Executive summary

# Introduction

The Department of Education and Training’s (DET) Linking Learning Birth – 12 Years Program (Linking Learning) aimed to improve learning outcomes for Victorian children from birth to 12 years, by supporting parents, educators, practitioners and professionals across early childhood and primary school settings to develop a comprehensive, cohesive and seamless approach to children’s learning. The project commenced in September 2014 and concluded in July 2017.

The project involved eight Linking Learning Lead Demonstration and Action Learning Sites (demonstration sites) across Victoria. The demonstration sites aimed to build an evidence base for effective shared approaches to learning and collaborative partnership models that could be shared with other locations across Victoria.

The Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH) at the Murdoch Children’s Research Institute (MCRI) was contracted by DET to undertake an evaluation of Linking Learning and deliver action research support to the demonstration sites.

# Methodology

The evaluation of Linking Learning collected program level, site level and system level data to assess the impact of Linking Learning and identify implementation barriers and enablers:

* Linking Learning was examined at a program level using a combination of existing secondary data sets and primary data collected for the evaluation (Linking Learning service and family questionnaires and data collected in the communities). The baseline outcomes and indicator data was collected in 2015 and has been compared to data collected in 2016 and 2017 to consider progress in working towards the Linking Learning program outcomes and objectives. The secondary data sets included:
  + School population and suburb socio-economic data
  + Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) 2012 and 2015 Data and supplementary data for

2016 and 2017 o Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) Rating for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Quality

* + Participation in Maternal Child Health Key Ages and Stages Visits at 3.5 years
  + Kindergarten Enrolment at 4 years
  + School Entrant Health Questionnaire (SEHQ) for students in Foundation year (SDQ and PEDS)
  + School absence data o AusVELS / VELS data
  + English Online Interview (EOI)
  + National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) growth and national minimum standard data Years 3 to 5
* Site level strategy reports were analysed to look at the impact of individual strategies. A range of quantitative data (process data, Linking Learning service and family questionnaire data) and qualitative data from formal contexts (interviews and open-ended survey responses) and informal contexts (meetings and reflections) was relied on to assess the impact of individual strategies.
* System level barriers and enablers that contributed to or were encountered in the implementation of Linking Learning were documented to provide evidence about how the larger service system operates and influences practice at a site level.

# Findings

## Program level findings

The evaluation found that any gains to child learning and developmental outcomes that may have been associated with Linking Learning activities were not visible in the community-level data.

Linking Learning was found to impact service providers, particularly Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services and primary schools, in demonstration sites. Findings from the Linking Learning services questionnaire and strategy reports found evidence of:

* Increased service collaboration and planning to improve child outcomes.
* Improvements in services working towards effective transition to school.
* Professional self-reported increase in skills and confidence to engage vulnerable families.
* Professional self-reported increase knowledge and skills to measure the impact of the curriculum.

Linking Learning was viewed by demonstration sites as providing strong leadership for collaboration to improve outcomes for children.

There is limited evidence of the impact of Linking Learning on families and communities. Findings from the Linking Learning family questionnaire and strategy reports indicate:

* A small increase in parent reported home learning environment activities.
* Some parents involved in Linking Learning activities have reported increased knowledge and confidence in how to support their child’s learning and activities to do with their children, including, how to support their children’s oral language and literacy development.
* Families and children at some sites are engaging more with literacy based activities both in and outside the home.

## Site level activity and findings

Service collaboration was fundamental to each of the Linking Learning sites and nearly all strategies across all sites employed an element of this approach. Demonstration sites built networks for effective collaboration through establishment of reference/working groups, providing a range of formal and informal networking opportunities, developing partnerships with local government and other initiatives and addressing barriers to collaboration. Impacts of service collaboration have included development of strong cohesive networks, better communication and consistent practice across service settings.

Professional learning strategies focused on capacity building through targeted professional development across services and included collaborative activities (such as joint professional development and fostering networks of collaborative practice amongst teaching professionals); training and skill development related to teaching and assessment around oral language and literacy and child centred practice; and professional coaching. The impact of these strategies included increased collaboration and planning amongst professionals and applying new knowledge, data and evidence to teaching practice and the curriculum.

Transition strategies were designed to make starting school a positive experience by supporting children, families, and early childhood professionals to become familiar with changing environments and experiences during transition to school. The key components of transition strategies were: collaboration between ECEC services and schools; developmental screening and progress tracking; and parent engagement. Increased collaboration across the early years and schools has led to better communication, planning and information sharing across settings. Demonstration sites were successful at screening all/most children prior to starting school which assisted identification of vulnerable children that needed further assessment, support or referral to other services. There is initial evidence that parent engagement strategies such as enhanced transition conversations have built better relationships between schools and families.

Parent engagement strategies focused on increasing family participation and enhancing the home learning environment. They included community-wide messaging; programs, activities and events for children and their families; development of community libraries and home learning resources such as fun literacy packs; transition activities and conversations; and parent education and training. The impact of these strategies has included increased parent knowledge and confidence in how to support their child’s learning and activities to do with their children, including, how to support their children’s oral language and literacy development.

Child focused strategies involved working directly with children to improve literacy and oracy. The impact of this strategy included improvements in children’s literacy skills (including vocabulary, oral language, speaking and listening) and confidence.

## System level barriers and enablers

Systems level enablers that were identified during Linking Learning included:

* The potential to build on the foundation of quality in ECEC services.
* Systemic frameworks such as NQF and VEYLDF that are supporting practice.

Systemic barriers identified during Linking Learning included:

* Valuable information pertaining to children and families is not able to be passed on to schools from other services due to (perceived and actual) confidentiality issues.
* Variation in each school in respect of the skills children arrive at school with and variation between schools in the same area in terms of the proportion of children with vulnerability on school entry.
* Engaging with personnel from long day care settings who have limited time away from their classrooms.
* The different perspectives of ECEC personnel, primary teachers and other professionals (including allied and community health, playgroups and family services) in respect of skills, practices and pedagogy.

## Sustainability of Linking Learning strategies and activities

Analysis of site level strategy reports has indicated that a number of the collaborative, professional learning, transition, parent engagement and child focussed activities will be sustainable beyond Linking Learning. Four key factors aided the sustainability of activities: support of local agencies, aligning strategies within existing frameworks, embedding strategies within policy and the continuing benefits of training and resources from Linking Learning.

## Limitations

The design of the Linking Learning evaluation has limitations, in common with other evaluations of this type. The most important of these are: the relationship between the outcome framework objectives and outcomes cannot be tested; and the changing policy context in Victoria means that the extent to which any reported changes in practice and outcomes can be attributed to Linking Learning, as opposed to other federal, state and local initiatives, cannot be quantified.

Ratings of collaboration, practice and transition at baseline data collection for services were generally high and this is unsurprising given that the selection of sites was based on readiness to engage in the project. High ratings at baseline mean that change over time is difficult to quantify, as the sensitivity of the instruments being used means changes to ratings are difficult to measure. Quantitative data should be read with issues of instrument sensitivity in mind.