017	Mogensen et al. 2024 [AUST] Briggs 2016 [AUST] Frawley et al. 2017 [AUST] Richards 2020 Guenther et al. 2024 [AUST]
LEADERSHIP	Boylan et al. 2024 [AUST] Boyle 2021 [AUST] Nolan et al. 2021 [AUST] Purtell et al. 2020 [USA] Boyle & Wilkinson 2018 [AUST] Dockett et al 2014 [AUST] Gonzales et al. 2024 [Review] Krakauer et al. 2017 [AUST] Holsted 2015 [NZ]	Lukey 2024 Saville et al. 2024 [UK]	Briggs 2016 [AUST]
PRACTICES ACTIVITIES PEDAGOGIES	Dockett Boyle & Perry 2024 [AUST] Akhlagh et al 2024 [AUST] Raittila et al. 2024 [FIN] Haruj et al. 2024 [FIN] Browne et al. 2022 [AUST] Boyle et al. 2021 [AUST] Nolan et al. 2021 [AUST] Boyle & Wilkinson 2019 [AUST] McLean et al 2017 [AUST] Krakauer et al. 2017 [AUST] Boyle et al. 2018 [AUST] Boyle et al. 2014 [AUST] Dockett et al. 2014 [AUST] Homerin et al. 2024 [USA] Balduzzi et al. 2019 [EUR] Holsted 2015 [NZ] Garber et al. 2023 [USA] McNair 2021 [UK] Purtell et al. 2020 [USA]	Lukey et al. 2024 [AUST] O'Bryan & Fogarty 2020 [AUST] Bobongie 2017 [AUST] Hopwood et al. 2016 [AUST] Beatson et al. 2023 Jindal-Snape et al. 2019 [UK]	Mogensen et al. 2024 [AUST] Wagner 2024 [USA]
BENEFITS & OUTCOMES	Akhlagh et al 2024 [AUST] Cook et al. 2024 Dockett Boyle & Perry 2024 Nolan et al. 2021 Purtell et al., 2020 Warren et al. 2019 McLean et al 2017 Dockett et al. 2014 Homerin et al. 2024 Balduzzi et al. 2019 Krakauer et al. 2017 Holsted 2015 Garber et al. 2023 Gath et al. 2024 Nolan et al. 2021 Boyle & Wilkinson 2018 Huser et al 2016	O'Bryan & Fogarty 2020 Lukey et al. 2024 Jindal-Snape Bradshaw 2024 Jindal-Snape Hannah 2020 Beatson et al. 2023 Saville et al. 2024 Lange et al. 2024 Martin et al. 2024 Mander et al. 2020 Pitt et al., 2019 Guenther & Fogarty 2018 Evans et al. 2018 Benner 2017	Ryan et al. 2025 Rogers 2024 Kilpatrick et al. 2020 Vernon et al 2019 Shay et al. 2023 Richards 2020 Frawley et al. 2017 Briggs 2016

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