



Article

Children's Continuity of Learning in the Transition from Early Childhood Education and Care to School and After-School Care: A Literature Review

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Abstract

Transitions from early childhood education and care (ECEC) to school and after-school care (ASC) mark one of the most formative phases in children's educational pathways. These transitions involve changes in relationships, routines, and pedagogical expectations that can both nurture and challenge continuity of learning. This hermeneutic literature review examines how transitions between ECEC, school, and ASC shape opportunities for learning, with a particular focus on how continuity is conceptualised and supported across settings. Guided by a hermeneutic model, the review followed iterative cycles of searching, reading, and interpretation to identify and connect central ideas within international research on early years transitions and their influence on continuity of learning. Through an ecological framework and later bioecological developments, the analysis revealed four interconnected themes: (1) increasing complexity in transition arrangements; (2) evolving roles in scaffolding and support across institutions; (3) the growing influence of schoolification on early learning; and (4) children's agency as active brokers of continuity. Taken together, these themes portray continuity of learning as a relational and ecological achievement sustained through collaboration, play, and children's participation. The review offers an integrative conceptual framework for understanding transitions as multidimensional processes and provides a theoretical foundation for future empirical inquiry.

Keywords: Early childhood transitions, continuity of learning, schoolification, children's agency, bioecological perspectives



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Introduction

Transitions from ECEC to school and ASC mark critical phases in children's educational journeys. These movements introduce new expectations, relationships, and learning environments, requiring children to adapt to changing pedagogical and institutional structures. International research shows that such transitions are associated with both continuity of children's learning and the risk of discontinuity (Balduzzi et al., 2019; Boyle et al., 2018; Esposti & Ciagala, 2025). The quotation below frames transitions as relational and systemic, clarifying why they can both disrupt and support learning.

Transitions are spaces where different contexts, systems and approaches intersect, and those making the transition are charged with adapting to new environments. Transition points, such as the transition to school, can be considered impediments to continuous development, reflected in a dip in learning or loss of confidence in learning. They can also serve as prompts for new learning, as individuals cross new boundaries and enter new spaces or systems (Dockett & Einarsdóttir, 2017, p. 134).

This conceptualisation reinforces the need to view transitions as relational and systemic processes rather than discrete events, which aligns directly with the aim of this review. The dynamics of transition appear to challenge lived experiences of children and play a key role in their development. Despite extensive research on school readiness and adjustment, how transitions contribute to children's learning as an ongoing, relational process across educational contexts remains underexplored (Binfield-Skøie, 2025; Jindal-Snape et al., 2021; Vogler et al., 2008). Although transitions have been widely studied, reviews still identify gaps in how they are conceptualised, particularly when viewed as ongoing and relational processes across contexts. Many studies lack clear theoretical foundations, which limits attention to relational, temporal and contextual aspects of learning (Jindal-Snape et al., 2021). Research also shows a predominant focus on vertical transitions, especially preschool-to-school, while other settings and experiences remain underexamined (Vogler et al., 2008). More recent work notes that transitions within educational settings, such as movements between groups or classrooms, are also understudied (Binfield-Skøie, 2025). Overall, there is limited research that considers transitions as interconnected processes that shape continuity across educational contexts.

Recent European syntheses emphasise that understanding continuity requires attention to how educational systems, cultural contexts, and professional practices interconnect across the early years and primary schooling (Balduzzi et al., 2019). While this review draws on international research, its analytical orientation is situated within the Nordic early childhood education tradition, which has been characterised as emphasising play-based learning, collaboration across settings, and holistic child perspectives; these emphases inform how continuity of learning is conceptualised in this review (Emilson & Johansson, 2018; Karila, 2012; Otterstad & Braathe, 2010). This marks a conceptual shift from perceiving transitions as readiness-focused events to recognising them as relational, systemic processes involving children, families,

and educators.

Continuity of learning—defined as the sustained connection of experiences, values, and pedagogical approaches across educational settings (Boyle et al., 2018)—has become a central concern in early childhood research and policy. Studies across Nordic and international contexts highlight the challenges of sustaining coherence as children move between ECEC, school, and ASC, where differing pedagogical traditions and institutional logics coexist (Ackesjö & Persson, 2019; Boyle et al., 2018; Dockett & Einarsdóttir, 2017).

For example, in Nordic countries, recent policy developments reveal a trend toward earlier and more uniform school entry, reflecting a growing emphasis on readiness and standardisation in transition practices (Kommunernes Landsforening, 2020). This policy movement underscores the increasing institutional prioritisation of school preparedness, which in turn shapes how continuity is enacted and managed across ECEC, school, and ASC (Ackesjö & Persson, 2019). At the same time, research increasingly points to the importance of children’s perspectives for understanding the lived complexity of these transitions. As Dockett et al. (2019) demonstrate, listening to children’s advice about starting school and ASC provides valuable insight into how they interpret expectations, relationships, and learning opportunities during these changes. Attending to children’s voices not only deepens theoretical understandings of continuity but also informs more responsive pedagogical and institutional practices (Emilson & Johansson, 2018; Koch & Jørgensen, 2023; Otterstad & Braathe, 2010).

In this context, the present review adopts a hermeneutic approach to interpret and synthesise existing research on transitions, focusing on how continuity of learning is conceptualised, supported and enacted across ECEC, school, and ASC. By viewing the literature review as an iterative and interpretive process (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014), this study seeks to illuminate how diverse perspectives collectively contribute to understanding children’s learning across institutional boundaries.

This review aims to examine how transitions between ECEC, school, and ASC shape the continuity of children’s learning across institutional and relational contexts. It seeks to elucidate how continuity is ecologically and relationally co-constructed and informs collaborative pedagogical and policy practices that align systems to support children meaningfully through transitions. The review is informed by Bronfenbrenner’s ecological and later bioecological model, which conceptualises children’s learning and development as emerging from interactions across nested systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). The PPCT model serves as a sensitizing framework guiding the analysis and is further elaborated in the Theoretical Framework section.

The research question that guides this review is:

How do transitions between ECEC, school, and ASC shape the continuity of children's learning across institutional and relational contexts?

Theoretical Framework: A Bioecological Perspective

This review is informed by Bronfenbrenner's ecological and later bioecological model, which conceptualises learning and development as emerging from dynamic interactions between individuals and the multi-layered systems around them (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). The PPCT model, referring to Process, Person, Context and Time, provides a sensitising lens for interpreting how continuity of learning is shaped across transitions.

Proximal processes such as play, communication and participation are central mechanisms through which children engage with and adapt to new environments. Person characteristics influence how children and adults participate in these processes. Context is understood as a set of nested systems including microsystems like ECEC, school and ASC, mesosystem relations such as family and institutional connections, and wider exosystem and macrosystem conditions including organisational structures and policy discourses. Time refers to the sequencing of transitions as well as broader historical developments that influence early years education. This framework orients the analysis toward the relational, contextual and temporal dimensions of continuity of learning.

Method

Research Design

Hermeneutic methodology, as outlined by Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic (2014), conceptualises literature review as an iterative and interpretive process rather than a static or purely descriptive summary. Understanding emerges through repeated engagement with texts, where meaning evolves in dialogue between the researcher and the literature. This approach enables a nuanced interpretation of how continuity of learning and transition practices are theorised and enacted across diverse studies and contexts. It supports a contextually grounded understanding of how children's learning is both supported and disrupted through transitions.

Situated within the Nordic early childhood education tradition, the interpretive stance is grounded in pedagogical values of play, participation, and collaboration across institutional boundaries (Emilsson & Johansson, 2018; Koch & Jørgensen, 2023; Otterstad & Braathe, 2010). Drawing on the bioecological

perspective outlined above (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), ecological concepts informed both the reading of individual studies and the development of the interpretive themes. This positional grounding supported sensitivity to relational and contextual dimensions of continuity of learning. Consistent with Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic's (2014) hermeneutic model, the review process was iterative and reflexive. Understanding evolved through cycles of reading, interpretation and discussion. Interpretive memos and peer dialogues documented shifts in meaning and enhanced transparency. Rather than aiming for neutrality, the analysis recognises synthesis as an interpretive act that connects the researcher's horizon of understanding with the conceptual worlds of the reviewed studies (Gadamer, 2004).

Search and Selection Process

The review was conducted in accordance with the two interrelated cycles of Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic's (2014) hermeneutic model: (1) the search and acquisition cycle, and (2) the analysis and interpretation cycle.

Database searches were conducted between April 2024 and November 2025 across EBSCO, Springer Link, Taylor & Francis, Idunn, JSTOR, Sage Journals, ScienceDirect, Wiley Online Library, and Google Scholar. Search strings combined terms such as transition, early childhood education and care (ECEC), school, after-school care, learning, continuity, and wellbeing (see Appendix A, Table A1). These searches included 1250 records. Studies were eligible for inclusion if they were peer-reviewed journal articles or scholarly books, published between 2000 and 2025 in English or Nordic languages, and if they explicitly focused on transitions involving ECEC, school, and/or ASC and were relevant to children's learning, continuity, or relational and pedagogical processes.

To achieve the timely, historical and contextual perspective needed in the sensitising framework, one book published prior year 2000 was also included in the search as well as governmental and international records (OECD, Nordic Cooperation). In line with the applied hermeneutic methodology, the search process also included citation tracing, snowballing, and recommendations from peers and supervisors. These additional strategies identified 48 further records (Appendix A, Table A1). Of these 48 additional records, 18 met the inclusion criteria and were incorporated into the synthesis, while the remaining sources were excluded after screening. A list of scholarly books included in the process is provided in Appendix A, Table A2. Altogether, the searches yielded 1298 records.

After including only full texts and removing duplicates, 181 unique records were assessed by reading the abstract and conclusion of articles and skimming other included records, using the same inclusion criteria across all sources. Records were excluded if they focused solely on readiness or adaptation without addressing continuity of learning, did not examine transitions involving ECEC, school, or ASC or lacked

conceptual engagement with relational or pedagogical processes. In total, 66 records were further included in the synthesis whereof 47 records were included in the final findings.

To minimise potential bias from non-database sources, the same inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied to all records, and the origin of each item (database, snowballing, recommendation) was documented. Interpretive memos also recorded how new sources influenced the evolving analysis. These steps supported transparency while remaining consistent with hermeneutic review logic. As hermeneutic reviews rely on iterative sense-making rather than closed sampling frames, incorporating sources beyond the initial database search was both methodologically appropriate and necessary for conceptual saturation; however, applying identical criteria and documenting each pathway ensured that these additional records did not introduce undue bias.

Analysis and Interpretation

The selected literature was organised using Mendeley reference management software and coded manually. Each text was coded for analytical concepts which served as interpretive anchors. These categories were informed by both the theoretical framework and recurrent patterns across the literature. Grounded in relational and ecological perspectives (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Dockett & Einarsdóttir, 2017), the patterns evolved through cycles of reading, reflection, and dialogue with the texts, with particular attention to how proximal processes, person characteristics, contextual arrangements, and temporal dimensions were described.

The analysis proceeded through iterative comparison of studies, identifying similarities and divergences in how transitions and continuity were conceptualised. Repeated engagement with the texts revealed recurrent conceptual configurations around continuity of learning, institutional collaboration, pedagogical change, and children's agency. Following the hermeneutic circle (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014), understanding developed through continual movement between individual studies and the broader body of literature.

This process continued until a point of interpretive saturation was reached. In hermeneutic literature reviews, saturation does not refer to the exhaustive identification of all available studies, but to the moment when further cycles of searching and reading no longer generated new conceptual insights relevant to the review question (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014). Saturation was determined by three criteria: (1) stability of the emerging interpretive categories, which remained consistent across additional texts; (2) recurrence of similar conceptual patterns in newly included studies, indicating diminishing returns; and (3) lack of new perspectives arising from refined search strings or additional snowballing. When iterative engagement with the literature ceased to extend or challenge the core themes, a

judgement towards the analysis to have reached an interpretive saturation was made.

The analysis evolved from an initial mapping of the literature toward a focused synthesis of conceptual meanings. Through sustained cycles of reading, memo writing, and reflection, descriptive insights were refined into four interrelated interpretive themes, which are presented in the Results section as complementary perspectives on how children’s learning is shaped across transitions.

Results

The hermeneutic synthesis yielded four interrelated themes that collectively illuminate how children’s learning is conceptualised and supported across transitions between ECEC, school, and ASC. In Table 1, four themes represent four interpretive categories that synthesise how researchers have theorised and examined the relational, institutional, and pedagogical dimensions of continuity of learning. These themes— (1) the increasing complexity of transitions and the challenge of learning continuity; (2) shifting roles in scaffolding across multiple institutions; (3) institutional shifts and the schoolification of early learning; and (4) children’s agency as active brokers of learning—reflect recurring ideas, tensions, and conceptual patterns identified across the reviewed literature. Table 1 functions as an organising device for the synthesis by summarising how the interpretive categories relate to representative studies and grounding the themes in the reviewed literature.

Table 1. Summary of themes, interpretive categories and representative references

Theme	Interpretive category	Representative References
1. Increasing Complexity of Transitions	Transitions are multidimensional, involving interacting physical, social, and institutional layers that challenge structural, developmental, and contextual continuity.	Brooker (2008); Petriwskyj et al. (2010); Dockett & Einarsdóttir (2017); Esposti & Cigala (2025); Boyle et al. (2018); Balduzzi et al. (2019); Harju et al. (2023); Egilsson (2022); Bronfenbrenner (1979); Bronfenbrenner & Morris (2006)

2. Shifting Roles in Scaffolding	Continuity of learning depends on cross-institutional collaboration, shared pedagogical principles, and coordination among professionals across ECEC, school, and ASC.	Dencik & Jørgensen (1999); Dencik (1998); Dencik et al. (2008); Alverson et al. (2019); Drange & Sandsør (2024); Simoncini et al. (2015); Odgaard (2023); Lillemyr et al. (2011); Boylan et al. (2023); Balduzzi et al. (2019); Egilsson (2022); Dockett & Einarsdóttir (2017); Ackesjö & Persson (2019); Søreide et al. (2021); Voogt & Roblin (2012); Urban et al. (2023); OECD (2021); Bronfenbrenner (1979); Bronfenbrenner & Morris (2006); Rantavuori et al. (2017)
3. Institutional Shifts and Schoolification	Early learning is increasingly shaped by school-oriented priorities and standardisation, risking the loss of holistic, play-based pedagogies.	Børne- og undervisningsministeriet (n.d.); Nordisk samarbejde (n.d.); Government of Iceland (n.d.); Regeringskansliet (2017); Nordic Co-operation (n.d.); Barna- og útbúgvingarmálaráðið (2025); Ackesjö & Persson (2019); Peters & Sandberg (2017); Hogsnes (2015); Kommunernes Landsforening (2020); Balduzzi et al. (2019); Egilsson (2022); Bronfenbrenner (1979); Bronfenbrenner & Morris (2006); OECD (2021); Otterstad & Braathe (2010); Carlbaum & Rönnberg (2024)
4. Children as Active Agents	Children act as brokers of meaning, relationships, and learning across contexts through play, participation, and communicative agency.	Vogler et al. (2008); Dockett et al. (2019); Balduzzi et al. (2019); Pálsdóttir (2019); Büker & Höke (2019); Hogsnes (2015); Einarsdóttir (2011); O’Kane (2016); Simonsson (2015); Bronfenbrenner & Morris (2006)

Theme 1: Increasing Complexity of Transitions

Children’s transitions have become more frequent, multifaceted, and prolonged, introducing new challenges for sustaining continuity of learning (Brooker, 2008; Dockett & Einarsdóttir, 2017; Esposti & Cigala, 2025). Petriwskyj et al. (2010) conceptualise transitions as occurring simultaneously across vertical

and horizontal dimensions—vertical transitions between institutions and horizontal transitions within children’s daily lives, such as home, ECEC, school, and ASC.

Building on this framework, European studies demonstrate that these complex movements unfold across interconnected professional, institutional, and policy domains. Balduzzi et al. (2019) show that transitions involve multiple layers of responsibility and interpretation among educators, families, and policymakers, underscoring the need for shared pedagogical coherence across systems. Similarly, Harju et al. (2023) identify how transitions encompass intertwined physical, social, and philosophical dimensions, resulting in diverse combinations of continuity and discontinuity within children’s everyday experiences.

Research further illustrates the multilayered nature of transitions. Egilsson (2022) finds that families often navigate multiple parallel transitions—from preschool to school, to after-school programmes and community-based activities—each demanding new social and pedagogical adaptations. Even seemingly minor changes, such as classroom routines or peer group reorganisation, can reshape children’s feelings of belonging and learning opportunities.

Interpreted through an ecological lens (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), this growing complexity can be understood as the interaction of multiple systems—micro (children’s relationships and daily routines), meso (connections between families and institutions), and macro (policy and cultural expectations). These interconnected layers collectively shape the ecological conditions that influence children’s continuity of learning during transitions.

This body of findings highlights that transitions are not singular events, but continuous, interwoven processes shaped by overlapping systems, relationships, and expectations. Such complexity requires coherence not only between educational structures but also within children’s lived experiences (Brooker, 2008; Petriwskyj et al., 2010). Boyle et al. (2018) identify three complementary forms of continuity—structural, developmental, and contextual—each essential for maintaining stability through change. When transitions are poorly coordinated, children may experience “learning dips” or diminished confidence; when well supported, transitions can become spaces of continuity of learning and growth (Dockett & Einarsdóttir, 2017).

Viewed through the PPCT lens (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), these dynamics reflect how children’s proximal processes of participation in everyday routines are reorganised across contexts, how different person characteristics are recognised or overlooked, and how temporal patterns of transition (e.g., extended, repeated, or compressed moves) create varying conditions for continuity of learning.

Theme 2: Shifting roles in scaffolding

As children's education now extends across multiple institutional settings, responsibility for scaffolding learning has expanded beyond the traditional home–school relationship as described by Dencik and Jørgensen (1999), Dencik (1998), and Dencik et al. (2008). European reviews emphasise that maintaining coherence across these diverse educational environments requires shared pedagogical principles, effective communication, and sustained professional collaboration (Balduzzi et al., 2019).

Learning unfolds across several institutional “socialisation platforms,” encompassing ECEC, pre-school classes, schools, and ASC, where educators must coordinate to ensure continuity in children's experiences (Dencik, 1998; Dencik et al., 2008; Dencik & Jørgensen, 1999; Odgaard, 2023). Research reveals that parents often perceive weak collaboration between preschools, schools, and after-school programmes, compelling them to rely on informal networks and community-based activities to support children's sense of belonging and learning continuity (Egilsson, 2022).

Pedagogical emphases also vary across the institutional settings: ECEC as well as ASC typically prioritise socio-emotional and play-based learning (Ackesjö et al., 2024; Alverson et al., 2019; Drange & Sandsør, 2024; Simoncini et al., 2015), while schools focus more on cognitive and academic development (Ackesjö & Persson, 2019). Traditionally—especially in school—scaffolding children's learning has emphasised guided instruction and teacher-directed support, aiming to help children master predefined skills and knowledge. More recently, influenced by the growing focus on 21st-century competences—including collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking—educators across ECEC, school, and ASC are moving toward to explore more participatory and co-constructed forms of scaffolding. These approaches value play, dialogue, and shared inquiry as means for developing understanding and agency (Søreide et al., 2021; Voogt & Roblin, 2012). For instance, within the Nordic pedagogical tradition, this development reflects an ongoing shift toward relational, inclusive, and context-sensitive support for children's learning across settings (Urban et al., 2023).

Play serves as a critical bridge between these domains, promoting cognitive growth while maintaining relational and emotional coherence (Boylan et al., 2023; Lillemyr et al., 2011). When opportunities for familiar play and interaction are sustained, children's motivation and engagement remain strong; when pedagogical discontinuities emerge, integration becomes fragile (Dockett & Einarsdóttir, 2017).

While scaffolding has traditionally been conceptualised as a pedagogical interaction within a setting, this research extends the idea by suggesting that scaffolding can also be framed as a coordinated, inter-institutional practice that spans children's transitions across contexts, rather than solely a purely pedagogical act (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; OECD, 2021; Rantavuori et al., 2017). In this view, educators,

families, and institutions collectively create a scaffold of relational and structural support that sustains learning continuity as children move between contexts. In PPCT terms, these inter-institutional practices shape the quality and continuity of proximal processes (for example, shared play practices or familiar routines), depend on how children's and adults' person characteristics are considered, and are structured by contextual and temporal conditions such as staffing, timetables, and the sequencing of activities (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

Effective scaffolding, therefore, relies on collaboration, mutual understanding, and continuity in children's relational and emotional experiences across institutions. In PPCT terms, such scaffolding coordinates proximal processes across settings, attends to the resources and dispositions of the persons involved, and negotiates the contextual and temporal conditions under which learning continuity can be sustained.

Theme 3: Institutional Shifts and Schoolification

Across the Nordic region, compulsory schooling usually begins in the year children turn six in Denmark, Norway, and Iceland, while in Sweden children attend the mandatory "preschool class" at age six and start formal schooling at seven; in contrast, compulsory schooling begins at seven in both Finland and the Faroe Islands (Barna- og útbúgvingarmálaráðið, 2025; Børne- og undervisningsministeriet, n.d.; Government of Iceland, n.d.; Nordic Co-operation, n.d.; Nordisk samarbejde, n.d.; Regeringskansliet, 2017).

The movement of children's sixth year into formal schooling exemplifies the "schoolification" of early learning (Ackesjö & Persson, 2019). This shift reflects a broader policy trend across the Nordic region, where the proportion of children delaying school entry has steadily declined—from 13.2% in 2009/2010 to 6.0% in 2019/2020 in Denmark (Kommunernes Landsforening, 2020)—signalling a growing commitment to age-based progression and standardisation.

Across Europe, research has documented similar tendencies toward aligning early childhood curricula with school expectations and assessment logics (Balduzzi et al., 2019). Egilsson's (2022) study illustrates this transformation at the micro-level, showing how families experience a marked pedagogical shift from play-based, relational learning in preschool to formal, outcome-oriented teaching in the first year of school. This shift challenges the sense of belonging and continuity that previously characterised children's early learning environments.

Originally conceived as a bridge between preschool and formal education, initiatives such as Sweden's preschool class have gradually adopted school-oriented goals and assessment practices (Peters & Sandberg, 2017). Although these developments can enhance children's readiness for schooling, they simultaneously risk eroding the holistic, play-based pedagogies central to ECEC (Hogsnes, 2015). Viewed through a

discursive and institutional lens, schoolification can be understood as a process that redefines what counts as legitimate learning across educational systems. The dominance of school-oriented discourse shapes how educators, policymakers, and families construct meaning around continuity, often privileging readiness and standardisation over relational and play-based learning (Ackesjö & Persson, 2019; Carlbaum & Rönnerberg, 2024; Otterstad & Braathe, 2010). Transitions shape children’s learning by reshaping the discursive boundaries that determine which pedagogical forms are valued and sustained. Maintaining pedagogical coherence therefore requires a delicate balance—supporting academic preparation while honouring children’s autonomy, curiosity, and emotional well-being. Sustaining such balance is essential to preserve developmental integrity and meaningful continuity of learning across institutional boundaries.

Here, the research question is addressed by identifying which structural forces reshape learning during transitions: policy-driven schoolification, school-oriented readiness and standardisation redefine what counts as learning and can compress the space for play-based, relational pedagogy that sustains continuity. The implication is that continuity is not mere alignment with school norms, but a calibrated coherence that protects developmental breadth across settings. In the language of PPCT (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), schoolification represents a macrosystemic and historical (macro-time) shift that reorganises the contexts in which proximal processes unfold and re-evaluates which person characteristics are valued, thereby altering the ecological conditions for continuity of learning.

Theme 4: Children as active agents and brokers of learning

Research has shifted attention toward children’s agency, positioning children as active participants who negotiate and interpret their own transitions rather than merely adapting to institutional structures (Vogler et al., 2008). Dockett et al. (2019) emphasise the importance of listening to children’s perspectives and advice on starting school and ASC, revealing how their insights contribute to more responsive and relational transition practices.

Comparative European studies likewise highlight children’s capacity to act as mediators of continuity across cultural and institutional contexts (Balduzzi et al., 2019). Children draw on familiar routines, artefacts, and relationships—using play and communication—to carry meaning across home, ECEC, school, and ASC (Einarsdottir, 2011; Hogsnes, 2015; O’Kane, 2016; Simonsson, 2015). Seen through a participatory and relational perspective, children’s agency transforms the research question’s “how” into a mutual process of co-construction. Learning continuity is not simply influenced by institutional design, but actively created through children’s interactions, play, and communicative strategies as they negotiate meaning across settings. In this sense, transitions shape learning through children’s own interpretive actions.

By exercising agency in this way, children act as brokers of continuity—translating social knowledge,

reusing established routines, and sustaining relational stability amid institutional change (Büker & Höke, 2019; Pálsdóttir, 2019). From a PPCT perspective, children's agentic actions illustrate how proximal processes are not simply imposed by adults but are co-constructed by children whose dispositions, experiences, and identities shape how they participate in, and transform, the learning opportunities available to them over time (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). On the one hand, when educators acknowledge and support this agency, transitions become co-constructed learning processes; when children's contributions are undervalued, their sense of coherence and continuity weakens. On the other hand, recognising children as brokers thus reframes transitions not simply as institutional processes but as participatory, relational experiences shaped collaboratively by children and adults.

This theme answers the research question by foregrounding who actively produces continuity: children themselves. Through play, narrative, and communicative action, children broker meanings across contexts, co-constructing continuity with adults. Recognising and designing for this agency turns transitions from top-down handovers into participatory learning processes that maintain coherence through change.

Summary of findings

Across the reviewed literature, four interconnected mechanisms shape how transitions influence children's continuity of learning:

1. *Increasing complexity* challenges structural, developmental, and contextual continuity.
2. *Shared responsibility for scaffolding* requires sustained collaboration across institutions.
3. *Schoolification* can fragment pedagogical coherence.
4. *Children's agency* plays a central role in sustaining continuity of learning across settings.

Together, these findings underscore that continuity of learning is a dynamic and relational process maintained through pedagogical alignment, cross-sector collaboration, and children's active participation. These insights collectively address the research question by illustrating how transitions are experienced and supported across the intertwined domains of institutions, relationships, and learning practices.

Discussion

Taken together, the four interconnected themes in this hermeneutic literature review show that transitions are multidimensional processes embedded within relational, pedagogical, and institutional systems that continually negotiate the conditions for continuity of learning.

Continuity as a Relational and Ecological Process

Continuity of learning emerges as a dynamic process of negotiation among children, educators, families, and institutions rather than as a fixed state. As Brooker (2008) and Petriwskyj et al. (2010) argue, transitions operate simultaneously across vertical and horizontal dimensions—linking institutional change with children’s everyday experiences and relationships. This multidimensionality underscores that transitions should be understood as systemic, relational processes rather than discrete events.

Research across Europe and the Nordic region reinforce this ecological view. Sustaining continuity requires alignment not only between pedagogical frameworks but also between families, educators, and communities (Balduzzi et al., 2019; Egilsson, 2022). When communication across these levels is fragmented, discontinuities can disrupt belonging and learning (Dockett & Einarsdóttir, 2017). Conversely, when coherence is cultivated through shared pedagogical principles and relational trust, transitions can foster adaptation, creativity, and growth (Boyle et al., 2018; Dockett & Einarsdóttir, 2017). Such alignment transforms transitions from potential disruptions into opportunities for collective learning where systems and individuals adjust to one another.

This perspective aligns with Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory, which conceptualises children’s learning as developing within nested and interdependent systems. As articulated in the PPCT formulation (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), continuity of learning is contingent upon the extent to which proximal processes are sustained across contexts, how the characteristics of children and adults shape participation in these processes, and how such processes are patterned over time. Continuity depends on communication and value alignment across microsystems (classes, peer groups), mesosystems (family–ECEC, school, and ASC relationships), and macrosystems (policy and cultural expectations). Within this view, sustaining continuity involves both structural coordination and emotional resonance—creating learning environments that support belonging, confidence, and identity through change.

Reinterpreting Scaffolding Across Institutional Boundaries

The first two themes highlight how increasing structural and pedagogical complexity redistributes responsibility for supporting learning continuity across a wider network of actors. As educational pathways expand, coherence depends on how educators coordinate pedagogical goals and maintain communication across institutional boundaries (Dencik & Jørgensen, 1999; Dencik et al., 2008; Balduzzi et al., 2019).

Viewed through a bioecological lens, these boundary-crossing collaborations operate within the mesosystem, linking the microsystems of children’s everyday participation across ECEC, school, and ASC.

Empirical research illustrates these challenges: while parents value preschool’s emotional and social security, they often experience limited collaboration between early childhood, school, and after-school

professionals (Egilsson, 2022). Families therefore become informal mediators of continuity, bridging gaps through communication and community ties. In PPCT terms, these family practices sustain children's proximal processes by carrying routines, expectations, and relationships across contexts. This suggests that scaffolding extends beyond individual pedagogy to encompass inter-institutional cooperation and shared responsibility for children's learning. Such alignment shapes the contextual conditions under which proximal processes unfold, illustrating how person characteristics (e.g., children's dispositions, educators' relational orientations) interact with institutional contexts to sustain or disrupt learning continuity.

In this context, the growing focus on 21st-century competences—such as collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking—further reinterprets what scaffolding means across educational boundaries. These competences require pedagogical approaches that promote participation, dialogue, and shared inquiry across settings. Maintaining continuity therefore involves aligning not only institutional structures and communication, but also pedagogical orientations that nurture agency and co-construction across ECEC, school, and ASC (Søreide et al., 2021; Voogt & Roblin, 2012).

Play functions as a central mediating practice in this process. It bridges pedagogical traditions, connecting cognitive development with emotional and social belonging (Boylan et al., 2023; Bükér & Höke, 2019; Lillemyr et al., 2011; Pálsdóttir, 2019). When educators sustain familiar forms of play and interaction across transitions, children's motivation and confidence are strengthened (Dockett & Einarsdóttir, 2017). Conversely, abrupt pedagogical shifts can disrupt coherence and engagement. Effective scaffolding therefore relies on collaboration, mutual understanding, and relational continuity across settings—emphasising that learning continuity is both structural and relationally co-constructed. From a PPCT perspective, these cross-setting practices guide how proximal processes are stabilised or reorganised over time, shaping children's experience of continuity across transitions.

Institutional Change and the Dynamics of Schoolification

The third theme highlights how macro-level policy and discourse reshape the conditions of learning continuity. Across the Nordic region, early learning environments increasingly reflect school-oriented priorities such as readiness, standardisation, and assessment (Ackesjö & Persson, 2019; Peters & Sandberg, 2017). The Danish policy trend toward uniform school entry (Kommunernes Landsforening, 2020) and similar European tendencies (Balduzzi et al., 2019) exemplify this structural transformation.

While closer alignment between preschool and school curricula can support smoother learning progression, it also risks reducing the emphasis on play and relationships that underpin children's well-being and creativity (Egilsson, 2022; Hogsnes, 2015;). Egilsson (2022) found that families often perceive a clear shift from the flexible, child-centred ethos of preschool to the more formal, outcome-oriented structure of

school. These findings suggest that ensuring continuity does not mean making practices identical across settings but balancing preparation for academic learning with the preservation of children's autonomy, emotional security, and developmental diversity.

Continuity and discontinuity coexist dynamically within children's transitions (Harju et al., 2023), a view that resonates with a hermeneutic understanding of learning as an interpretive and evolving process. Continuity involves the capacity of systems and relationships to adapt through change while preserving the integrity of play-based, relational learning while engaging with new expectations. This interpretation reframes continuity as a responsive process that depends on how pedagogical and policy systems interpret and adjust to one another.

From a bioecological perspective, these policy and discursive shifts operate at the macrosystem level and across macro-time level, reconfiguring the broader socio-institutional conditions within which children's proximal processes occur and, consequently, shaping the conditions for continuity of learning.

Children's Agency and the Co-construction of Continuity

The fourth theme foregrounds children's agency in producing continuity. Research increasingly views children as active participants who interpret and negotiate transitions rather than passively adapting to them (Büker & Höke, 2019; Dockett, et al., 2019; Pálsdóttir, 2019; Vogler et al., 2008). Children use familiar routines, artefacts, and relationships to carry meaning across settings, drawing on play and communication to link experiences from ECEC, home, school, and ASC (Einarsdottir, 2011; Hogsnes, 2015; O'Kane, 2016; Simonsson, 2015).

When educators recognise and support these practices, transitions become collaborative processes of shared meaning-making; when they are overlooked, children's sense of coherence weakens. Children's agency therefore reframes continuity as co-constructed created through interaction, participation, and dialogue (Büker & Höke, 2019; Pálsdóttir, 2019). This participatory conception of continuity aligns with rights-based and relational pedagogies that position children as contributors to their own learning trajectories.

Empirical work drawing explicitly on Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model further illustrates this point. In their study of preschoolers' perspectives on transition to school in Australia and Denmark, Schürer et al. (2025) show how children's accounts of feeling safe, known, and increasingly independent are anchored in everyday proximal processes—such as teacher support and peer relationships—while also reflecting the curriculum and legislative frameworks of each country. From a PPCT perspective, their findings underscore how children's agentic contributions to continuity are simultaneously shaped by personal characteristics (e.g., confidence, sense of belonging), contextual features, and the temporal organisation of the transition

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Continuity of Learning as a Relational and Ecological System

Viewed through Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework, and particularly the later PPCT formulation (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), the four themes can be interpreted as interrelated dimensions of a bioecological system. The review highlights how proximal processes, person characteristics, contexts, and time are intertwined in shaping continuity of learning:

- Children's agency operates at the microsystem, where daily play and communication sustain coherence.
- Scaffolding occurs within and between microsystems and mesosystems, where educators and families coordinate pedagogical intentions and create conditions for recurring, meaningful interactions.
- Complexity of transitions reflects exosystemic arrangements, encompassing organisational and professional structures that shape how proximal processes can be organised and sustained across settings.
- Schoolification represents macrosystemic and historical (macro-time) processes, where educational discourses and policy define what counts as learning and reconfigure the contexts for children's ongoing participation.

These levels are dynamically interconnected over time: macro-level priorities influence institutional structures, which in turn, shape mesosystemic collaboration and micro-level participation across children's transition trajectories. Recent studies that analyse preschoolers' transition experiences through a bioecological lens demonstrate this interconnection by tracing how children's feelings and expectations emerge from proximal processes in classrooms and peer groups while at the same time reflecting national curriculum frameworks and legislative contexts (Schürer et al., 2025).

In this way, transitions between ECEC, school, and ASC shape the continuity of learning by linking structural alignment with relational processes. Continuity of learning is not achieved through standardisation but through collaborative responsiveness across ecological levels. It is an interpretive and relational achievement sustained through dialogue, participation, and the ongoing negotiation of meaning across systems and relationships.

Conclusion

The aim of this research was to examine how transitions between ECEC, school, and ASC shape the continuity of children's learning across institutional and relational contexts with the purpose of illuminating how continuity of learning is ecologically and relationally co-constructed, and of informing collaborative pedagogical and policy practices that align systems to meet children through transitions.

Through an iterative and reflexive hermeneutic process (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic's 2014), four

interrelated themes were identified: the growing complexity of transitions, shifting roles in scaffolding, institutional change and schoolification, and children's agency as brokers of learning. Together, these show that continuity of learning is not a static condition but a dynamic process of negotiation among children, educators, families, institutions and educational discourses, unfolding over time as relationships and practices evolve. It is sustained through dialogue, trust, and shared pedagogical intent that connect diverse practices across contexts.

The synthesis reframes continuity as an ecological and relational system linking children's everyday experiences with wider structures of policy, curriculum, and organisation. Continuity depends on how systems respond to one another and how professionals interpret and adapt collaboratively. When alignment occurs, transitions become generative spaces fostering agency, belonging, and growth rather than disruption. Viewed through the PPCT lens (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), continuity of learning is realised when proximal processes are sustained and adapted across settings. It further depends on recognising children's and adults' characteristics as resources within these processes. Continuity is also supported when institutional contexts are aligned without losing their diversity, and when the temporal organisation of transitions enables the gradual and iterative construction of relationships and shared meanings. Play, communication, and relational practices are central to coherence. Play enables children to connect past and new experiences through imagination and creativity (Boylan et al., 2023; Hogsnes, 2015; Lillemyr et al., 2011), while cross-setting communication builds shared understanding and continuity (Balduzzi et al., 2019; Bierman & Sheridan, 2022; Boyle et al., 2018; Dockett et al., 2017), in line with a holistic approach to childcare (Alverson et al., 2019).

Foregrounding children's perspectives challenges adult-centred models that frame continuity as an administrative task. Children are co-authors of continuity, actively carrying meaning and familiar practices across contexts through the proximal processes of play, communication and participation (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Bükér & Höke, 2019; Pálsdóttir, 2019). This view positions continuity not as a policy outcome but as a lived, co-created process unfolding through relationships and shared interpretation.

Implications for Policy, Practice, and Research

The findings of this hermeneutic synthesis highlight that continuity of learning is a collective, relational, and participatory process extending beyond institutional boundaries. Sustaining such continuity requires coordination across policy frameworks, pedagogical practices, and the everyday interactions that connect children, educators, and families.

At the policy level, frameworks should promote collaboration and contextual alignment across ECEC,

school, and ASC sectors by embedding shared transition goals within learning discourses, curricula, professional development, and quality assurance systems. Coherence should not be equated with standardisation but understood as alignment in pedagogical values that support children’s emotional, social, and cognitive well-being. Policies should also recognise children as active participants whose perspectives inform transition design and evaluation, alongside the roles of families and communities in sustaining continuity of learning across educational transitions.

In practice, the findings emphasise the importance of cultivating relational continuity through consistent communication and shared understanding across professional boundaries. Joint planning, cross-sector meetings, and collaborative transition activities can strengthen children’s sense of belonging and reduce discontinuity. Maintaining play as a pedagogical bridge is especially vital, as play fosters familiarity, creativity, and confidence across learning contexts. Educators should also actively involve children in transition planning and reflection, recognising these interactions as central proximal processes shaping continuity of learning. Recognising children’s agency enhances both the ethical and educational quality of transition practices.

Future research should examine how continuity of learning operates across diverse sociocultural and institutional contexts, exploring how institutions, educators, families, and children co-construct continuity of learning through everyday practices. Comparative and longitudinal studies could illuminate how professional collaboration and children’s agency shape belonging and learning outcomes over time. Research in, for example, small-society contexts can provide valuable opportunities to investigate how proximal processes evolve over time and how community relationships, institutional proximity and child-centred educational discourses enable collaboration and sustain continuity. These localised insights can enrich international debates on transition pedagogy, showing how cultural, structural, and relational factors collectively shape the continuity of learning.

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Appendix A

This appendix provides an overview of the literature search process and the scholarly books included in the review.

Table A1. Overview of literature search

Overview of search strings, dates, databases, inclusion criteria, initial records retrieved, and records selected after screening of abstracts and conclusions.

Search string and date	Databases	Inclusion marks	Initial records retrieved	Selected after screening
22/04/2024 transition* AND "early childhood education and care" AND "primary school"	EBSCO, Springer Link, Taylor & Francis, Idunn, JSTOR, Sage Journals, ScienceDirect, and Wiley Online Library.	Peer reviewed Full text available Open access English 2000-2024	30	6
22/04/2024 transition* AND "early childhood education and care" AND "primary school"	Google scholar	2014-2024	435	21
22/04-27/04/2024 "Transition to school" AND learning AND "Early childhood education and care"	EBSCO, Springer Link, Taylor & Francis, Idunn, JSTOR, Sage Journals, ScienceDirect, and Wiley Online Library.	Peer reviewed Full text available Open access English 2000-2024	89	33
29/04-03/05/2024 transition AND (from preschool to	EBSCO, Springer Link, Taylor & Francis, Idunn,	Peer reviewed Full text available Open access	616	33

primary school) AND requirements AND (children's learning)	JSTOR, Sage Journals, ScienceDirect, and Wiley Online Library.	English 2004 - 2024		
06/05-15/05/2024 transition AND (from preschool to primary school) AND requirements AND (children's learning) AND (children's wellbeing)	EBSCO, Springer Link, Taylor & Francis, Idunn, JSTOR, Sage Journals, ScienceDirect, and Wiley Online Library.	Peer reviewed Full text available Open access English and Nordic languages 2004 - 2024	128	70
22/04/2024-20/11- 2025 Ongoing searches during writing process (peer recommendations, citation tracking, database updates, Google Scholar)	Multible sources	English and Nordic languages 1979-2025	48	18

Note. Initial records retrieved reflect raw search results for each search round and are not additive due to overlap across searches. Records were merged and duplicates removed prior to screening. In total, 181 unique records were assessed after duplicate removal, consistent with the description in the Method section.

Table A2. Overview of scholarly books included in the search

Transitions to Early Care and Education (Laverick & Jalongo, 2011)
Rethinking Readiness in Early Childhood Education (Iorio & Parnell, 2015)
Listening to Children’s Advice about Starting School and School Age care (Dockett et al., 2019)
Finnish Early Childhood Education and Care (Harju-Luukkainen et al., 2022)
Family-School Partnerships During the Early School Years (Bierman & Sheridan, 2022)
Families and Transition to school (Dockett et al., 2017)
Pedagogies of Educational Transitions (Ballam et al., 2017)
Børn og familie i det postmoderne samfund (Dencik & Jørgensen 1999)
Familie og børn i en opbrudstid. (Dencik et al., 2008).
