Going to Big School: The Transition for Young Children

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Abstract

Moving from preschool to primary school, or going to 'Big School', is an important milestone for young children. It means new faces, new environments, new routines, and a lot of other changes. It may take some children a few months to settle in, while others will settle in quickly.

It is crucial to manage this step in a manner that serves the child well and supports them in settling into this new phase of their lives. This support will help them to settle in happily and securely, and will support them in developing a positive disposition to learning from the opportunities that will arise for them on their journey through their school years.

The Erasmus+ Project, Preschool to Primary School (PSPS), on this transition has been successfully completed, and is now making the main outcome of the project, the online Transition Toolkit, available. The Toolkit was developed following extensive research by the project partners, with research and findings from The Marie Curie Centre, Bulgaria; PEIN, Ireland; the EPA (through Estonia and Serbia), with some contribution from the Leeds Beckett Carneige Centre UK.

The results of the research led to development of the handbook in a number of units, including: The Child at the Centre, Supporting Social and Emotional Development, Physical Development, Language and Disabilities, Environments. The units are all inter-connected and can be used together or as stand-alone pieces. The handbook is targeted at Primary Schools, Parents and Early Years Settings.

This presentation will outline the research results, the resultant handbook development and ideas and suggestions for use.

Children will make many transitions throughout their lives, so supporting them through this milestone will influence how they manage change for many years to come.

Keywords*: Young children; Transitions; Primary School; Early Years; Parents.*

1. Introduction

The Eramus + Project, Preschool to Primary School (PSPS), brought together partners from Ireland, Bulgaria, and across Europe to conduct research into this aspect of childrens' lives and develop supports. The project research purposefully sought to include vulnerable and hard-to-reach groups. The materials developed are aimed at primary teachers, early years educators, and especially parents.
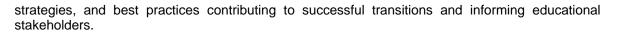
The aim of the project has been to support the provision for children of meaningful and positive transition experiences, through providing the adults in their lives with more knowledge and an accessible toolkit. The partners to the project included:

- European Parents' Association (with Estonia as an EPA Spotlight and primary research with the EPA's Serbian partner)
- Pein (Ireland, Project Lead, with the Northside Partnership)
- Marie Curie Association

There was also a contribution from Carnegie School of Education, Leeds Beckett University, UK.

The transnational research examined the national policies, education systems, preschool structures, transition support mechanism in each country. It sought to identify key approaches,

strategies, and best practices contributing to successful transitions and informing educational stakeholders.

This presentation will focus on understanding transitions, identifying the stakeholders, examples of best practice, and the Transitions Toolkit that has been developed and is available online

2. What Are Transitions in This Context

Transition in this context involves moving from one setting to another. It should be seen as a process, not a single event. There are many different factors that influence transitions. In some countries, children start school at 4 years of age and in others, 6 is when primary school begins. Similarly, in some places, the preschool and primary school are in the same building and in others, there is no connection at all between the two services. While there are lots of differences, there is one common message –regardless of country or culture, every child benefits from a preschool to primary school transition that is valued, planned, and celebrated.

Transitioning to 'Big School' is a key step in children's lives, marking their identity as a 'school pupil'. According to Fabian (2002), there are three discontinuities experienced by children during this transition. These are physical, social, and philosophical.

- **Physical** refers to the difference in class layout, size, location compared to their preschool setting, for example where the toilets are located.
- **Social** discontinuity includes making new friends, leaving old friends behind, new routines, new language as in school terminology, and mixing in a larger group.
- **Philosophical** discontinuities reflect a change in pedagogy, culture, expectations, with a rigid routine and an emphasis on formal teaching.

> **Case Study:** A school in Belgium has a transitions programme that consists of:
> - Two years with the same teacher
> - Once a month a 'workshop day' which is the free choice of the children
> - Parents have slots where they can be co-teachers
> - Children spend time with the next class up in advance of move
>
> **Figure 1:** Belgian Case Study on Transitions

Most children are ready and able for the changes involved in the transition, however between 5-10% find it more challenging (Brooker 2008). This can be particularly true of children with special educational needs, who are more vulnerable, according to a number of researchers. Many children will experience a disjuncture between the culture of home and school, even when they share a common language, with differences of experience, knowledge, social and cultural capital (Moll et al., 1992). This mismatch will be greatest for families who speak a different language, are from minority or ethnic religious communities with different expectations of education, have little experience themselves of education or have had negative educational experiences.

There are many things that make a transition meaningful, these are contained in the Transitions Toolkit developed through the project. We say that a transition is 'meaningful' if the child has been an active participant in the change process and benefits from it. That means they know what to expect and are prepared for the change.

The two most important factors in planning for transitions are that this work is done in a child-centered way and in partnership with parents. Being child-centered (as set out in Unit 1 of the Transitions Toolkit) simply means making the needs and interests of children a priority. Working this way means always putting the child at the centre of the learning process and meeting the needs of each individual child. It means looking at things from the child's perspective. It teaches children that their opinions are valued and supports their holistic development. For transitions, this means including children in the planning and delivery of activities that will support their move between services.

Parents are the experts in their own child. They understand their child's likes and dislikes, know their learning style and are in tune with their emotions. When parents, preschool practitioners and teachers work together, great things can happen. For children, it means that some of the most important people in their lives are sharing information about them. True partnership with parents is based on mutual respect and clear communication.

It is important to keep in mind that **the transition from preschool to primary school is a journey, not a destination.** It does not, for example, begin when preschool finishes and school begins. It is a journey of many parts, involving lots of activities and people. These include such things as talking about 'big school', including school uniforms in the dress-up box, site visits between the preschool and school, for example, in Plovdiv in Bulgaria, the teachers from some primary schools visit the preschools and get to meet their future pupils.

Once a child starts primary school, the transition is ongoing. Everything is still new to them, so they need time and support to adjust. The main message is that the transition from preschool to primary school is a key milestone for every child. Planning it with their needs and interests at the centre and in partnership with their parents means that we are helping to make it a happy, playful process. By doing this, we are helping to create a strong and safe base for their future development.

3. Literature Review Findings

Academic research about transitions is often based in the USA, UK and Australia. This research presents ideas on ensuring successful, positive transitions into compulsory education. Transition programmes should begin in the year before the child enters school with strong links established with pre-school settings (O'Connor 2018), open days and frequent visits to see the new classroom and meet staff and children (Fabian & Dunlop 2007; Donkin 2014; O'Connor 2018), information sessions (Donkin 2014) and establishing good relationships and communication channels for sharing information between parents or carers, school and pre-school (Brooker 2008; O'Connor 2018).

Dockett, Einarsdottir and Perry (2019) noted in their overall conclusions that most children look forward to starting school and that making the transition with friends matters. In addition, because transition activities and events are decided upon by teachers and schools, they advocate listening to children's voices and opinions on transition to inform decisions. Transition to school is sometimes conceptualised as 'school readiness', involving the child being ready for the intellectual and social challenges of school. However, transition involves a wider range of stakeholders than just the child. Bronfenbrenner's (1988) Ecological Systems Theory and more recently, the Ecological and Dynamic model of Transition (Rimm-Kauffman & Pianta, 2000) argue that children do not develop in a vacuum; instead, the child's development and transition to school is shaped and influenced by interactions between the child and their family members, the local community, their parents' work, pre-school and medical facilities, as well as more distant systems such as the culture and society they are growing up in, local and national laws, and wider events occurring politically and internationally. Parental involvment is a core feature of successful transiitons, and three key aspects are highlighted as crucial to success throughout the literature, these are emotional support, continuity of learning, and information sharing.

The literature review identified examples and models of good practices. These included:
1. *Finland:* a collaborative, play-based approach, which continues into the early stages of primary school
2. *Germany:* structured tranistion period with a partnership approach.
3. *The Netherlands:*strong parental involvment programmes; children's social skills strongly supported in preschools.

The transition to school therefore involves the child, their parents and siblings, the school and the preschool setting as stakeholders at least. Depending on the country, culture, social norms and individual situations, other family members may also be closely involved as well as social services, interpreters and medical services. This means that the views, attitudes and expectations of school

staff, pre-school staff and parents and family members are all important in ensuring a smooth transition.

4. Primary Research and Outcomes

A needs analysis was conducted among the partners, led by the EPA. The Serbian partners in the EPA participated in this survey (Full results can be seen in the report https://pein.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Consolidated-Needs-Analysis-Report.pdf). This needs analysis was supported in turn by focus groups (results are in the report: (https://pein.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Executive-Summary-of-O3-Consolidated-Focus-Group-Report.pdf).

The focus was on the needs of parents and children, and on how they viewed the transitions process and supports provided for their children. (NB: some of the research was conducted during the pandemic lockdowns, this is addressed in the reports). An example of the responses is below in Fig. 2:
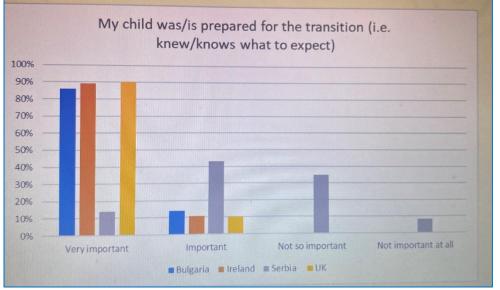

Fig. 2 Sample response from Needs Analysis Research

The partners analysed the outcomes of the secondary and primary research, identifying components for the creation of the toolkit. These components were then developed into discrete units, reviewed, collated, and the final toolkit was produced. It includes narrative on each unit, with practical tips for using the suggestions that are included. There is an emphasis on self-reflection for each of the target groups, checklists, and examples, with useful resource lists. The nine units are:

Unit 1: Keeping the Child at the Centre
Unit 2: Understanding Families
Unit 3: Disabilities
Unit 4: Language
Unit 5: Social and Emotional Development
Unit 6: Supporting Physical Development
Unit 7: Migrant Children and Cultural Diversity
Unit 8: Communication
Unit 9: Environments

Self-reflection for each stakeholder is a feature of each Unit. An example of the self-reflection questions for teachers (from Unit 1: Keeping the Child at the Centre)) is:

School/Teachers
- Does our school have a written transitions policy?

- How do we engage with parents throughout the transition process?
- Do we have an information board or on-line portal for parents?
- Are we communicating openly and regularly with parents so that they are comfortable talking to us about any concerns or expectations?
- How do we as teachers support the child in adapting to the larger group in the class?
- How do we acknowledge the child's shift in role as they become pupils?
- Will it be made clear to each child where the toilets and bathrooms are, and how they can go to them when needed?
- Will we help the children in the early weeks to learn the layout of the school, perhaps through making maps and exploring the corridors?
- How does the classroom reflect the child's identity: do they see books, toys, items which reflect their family unit? Is their language and culture represented?
- Are each child's particular needs being met in an accessible manner?
- Are there children with vulnerabilities, such as age, minority ethnic group beginning in the class?
- Are we open to hearing each child's voice and bring their ideas into our planning?
- How do we ensure we hear each child's voice, what methods do we use?
- What connections do we make with the child's preschool?
- Do we liaise with the preschools that will be sending children to our school, perhaps using video links to show the children their new settings and getting to know them, or inviting questions from the children due to attend our school?
- Would we establish a local forum or network with local preschools to prepare for transitions?
- Where a child has brought a passport or similar, have we made the time to familiarise ourselves with them?
- Have we discussed children's transition to school with other professionals such as special needs assistants, social workers, where appropriate and with parental consent?

The Transitions Toolkit (2023) is available for all teachers, schools, preschools and parents across Europe to use individually or in workshops.

5. Conclusion

It has been established in this project that each country has specific national policies and frameworks that guide the transition from preschool to primary school. Collectively, the learning indicates that several success factors contribute to facilitating smooth transitions and ensuring positive outcomes for children:
- Effective communication between preschools and primary schools are vital
- Supportive relationships between teachers and parents play a crucial role in easing children's transitions
- The active involvement of parents in the transition is a fundamental cornerstone for a child's successful educational journey
- Continuity in learning experiences is another success factor, where curricula from preschool and primary school align to promote a seamless progression in children's education.
- Building a sense of belonging, fostering social connections, and creating opportunities for peer interactions are critical for facilitating social integration and a positive transitions experience.

Smooth and meaningful transitions have a significant impact on children's educational achievements, social integration, and emotional well-being over their life's course. When transitions are facilitated effectively, children are more likely to adapt well to new surroundings, establish positive relations with peers and teachers, and develop a strong sense of belonging. Conversely, challenging transitions can lead to a range of negative outcomes, including academic difficulties, social disconnection, and heightened stress levels for children.

Recognising and addressing the significance of smooth transitions is essential for creating an inclusive and supportive educational environment that nurtures children's overall development.

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