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Bridging the Educational Divide: The Case for Integrating Childcare and Kindergarten in to Australia's School Education System

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Abstract

Australia's current educational landscape presents a fragmented approach to early childhood education, with childcare, kindergarten, and formal schooling operating as separate entities. This paper argues for the strategic integration of childcare and kindergarten services into the existing school education system, examining the pedagogical, economic, and social advantages of such reform. Through analysis of international best practices, developmental psychology research, and educational policy frameworks, this article demonstrates that integration would enhance educational continuity, improve equity of access, strengthen professional development pathways, and provide significant economic benefits for families and government. The paper concludes that systematic integration represents a critical reform necessary for Australia to optimise early childhood educational outcomes and establish a more coherent, effective educational foundation for all children.

Keywords: Early Childhood Education, Educational Integration, Childcare Policy, Kindergarten, Australian Education System

Introduction

Australia's early childhood education and care landscape remains characterised by structural fragmentation, with childcare, kindergarten, and formal schooling operating under separate regulatory, funding, and pedagogical frameworks. Despite decades of evidence demonstrating the critical importance of early childhood experiences for lifelong educational, social, and economic outcomes, Australia continues to maintain a divided system that separates "care" from "education" in ways increasingly inconsistent with contemporary developmental science and international best practice [1].

Research in developmental neuroscience demonstrates that the first five years of life represent a period of rapid brain development during which stable, responsive, and continuous learning environments significantly shape cognitive, social, and emotional outcomes [2]. However, the current Australian system often requires children to transition between multiple services with differing educational philosophies, expectations, and relational environments. These discontinuities may undermine developmental stability and educational continuity, particularly for children experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage or developmental vulnerability.

The Australian Early Development Census continues to identify significant disparities in developmental vulnerability linked to socioeconomic status, geographic location, and access to quality early childhood education. Similarly, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare reports that children from disadvantaged communities are substantially more likely to experience developmental challenges before commencing formal schooling. These findings reinforce growing concerns that Australia's fragmented early childhood system contributes to educational inequity rather than alleviating it [3].

International evidence increasingly supports integrated early childhood education systems that combine childcare, kindergarten, and early schooling within coherent educational frameworks. Countries as diverse as Finland, New Zealand and France have shown that integrated systems can enhance educational continuity, foster workforce participation, increase equity of access and produce stronger long-term educational outcomes [4]. In these systems, children experience smoother transitions between educational stages, while educators operate within unified professional and pedagogical structures.

This paper argues that integrating childcare and kindergarten into Australia's school education system would address current segmented system while generating substantial educational, economic, and social benefits. Such reform would establish greater pedagogical coherence, improve developmental continuity, strengthen professional pathways for educators, and ensure more equitable access to high-quality early childhood education.

Drawing on contemporary international research, developmental theory, economic evidence, and Australian policy analysis, this paper contends that integration represents a necessary and strategic reform for the future of Australian education.

Theoretical Foundations of Early Childhood Education Integration

The theoretical basis for integrating early childhood services draws extensively from developmental psychology, educational theory, and systems thinking. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory emphasises the importance of consistent, interconnected environments for optimal child development. When transitions from childcare to kindergarten and school are not well connected, children are required to adapt to varying expectations, relationships and ways of learning, often multiple times, which can cause stress and interrupt their developmental progress [5].

Attachment theory provides another crucial theoretical foundation for integration Bowlby (1988) arguments and subsequent researchers have demonstrated that children thrive when they can form secure relationships with consistent caregivers and educators [6]. The current fragmented system often requires children to form multiple new attachments as they transition between services, while integration would allow for greater continuity of relationships and more secure attachment formation [7].

Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory further supports integration by emphasizing the importance of culturally consistent learning environments and scaffolded learning experiences. When early childhood services operate under different philosophical and pedagogical approaches, children may experience confusion and gaps in their learning progression. Integration would ensure the consistent application of evidence-based pedagogical approaches across all early childhood settings.

International Models of Integration

Several countries have successfully implemented integrated early childhood education models, providing valuable insights for Australian policy development. Childcare, preschool and early primary education in Finland form a unified system with common national curricula and professional standards [8]. This approach has contributed to Finland's consistently high international educational performance rankings while maintaining strong equity outcomes.

New Zealand's integrated approach, established through the Education and Care Centres system, demonstrates how countries with federal structures similar to Australia can achieve coordination across different service types. The New Zealand model emphasizes consistent professional standards, unified curriculum frameworks, and seamless transitions between early childhood and school settings.

France's école maternelle system provides another instructive example, integrating early childhood education into the broader school system while maintaining age-appropriate pedagogical approaches. French children transition seamlessly from maternal school to elementary school within the same institutional framework, ensuring continuity of approach and relationships.

Research on Educational Continuity and Transition

Extensive research demonstrates the importance of smooth transitions between educational settings for optimal child development outcomes. Fabian and Dunlop (2007) found that children who experience well-supported transitions show better adjustment, higher academic achievement, and stronger social-emotional development. Conversely, poorly managed transitions can create lasting negative impacts on children's educational trajectories.

The concept of educational continuity encompasses multiple dimensions including pedagogical approaches, assessment methods, physical environments, and relationship continuity [9]. The current segmented system in Australia's early childhood system creates discontinuities across all these dimensions, potentially undermining the benefits of quality early childhood programming.

Longitudinal studies consistently demonstrate that children who experience high-quality, continuous early childhood education show sustained advantages throughout their educational careers [10]. The Effective Provision of Pre-School

Education (EPPE) study found that the quality and continuity of early childhood experiences were stronger predictors of later academic success than family background factors, highlighting the potential for integrated systems to address educational inequity.

Potential Concerns Regarding Integration

Critics of integration argue that incorporating childcare into school systems risks the “schoolification” of early childhood education, whereby play-based and relationship-focused learning approaches may be replaced by overly academic models inappropriate for young children. Others raise concerns that integration could reduce the flexibility and community responsiveness currently provided by some independent and community-based childcare services.

These concerns are important and highlight the necessity of ensuring that any integration model preserves developmentally appropriate pedagogies, play-based learning principles, and strong family engagement practices. Integration should not involve imposing primary school structures onto early childhood settings; rather, it should involve embedding high-quality early childhood philosophies within a more coherent educational framework.

International evidence suggests that successful integrated systems maintain the distinctive nature of early childhood education while strengthening continuity, accessibility, and professional collaboration across educational stages [1].

Furthermore, careful policy design would be required to ensure that integration supports diversity of provision, cultural responsiveness, and local community engagement. A balanced and phased approach to reform would therefore be essential to preserve the strengths of existing early childhood services while addressing the structural limitations of the current fragmented system.

Advantages of Integration

Enhanced Educational Continuity and Pedagogical Coherence

Integration of childcare and kindergarten into the school system would establish consistent pedagogical approaches aligned with evidence-based early childhood education principles. Currently, children may experience dramatically different educational philosophies and practices as they move between childcare centres, kindergarten programs, and primary school. Some centres may emphasise academic preparation while others focus primarily on care functions, creating confusion and potential gaps in learning progression.

An integrated system would ensure all early childhood settings implement consistent, developmentally appropriate pedagogical approaches based on the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF). This coherence would be particularly beneficial for children’s literacy and numeracy development, where consistent approaches to foundational skills development are crucial for later academic success [11].

Professional learning communities could be established across integrated settings, enabling early childhood educators and primary school teachers to collaborate in developing seamless curriculum progressions. This collaboration would ensure that children’s learning experiences build systematically from birth through the early primary years, maximizing the educational benefit of each developmental stage.

The integration would also enable more sophisticated assessment and monitoring systems that track children’s development across the entire early childhood period.

Currently, assessment information rarely transfers between different service types, meaning valuable developmental information is lost at transition points. An integrated systems approach could sustain rich developmental profiles that inform teaching and learning throughout children’s early educational journey [4].

Improved Equity and Access

One of the most compelling arguments for integrating childcare and kindergarten into the school education system is the potential to significantly improve equity of access to high-quality early childhood education. Australia’s current mixed-market approach produces substantial disparities in access, affordability, and educational quality, with outcomes often determined by family income, geographic location, and service availability [12].

Recent national data continue to demonstrate that developmental vulnerability is strongly associated with socioeconomic disadvantage. The Australian Early Development Census [3], found that children living in disadvantaged communities are considerably more likely to commence school developmentally vulnerable across multiple domains, including language, cognitive skills, emotional maturity, and communication.

Similarly, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [11], reported persistent inequities in early childhood development outcomes between metropolitan and regional communities, as well as between advantaged and disadvantaged populations.

These inequities are compounded by the fragmented structure of Australia's early childhood sector. Families with greater financial resources are often able to access higher-quality services and more stable educational pathways, while disadvantaged families frequently encounter inconsistent service quality, affordability barriers, and limited program availability. Contemporary OECD analysis argues that universal and integrated early childhood systems are among the most effective mechanisms for reducing educational inequality and improving long-term social outcomes [1].

Integration into the school education system would reposition early childhood education as a universal educational entitlement rather than primarily a workforce support mechanism. Such an approach would align Australia more closely with high-performing international systems where early childhood education is viewed as foundational public education infrastructure UNICEF (2022) [14]. further argues that universal access to integrated early childhood education and care improves not only child development outcomes, but also social cohesion, maternal workforce participation, and long-term economic productivity.

Integrated systems would also improve geographic equity. Many rural and remote Australian communities struggle to maintain viable standalone childcare and kindergarten services due to workforce shortages, infrastructure costs, and limited population size. Co-locating integrated early childhood services within existing school infrastructure could significantly improve service sustainability and educational continuity in regional areas.

Importantly, integration also creates opportunities for more culturally responsive educational pathways. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families may particularly benefit from integrated approaches that connect early childhood services with culturally safe and community-responsive schooling environments. Greater continuity between early childhood and school settings has the potential to strengthen engagement, trust, and long-term educational participation.

Strengthened Professional Development and Career Pathways

The current fragmented system in Australia's early childhood sector has contributed to workforce shortages, high turnover rates, limited career progression opportunities, and inconsistent professional standards [15]. The divided nature of early childhood provision has also created disparities in educator status, remuneration, and access to professional learning opportunities across different service types. Integration into the school education system would create enhanced professional development pathways, greater workforce stability, and improved working conditions for early childhood educators.

Unified professional standards across integrated settings would ensure all early childhood educators receive high-quality initial training and ongoing professional development. This standardization would be particularly important for improving program quality in the childcare sector, where professional requirements are currently less stringent than in kindergarten and school settings.

Career progression opportunities would be significantly enhanced through integration. Currently, early childhood educators in childcare settings have limited opportunities for advancement without leaving their specialized field. Integration would create leadership pathways within early childhood settings and opportunities for movement between different educational levels while maintaining specialization in early childhood pedagogy.

The integration would also facilitate collaborative professional learning between early childhood educators and primary school teachers. This collaboration would enhance understanding of child development and age-appropriate pedagogical approaches across the early years, potentially improving educational quality throughout the primary school years.

Research-practice partnerships could be more easily established in integrated systems, connecting early childhood educators with university researchers and fostering evidence-based practice improvement. Currently, the fragmented nature of early childhood services makes systematic research and evaluation difficult to coordinate and implement.

Economic Benefits and Efficiency Gains

Integrating childcare and kindergarten into Australia's school education system would generate substantial long-term economic benefits for governments, families, and the broader economy. While implementation would require significant initial investment, extensive evidence demonstrates that high-quality early childhood education produces some of the highest returns of any public educational investment.

Contemporary economic analyses continue to confirm the long-term benefits identified in earlier early childhood research. Heckman and Karapakula (2021), in their longitudinal analysis of the Perry Preschool Project, found that high-quality early childhood education generates enduring intergenerational benefits through improved educational attainment, increased employment participation, higher lifetime earnings, and reduced reliance on social welfare and criminal justice systems. These findings reinforce the conclusion that investment in integrated early childhood education should be understood not as a social cost, but as a major long-term economic strategy.

Australia's current early childhood funding and governance arrangements remain highly complex and administratively fragmented. The Productivity Commission (2024) concluded that the existing system is inefficient, difficult for families to navigate, and characterised by overlapping regulatory and funding structures across multiple levels of government [10]. Integration into the school education system would substantially reduce administrative duplication by establishing more unified governance, quality assurance, workforce development, and funding arrangements.

Families would also benefit economically through reduced childcare cost pressures and improved workforce participation opportunities. High childcare costs continue to operate as a significant barrier to workforce participation, particularly for women and single-parent households [12]. identifies universal early childhood education and care as essential social infrastructure that supports both economic productivity and gender equity.

Infrastructure efficiencies would represent another significant advantage of integration. Co-locating childcare and kindergarten services within existing school sites would allow shared use of facilities including libraries, playgrounds, administrative systems, specialist educational spaces, and support services. Such arrangements would be particularly beneficial in rural and remote communities where maintaining separate early childhood facilities is often financially unsustainable.

Integrated systems would also strengthen workforce sustainability by improving professional status, career pathways, and employment conditions for early childhood educators. Current workforce shortages and high turnover rates are exacerbated by fragmented professional structures and inconsistent employment conditions across service types. Unified educational systems would create more stable and attractive professional pathways, contributing to improved program quality and workforce retention.

Ultimately, integrating childcare and kindergarten into the school education system represents not only an educational reform, but also a nation-building economic investment capable of improving productivity, reducing long-term social expenditure, and strengthening Australia's future human capital development.

Implementation Considerations and Challenges

Structural and Administrative Reforms

Implementing integration would require substantial structural reforms across multiple levels of government and education administration. Constitutional arrangements in Australia allocate primary responsibility for school education to state and territory governments, while childcare regulation involves both federal and state responsibilities. Successful integration would require coordinated policy development and implementation across these jurisdictional boundaries.

Workforce transition arrangements would need careful planning to ensure current early childhood educators can successfully integrate into school system structures. This transition would require significant investment in professional development and potentially modified qualification requirements to ensure workforce capacity meets integrated system needs.

Facility planning and infrastructure development would require substantial capital investment, particularly in areas where existing school sites cannot accommodate additional early childhood facilities. However, this investment should be viewed in the context of the long-term infrastructure requirements for maintaining separate early childhood and school systems.

Quality Assurance and Regulatory Alignment

Maintaining and enhancing quality across integrated early childhood services would require sophisticated quality assurance mechanisms that respect the distinctive nature of early childhood pedagogy while ensuring alignment with broader educational standards. The National Quality Framework for early childhood education and care would need integration with school-based quality assurance approaches.

Assessment and reporting systems would require careful development to ensure they capture the breadth of early childhood development outcomes while providing useful information for educational planning and family communication. Over-emphasis on narrow academic measures could undermine the holistic approach essential for effective early childhood education.

Community and Stakeholder Engagement

Successful integration would require extensive consultation and engagement with early childhood communities, including families, educators, and service providers. Many stakeholders have strong attachments to current service models and may have concerns about integration impacts on service accessibility, quality, or philosophical approaches.

Private sector involvement in childcare provision would need careful consideration in integrated models. While some countries have successfully maintained mixed public-private provision within integrated frameworks, this requires sophisticated regulatory and funding arrangements to ensure equity and quality outcomes.

Recommendations for Policy Development

Phased Implementation Approach

A staged implementation approach would enable policy makers to test integration models, refine approaches based on experience, and manage transition challenges effectively. Initial pilot programs could be established in selected locations representing different demographic and geographic contexts, enabling evaluation of different integration models and identification of best practices.

The first phase might focus on integrating kindergarten programs into school settings while maintaining existing childcare arrangements. This approach would establish the infrastructure and administrative arrangements necessary for broader integration while addressing some current transition challenges.

Subsequent phases could progressively integrate childcare services, beginning with areas where infrastructure sharing is most feasible and community support is strongest. This gradual approach would enable workforce development, community engagement, and system refinement throughout the implementation process.

Investment in Professional Development

Substantial investment in professional development would be essential for successful integration. This investment should include both initial training for educators transitioning into integrated systems and ongoing professional development to maintain and enhance practice quality.

Leadership development programs would be particularly important to ensure integrated early childhood settings have effective educational leadership that understands both early childhood pedagogy and broader educational system requirements. These leaders would play crucial roles in maintaining program quality and fostering positive relationships with families and communities.

Research and Evaluation Framework

Comprehensive research and evaluation frameworks should be established from the beginning of implementation to track outcomes, identify challenges, and inform continuous improvement efforts. This research should examine multiple outcome measures including child development outcomes, family satisfaction, educator professional development, and system efficiency measures.

Longitudinal tracking of children's educational progress would be particularly valuable for demonstrating the long-term benefits of integration and informing ongoing program development. International collaboration with countries that have implemented similar reforms could provide valuable comparative perspectives and shared learning opportunities.

Implementation Feasibility: System Design Considerations

While the integration of childcare and kindergarten into Australia's school education system represents a substantial structural reform, international evidence and domestic policy conditions suggest that such reform is administratively feasible if approached as a staged system transition rather than a single structural overhaul. The key constraint is not conceptual viability, but governance coordination across Australia's federated education and care systems.

Australia already possesses several foundational elements required for integration, including the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF), the National Quality Framework (NQF), and established state-based school systems with universal enrolment infrastructure. These existing structures provide a partial platform upon which a unified early childhood-school continuum could be developed, reducing the need to create entirely new institutional frameworks.

Governance Alignment and Federal-State Coordination

A central feasibility challenge lies in the division of responsibilities between the Australian Government (primarily funding and childcare subsidy mechanisms) and state and territory governments (school education delivery and regulation). However, precedents such as the National School Reform Agreement and the National Partnership on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education demonstrate that coordinated intergovernmental reform in education is both possible and operationally established in Australia.

An integrated model would therefore require the development of a National Early Childhood and Foundation Education Agreement, aligning funding, regulatory oversight, workforce standards, and curriculum governance across jurisdictions. Rather than centralising authority, the reform would operate through harmonisation of standards and pooled accountability mechanisms, similar to existing national education agreements.

Phased Structural Integration Model

Feasibility is strengthened when integration is conceptualised as a phased structural transition rather than immediate institutional merger. A realistic implementation pathway would involve three stages:

Stage 1: System Alignment (0-5 years)

- Full alignment of EYLF with Foundation (Prep/Kindergarten) curriculum frameworks

- Co-location incentives for childcare services on school sites
- Shared professional development frameworks for early childhood and foundation teachers
- Unified transition reporting between childcare/kindergarten and school systems.

Stage 2: Institutional Co-location and Governance Integration (5-10 years)

- Expansion of integrated early learning hubs on primary school sites
- Introduction of “Early Learning Directors” overseeing birth-to-year-2 provision
- Shared enrolment and administrative systems across childcare and school sectors
- Consolidation of quality assurance mechanisms under a unified inspectorate model.

Stage 3: Full System Integration (10-15 years)

- Establishment of a continuous early childhood–primary education workforce classification
- Integration of funding streams into a single per-child early learning entitlement model
- Removal of structural separation between childcare, kindergarten, and early schooling services
- Universal entitlement to integrated early learning from birth to Year 2 entry This staged approach reduces institutional disruption while allowing workforce adaptation, infrastructure planning, and community adjustment over time.

Workforce Transition Feasibility

Workforce integration represents one of the most significant practical challenges but also one of the strongest arguments for feasibility if properly managed. Australia already faces workforce shortages in both childcare and early childhood teaching, suggesting that maintaining separate systems is increasingly inefficient.

A unified workforce strategy would involve

- Gradual harmonisation of qualification requirements across childcare educators and early childhood teachers
- Development of a dual registration pathway allowing movement across service types without professional loss
- Salary standardisation aligned with school-based early years educators over time (McLean et al., 2024)
- National workforce transition funding to support upskilling and qualification upgrading.

Importantly, integration does not require immediate replacement of the existing workforce but rather progressive convergence of roles and qualifications.

Infrastructure and Capital Utilisation

From an infrastructure perspective, integration is feasible because Australia already has a near-universal network of primary schools distributed across urban, regional, and remote communities. This provides a scalable foundation for co-located early childhood provision.

Rather than constructing parallel childcare infrastructure, integration would prioritise:

- Repurposing underutilised school facilities
- Expanding modular early learning units on existing school sites
- Shared use of specialist facilities (libraries, outdoor learning spaces, therapy rooms)
- Regional hub-and-spoke models for low-population areas.

This approach significantly reduces long-term capital duplication compared to maintaining separate early childhood and school infrastructure systems.

Risk Management and System Safeguards

Key risks associated with integration, particularly the “schoolification” of early childhood education, loss of sector diversity, and transitional disruption—can be mitigated through regulatory safeguards rather than structural separation. These include:

- Statutory protection of play-based pedagogies within an integrated framework
- Independent early childhood quality assurance standards within the broader education inspectorate
- Maintenance of service diversity through public, not-for-profit, and community-based providers operating within a unified system
- Transition protections for workforce conditions during system convergence.

Feasibility Conclusion

Overall, while integration represents a major structural reform, it is administratively and operationally feasible within the Australian context due to existing national frameworks, established education infrastructure, and precedents for intergovernmental coordination. The primary requirement is not system invention, but system alignment and staged convergence of currently parallel structures into a unified early childhood–school continuum.

Conclusion

The integration of childcare and kindergarten into Australia’s school education system represents a fundamental reform that would address current system fragmentation while providing substantial benefits for children, families, educators,

and society. The evidence base supporting early childhood education investment is compelling, and integration would help ensure these investments achieve maximum impact through consistent quality, enhanced continuity, and improved equity of access.

This reform represents not a modification of existing early childhood services, but a structural redesign of the relationship between care and education in Australia's foundational learning system.

While implementation would require substantial commitment and investment, the long-term benefits justify this effort. International examples demonstrate that integration is achievable and can contribute to improved educational outcomes and social equity. Australia has the opportunity to build on its existing early childhood education strengths while creating a more coherent, effective, and equitable system for all children.

The advantages of integration extend beyond immediate educational benefits to encompass economic efficiency, professional development opportunities, enhanced workforce participation, and stronger social cohesion. As Australia faces continuing challenges relating to educational inequity, workforce sustainability, and long-term economic productivity, the integration of childcare and kindergarten into the school education system represents a strategic national investment in human capital and social wellbeing.

Policy makers should proceed with careful planning, extensive stakeholder consultation, and commitment to evidence-based implementation. While the transition would require substantial structural reform and sustained investment, the long-term educational, social, and economic benefits strongly justify such action. As international evidence increasingly demonstrates the value of integrated early childhood systems, Australia faces a critical policy opportunity to reimagine early childhood education as a universal, coherent, and foundational component of the national education system.

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