Sustaining Warm and Inclusive Transitions Across the Early Years (START): Facilitating Collaborative Learning of Childcare Workers, Preschool and Primary School Teachers

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Introduction

In the last decade, the relationship between early childhood education and care (ECEC) and compulsory school education (CSE) has gained increased attention both in academic and in policy debates. As indicated in the ‘Study on the effective use of ECEC in preventing early school leaving (ESL)’ – concluded under the commission of DG EAC – positive experiences of transition between educational levels can be a critical factor for children’s future success and development, while negative experiences can have lasting difficulties leading to poorer educational performance (Dumčius, Peeters, Hayes et al., 2014). It is well documented by a growing body of research that paying particular attention to smoothening transitions – by adopting a more unified approach to caring and learning across educational settings in order to sustain continuity of children’s experiences over time – can significantly improve children’s educational achievement and socio-emotional development (Brooker, 2008; Woodhead and Moss, 2007). In these regards, promoting professional exchanges among ECEC practitioners (childcare workers/preschool teachers) and primary school teachers as well as involving parents in the transition process are considered to be key factors in ensuring successful transitions (Dunlop and Fabian, 2007; Margetts and Kiening, 2013; Moss, 2013). Taking these crucial elements into account, practitioners and researchers from
four different countries have collaborated in a transnational action research study (START/Erasmus +) in order to foster warm and inclusive transitions across the early years. This article will discuss preliminary findings from this pioneering work preceded by a short analysis of current academic research on transitions.

School-ready children versus children-ready schools?

Our literature review conducted by our START partners, confirms that all studies underline how transitions mark a very significant phase in the lives of young children. For some children the experience of their transition can be critically important in terms of their future learning, education, and life chances due to them having a special educational need or/and disability or because they live in families characterized by complexity or who experience poverty, disadvantage, and social isolation. Transitions are complex and multidimensional phenomena involving many interrelated spheres: from the political level to the pedagogical one, from the institutionalized practices to the working cultures of services and schools, from the possibility of children’s agency to the acknowledgement of different families’ cultures. Although the concept of ‘transition’ is fairly common in literature, the review reveals that there are two different perspectives from which transitions are studied and that deeply affect how educational practices are implemented in ECEC and school. The first perspective focuses on transition in term of children’s school readiness while the second one relates to children-ready schools (Dumčius, Peeters, Hayes et al., 2014; Moss, 2013; Vonta et al., 2011).

In the school readiness perspective, learning in ECEC is functional to what comes next; school years and school grade are represented in a linear and hierarchy perspective in which the ultimate goal of schooling is to prepare responsible workers for the labour market. In that perspective little, if any, attention is paid to the educational, caring and pedagogical needs of the child; the emphasis is firmly upon classroom management and the needs of the teacher to be able to control the children’s behaviour and provide structured teacher-led sessions. In relation to the disadvantaged or special needs children, this perspective emphasizes the importance of early intervention, particularly through specific programmes, formalized learning and a narrow curriculum approach. Some researchers, however, warned us how implicit and explicit ideas and practices of unidirectional readying children for preschools or primary schools has paradoxically contributed to marginalizing and stigmatizing children considered disadvantaged (Bloch and Kim 2015; Lehrer, Bigras, and Laurin, 2017).

The children-ready school approach emphasizes the necessity to empower all the actors involved. This means giving particular importance to negotiated values and pedagogical assumptions of families and professionals, to recognize and to enhance the children’s agency, to overcome a top-down model of curriculum and to develop a co-constructed and shared one. The studies, in this perspective, underline the importance of the educational contexts valuing multiple ways of learning, not only teacher directed but indeed co-constructed by all actors involved, starting from the children’s needs and interests. Another strength is related to a teacher’s team work seen as extended collegiality, to enhance and support teachers’ shared reflection on practice and educational approaches. In the children-
ready schools’ approach, different researches play particular attention to children and parents from marginalized groups. The key question is how preschools and primary schools can be supported to deal with a diversity of children, families and local communities while resisting the homogenization of the school population.

Pedagogical and professional continuity during institutional splits?

Transitions between childcare and preschool settings (e.g. Belgium, Italy) as well as between these and compulsory school (e.g. UK and Slovenia) mark a significant change in the life of children, particularly in those countries where ECEC systems are split. The countries involved in this transnational action research project have been dealing with these issues in different ways. In Belgium (Fl) the Department of Education, Welfare and Integration recently started to collaborate to smoothen the transition between childcare/home environment and the preschool environment with a specific interest in ensuring pedagogical and professional continuity within a split system. Italy decided to transform their historical split system into a more integrated one. This new law of 2017 needs to be understood within the context of a long pedagogical and cultural tradition, reinforced by the Children Rights perspective. In the UK, they also recently changed the historical split system into a more integrated one. Even in an integrated system, a country like Slovenia experiences problems during institutional splits between ECEC and primary school. As the school system is less successful in reaching out to Roma children and their families, this transition has become a recurrent policy topic. Irrespective of the system, all countries are faced with an international tendency of increasing schoolification in which the value of childcare and preschool is foremost understood as preparing children for what comes next in primary school, secondary school and eventually the labour market. This schoolification tendency, typical in a social investment logic of governments, risks focusing again on solely making children (pre)school ready at the expense of creating equal opportunities and outcomes for all children.

Despite the increasing schoolification, the latest Starting Strong report on transitions (OECD, 2017) made a strong plea to focus more on making schools ready for children instead of children ready for schools. In this perspective, both the Starting Strong II and V report (OECD, 2006; 2017) recommended the development of a ‘strong and equal partnership’ that links, along a continuum, services from childcare into early education and thence into compulsory schooling. Other international policy organisations like UNESCO, also underlined the importance of continuity of educational approaches – grounded on shared pedagogical principles that start from a holistic development of children due to an increasing policy attention dedicated to children’s participation in ECEC programmes worldwide (UNESCO, 2010). Within this line of thinking, the goal of the transnational START project was to think and rethink pedagogical continuity in relation to how a diversity of children and parents can feel welcome, participate and recognized in an educational community/society.
Ricerca-form-azione

The methodological approach that we chose was action research ricerca-form-azione in which practitioners work side by side with academic researchers – in shared processes of critical reflection aimed at generating transformative change in educational institutions starting from situational analysis, data collection and interpretation and leading to joint planning, documentation and evaluation of experimental projects (Asquini, 2018). In a first phase children were observed or interviewed (e.g. comments on drawings), parents were interviewed individually or in groups. The researchers presented the data and together with the practitioners analyzed and reflected on the different standpoints in order to develop new actions and practices. The second phase of the research aimed to implement some new actions and practices in order to smoothen the transitions between childcare/home environment and preschool and between preschool and primary school. According to ricerca-form-azione methodology, recurring meetings in learning networks involving childcare workers, preschool and primary school teachers, coordinators and researchers in the different countries were organised to share, to make decisions and to reflect on the implemented practices. The main themes that have been discussed is the establishment of a welcoming and familiarization policy in both institutions by exchanging practices and ideas and rethinking the anticipation process of going to preschool or primary school from the perspective of children and families. Furthermore, all the participants of the different countries had the opportunity to meet colleagues from the other countries in two exchange/training weeks in Corby (UK) and Tisina (Slovenia). These international weeks were crucial in order for professionals from the different countries to be inspired and to be able to think out of the (institutional and cultural) box. During the first meeting, ideas were shared on action research methods and how to build sustainable, trustworthy relationships with parents. During the second meeting ideas were shared on observation methods and how to create inclusive ECEC centres and primary schools. After the experimentation of new transition practices children, parents and professionals were questioned again.

Experiences of children and families in transitions

By observing and analysing children’s drawings, it became clear how aspects of time (shorter/ fragmented vs integrated experience) and space (rigid vs flexible organisation) drastically change in institutional transitions, which makes it especially more difficult for children with additional needs. Moving on to a new environment also signifies an implicit change in rules and expectations. This can be seen in the children’s drawings in which children experience a sense of loss of control over the learning environment. The older children become, the more they need to get used to adult-initiated and directed learning activities.

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1 The Italian term ricerca-form-azione is the combination of three different words, meaning respectively research (ricerca), professional development (formazione) and action (azione).
Parallel to this, children seem to experience a fundamental change in identity. Whereas they previously are perceived by childcare workers in childcare centres or preschool teachers in preschools as competent and autonomous children, they are often perceived in the next stadium (preschool or primary school) by the preschool teachers or primary school teachers as ‘incompetent novices’ who are hindered by their own caring needs (e.g. wearing diapers, crying,) or behave too ‘childlike and wild’. Moreover, the drawings and observations point out how children also transition into a new group of peers in which they need to redefine their roles. Furthermore, parents pointed out how peer relationships are changing for their children and they expressed the hope that their child would be able to connect and find new friends. In general, parents also expressed how they face big changes during transition. Our interviews and focus groups show how they found themselves in rather complex positions in which they both adhere to and challenge dominant school and school ready practices/ideas.

Aren’t children normally ready to go to the toilet autonomously when they are three-years old or older? My child is two and a half-years old and needs to start preschool soon. I feel the pressure to make him already potty trained although I think he is not ready for this. I experience some fears when he has to go to school. What if he is not potty trained and will not be seen by the preschool teacher? I have the impression that a child in preschool suddenly needs to grow up. (Parent, Belgium, Fl)

It should be noted that irrespective of the context and the ECEC/school system, many questions on emotional and physical care and safety were addressed by parents in these transitions. Especially when parents are more at risk of societal exclusion (e.g. Roma parents, parents from children with special needs, parents living in severe poverty,...) these caring questions seem to also represent a political need to belong and be included in the (pre)school and broader society. It is remarkable how the questions on care are related to the overwhelming need of parents to talk and exchange information about the transition of their child with professionals from childcare, preschool or primary school.
Well I don’t know whether he has eaten in primary school, I don’t know whether he has had a good day, bad day, don’t know what kind of mood he is going to be in, don’t know anything! The preschool was more relaxed…more friendly and welcoming… Now, you have to stand in the playground, you have to stand outside. The children come out one by one, go straight to the parents and then you leave so you don’t even get to talk to a teacher or find out anything…I felt like I could tell the preschool staff anything…now I don’t feel like I can say anything. The only place you can go into is the office of the principal, which always seems to be locked, or you go through the office and sit in the corridor. (Parent, UK)

Main changes

Children’s and parent’s needs as focal point
By understanding and discussing the different standpoints in transition, the practitioners in the different countries gradually worked towards a pedagogy in which caring and learning of children, irrespective of age, is inseparable, while also taking into account that parents and families are crucial partners in the transition story. By stimulating collaborative learning of professionals from different settings (childcare, preschool and primary school) and from different countries, we experienced that all practitioners gradually moved beyond thinking from a solely institutional, historically engrained perspective: they started thinking from what children and parents expressed as to what they need in these transitions. Professionals from different settings and countries realized: why are we looking and acting so differently towards the same children and parents?

It is actually amazing to notice what children are already capable of before they enter primary school. (Primary School Teacher, Italy)

Working towards a more democratic approach of pedagogical quality
It was remarkable how the initial research on the voices of children and parents, as part of the first phase of the action research, slowly became a continuous focus of the professionals in the different countries. For example, in Italy the success of the transition actions and practices was also supported by the positive feedback the professionals received from parents. At the beginning of the school year, parents were asked to describe their own children using artefacts such as pictures, videos, words… and after that they could tell about their transitional experience in video interviews.

I had another child who attended the school some years ago. I saw the difference… everything was smoother, no child was crying, we had enough time to prepare the child but also our self. (Mother, Italy)

Also in Belgium the positive and critical feedback from parents on the new transition practices (e.g. parents can come into the classroom everyday (this was not allowed previously), more pedagogical attention towards the importance of sleeping, play ground, …) gave a boost to the pre- and primary school team:
I used to say to parents that ‘my door was always open’ and I really believed this was the case. Since parents are able to take time to say goodbye to their child and talk to the teachers in the classroom, I can really say that we have more and better contact with parents. Parents often come to me and talk and I also easily start talking to them. I often go outside to be able to talk to parents, even about small things. (Schooldirector, Belgium)

Increasing shared responsibility among professionals
By doing this project, it was remarkable how mutual respect and understanding was growing between the professionals from the different settings. Although broader society often gives different praise and acknowledgement (e.g. difference between childcare worker and primary school teacher), the various groups of professionals felt more connected in their mission to develop educational practice that is suitable and meaningful for a diversity of children and parents.

We feel that the project has connected us more. Previously, it almost felt like we were part of two separate institutions, even if formally we belong to the same one. Now we gather at informal as well as at formal ones. Quite a few teachers from the primary school went to observe practice in the preschool and reflected together on the observation afterwards. I think that this was one of the best collaborations achieved. We were all positively surprised and enthusiastic about the dynamics of groups or classes and about the work of our colleagues. We were comparing methods of our work, methods of work with children who need different approaches. Just recently, preschool teachers of the oldest preschool group participated in structuring the first grades (which children go to which group) in order to support them in the most meaningful way, knowing the dynamic of the group and the future teacher. (Primary school teacher, Slovenia)

Conclusion
Whereas at the beginning of the project we solely perceived the institutional splits as a huge problem, we gradually understood that these institutional splits are actually an opportunity to think outside the institutional and cultural box: by collaborative learning and confrontation of childcare workers, preschool teachers, and primary school teachers coming from four different countries, traditional child and family images were deconstructed and based on this pedagogical practices were recontextualized and reinvented. Although we admit that we definitely have a long way to go still, it is also remarkable how the initial focus of professionals on making children (pre)school ready gradually disappeared. In our experience systematic change, even in an increasing international context of schoolification is possible by taking small steps in which relationship, care, trust and community are considered key levers. This is possible by:

- constantly engaging with children and families to keep us focused on the issues that matter to them in transitions;
- constantly supporting and connecting practitioners from different settings and countries in dealing with the challenges that such a transformative process implies;
investing in recursive interaction between research and experimentation, between theory, policy and practice.

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The results of the START project (main changes, policy recommendations and a toolbox for professional learning) will be presented in Brussels on the 26th of April 2019 in one of the European institutions.
Check out the project website (http://start.pei.si) and Facebook for updates or contact katrien@vbjk.be if you would like to receive an invitation for this event in the near future.

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References


