

Chapter 6

Policy pointers to improve transitions from early childhood education and care to primary school

Traditionally, the “transition to school” has been interpreted as being all about “school readiness”, whereby the early childhood education and care (ECEC) setting should prepare children for the school environment. However, recent advances in neurological research, developmental psychology and learning science all suggest the need for school environments to themselves be more developmentally age-appropriate. This implies that reform is also needed in primary schooling to ensure that the benefits to young children of high-quality ECEC endure and can be built upon in the school environment. While ensuring effective transitions is the responsibility of many people, policy makers have a particular role to play. This includes creating the supportive structure and frameworks required across government, in teacher training and educational institutes, and in the administrative mechanisms within which effective transitions can occur. This chapter distills six cross-cutting themes from the thematic chapters of the report that can be considered by policy makers and adapted to their own contexts.

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Introduction

As the preceding chapters have shown, countries are implementing a wide range of strategies, policies and practices to ensure continuity between and across various aspects, including governance (Chapter 2), professional continuity (Chapter 3), curriculum and pedagogical continuity (Chapter 4), and developmental continuity (Chapter 5), all of which are interdependent. Each of the chapters has provided detailed theme-specific policy pointers. This final chapter draws out six key cross-cutting policy pointers to guide and inspire policy makers aiming to ensure continuity in transitions in their countries or jurisdictions:

- 1) Focus on making schools ready for children, not only children ready for school
- 2) Dispel some common myths and misconceptions surrounding transitions
- 3) Overcome structural roadblocks to co-operation and continuity
- 4) Encourage local leadership, backed up by a clear national policy framework
- 5) Mainstream transition into equity measures
- 6) Support transition research and monitoring to improve policy

Focus on making schools ready for children, not children ready for school

Transitions are often linked to the term “readiness”, which in many countries refers to a child’s “readiness for school”. To make children “ready”, the approach often taken involves exposing children who are still in ECEC to the culture of primary school. Research points out that the greater the gap between the culture of the school and the culture of the early years setting, the greater the challenge to the child and the greater the risk of not being able to understand the requests of primary school (Fabian and Dunlop, 2006). To address this challenge, some countries expose the child to the culture of the school already in ECEC, to familiarise the child with primary school as early as possible. This approach raises concerns over increased “schoolification” of early childhood settings (see Chapter 1). “Schoolification” refers to changing ECEC settings into adopting practices that are usually more related to primary school, i.e. the “trickling down” effect of school pedagogical practices to settings that provide early education and care before compulsory primary school starts. Examples include higher staff-pupil ratios, more hours spent away from home, more teacher-directed pedagogies, greater attention to academic content or less playtime, imposing children to sit still at their desk and be quiet.

Change how “school readiness” is interpreted

However, more recent research is highlighting the importance of developmentally appropriate practices based on children’s age and developmental stage (See Chapter 1, Box 1.2). The more age- and child-appropriate the pedagogical practices are, the greater the effect on children’s social and cognitive development (Litjens and Taguma, 2010; OECD, 2012). Thanks to this research, in recent years, the “readiness” rhetoric is changing. Today, there is a growing perception that it is no longer for ECEC alone to prepare children for school; schools also need to be ready for children coming from the ECEC environments. Research suggests that minimising the amount of change children and parents or guardians (see Box 5.1 in Chapter 5 for information on terminology) experience in the recipient culture could be an alternative way to enhance transition, alongside making efforts to prepare children for changes in classroom practices (Stipek et al., 2017). The researchers call for the need to ensure psychological safety and comfort to children of that age group to ensure children’s self-confidence and self-efficacy, which are often strong predictors for later and wider student outcomes. Indeed, some countries have started to regard “readiness” as not only “readiness for school/life” but also “a school’s readiness for the child”. In the Nordic countries, this has been the main approach for

some time. A successful transition not only ensures that a child is ready to leave the ECEC setting and start primary school, but makes sure that the ECEC setting the child is leaving, as well as the school the child will attend, are prepared for the transition. This suggests the need for primary schooling to also collaborate with ECEC for better “readiness” for children.

Put the child at the centre

Policy makers need to embrace the idea that collaboration and co-construction of transition should be shared by all the agents in the transition process, including teachers and educators, parents and the community, and children (Fabian and Dunlop, 2006). Recent research acknowledges children are increasingly considered to be “agents”, as even young children are active social learners and decision makers who are capable of understanding and contributing their opinions on a range of issues affecting them (Fabian and Dunlop, 2006; Vogler et al., 2008). Indeed, in the growing number of studies focusing on transitions, the child is increasingly studied from the perspectives of development and adaptation. More recent research puts the child at the centre. Research in Finland, for example, suggests that children’s role as agents in the context of transition is key for developing children’s competencies and capabilities. If the child is an active participant in aspects that matter in her/his life, she/he can commit more deeply to the activities required (Lipponen et al., 2013).

Similarly, Ackesjö (2013) argues that understanding children’s perspectives on how they experience the transition is essential for developing suitable transition practices. When transitions are based on children’s perspective, interests, motives and questions, they help to make the transition transparent and to give children and parents a sense of continuity. Listening to children and their experience helps to better understand the challenges they face and helps to improve the support given by parents, pedagogical staff in ECEC settings and schools. Listening to children also enables to acknowledge that the preschool-primary school transition, if well managed by adults, can be an opportunity for children’s growth and socialization (Corsaro & Molinari, 2008).

Although children’s views are increasingly being taken into account, children are still rarely active participants in studies on transitions. Hence, little is known about their expectations and fears of forthcoming transitions or of their actual experience.

Ensure that compulsory education entry and curriculum frameworks are age appropriate

Discussion on age-appropriateness often stimulates debate, e.g. on the age at which primary schooling or compulsory education should start. In the majority of countries, primary schooling starts at the age of six, with a few exceptions (e.g. five in Australia and the United Kingdom, and seven in Denmark, Finland, Poland and Sweden). In most countries, compulsory education starts at the same age as or earlier than the starting age of primary schooling. When compulsory education starts earlier than primary schooling, in most countries it is one year earlier (e.g. at five in Chile, Greece and the Netherlands, and at age six in Denmark, Finland and Poland). In a few countries, compulsory education starts even earlier (e.g. at four in Luxembourg and Switzerland and at three in Hungary and Mexico). The aim is to ensure participation in ECEC without lowering the starting age of primary schooling, so as to manage concerns about “schoolification”.

In Sweden, a recent debate focused on whether preschool class at age six should be made mandatory while remaining a separate transition year bridging preschool and compulsory school, or whether it should be replaced by a mandatory 10-year compulsory school with a starting age of six years. The government is currently considering making the preschool class mandatory from the autumn of 2017.

Another area of debate is the age range that should be covered by a curriculum framework. Wales (United Kingdom) is reorganising its curriculum and assessment arrangements to provide a

more coherent curriculum programme and a smoother progression from 3 to 16 years, compared to the current curriculum which is organised into phases. The reform will include changes to initial teaching training, workforce development and to the curriculum and assessment arrangements. A growing number of countries are reframing their age-groupings in their ECEC and primary curricula. In the United States, for example, the traditional “K-12” framework has been revisited and there is a movement, often called “PK-3” or “0-8” to highlight the importance of creating stronger connections between ECEC and elementary school while not losing the positive effects of ECEC intervention. In Ontario, Canada, while separate curricula cover ages 4-5 (Kindergarten Programme 2016) and 6-14 (The Ontario Curriculum Grades 1-8), a pedagogical document, *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario’s Pedagogy for Early Years* (2014), covers the age spectrum from birth to eight. In Italy, the curricular framework covers the 3-14 age range and it includes a specific paragraph on continuity and on the unitary “vertical” curriculum. In the Netherlands, the curriculum “Core Objectives” covers the age range of 4-12 year-olds.

In Austria, the last year of ECEC and the first two years of primary school (covering ages five to seven) will form a new “joint school-entry phase”. This new, three-year transition phase creates a structure for co-operation and will ensure that important knowledge gained in ECEC is not lost, but rather used to facilitate integration at primary school.

Dispel some common myths and misconceptions surrounding transitions

The underlying issue for many of the challenges cited in the chapters in this report – fragmented coherence and lack of consistency of goals, curriculum, pedagogical practices between the two sectors and lack of cooperation and collaboration among actors – is rooted in the differences of perceptions, ideologies, philosophies and expectations about “transitioning” held by the actors participating in transitions, including policy makers, ECEC staff, primary school staff, parents, municipality leaders, and other child development services. First and foremost, the concept of “transitioning” needs to be better understood. It is **multi-directional**, not a requirement for ECEC to align with primary education; it is a **dynamic change process**, not a snapshot of a point in time; it is a **shared responsibility of all stakeholders**, not that cooperation between ECEC and primary school can address all issues.

View transitions as multi-directional

One of the most frequently held misconceptions is that the transition is a one-way street, that is, ECEC is responsible for preparing children for school. In fact, transitions are part of the holistic early development experience and thus should not be regarded as an individual part of the education system, or the sole responsibility of ECEC. Research suggests that the impact of early educational experiences may be affected heavily by the subsequent quality of school learning experiences (Burchinal et al., 2002; Magnuson et al., 2007), not only by the early learning experiences. Therefore, it is important to align the early years of primary schools with ECEC to reduce the risk of “fade-out” effects. Children’s experience in ECEC should be followed up with good quality experiences during the first years of primary school.

The majority of jurisdictions report that both ECEC staff and primary-school teachers work together to share information on individual child development and children’s experiences (see Table 1.5, Chapter 1). Collaboration and communication are very important for ECEC staff and primary teachers to have a mutual understanding of each other’s work and expectations. Denmark states that broad objectives for ECEC and the target goals for primary schools should be developed in line with each other. This is expected to create more common ground, which will result in better understanding of each other’s methodologies and purposes, and ultimately create better coherence between ECEC and school. Denmark indicated that the lack of shared

knowledge between staff in ECEC and primary school about the ideas, values and methods in schools and ECEC, such as differences in pedagogy, philosophy and practices, can make collaboration difficult.

Slovenia and Norway also believe that when the objectives of early education and primary school are (more) aligned and clearly communicated, this can benefit the collaboration between the two settings and can support the implementation of transition practices. In Slovenia, for instance, even though the ECEC and school curricula were developed during the same curricular reform (1996-1999) and share the same principles and framework, there are differences in perspectives on the objectives of ECEC and primary schools, which makes cooperation between the different settings harder. As a consequence, these different settings often do not communicate with each other (unless in the process of establishing the child's school readiness) or do not attempt to strengthen their collaboration, although lately there have been attempts in some settings. This suggests that training for both ECEC and school staff on understanding the objectives of transition, and trying to strengthen and align these more, could also help transitions.

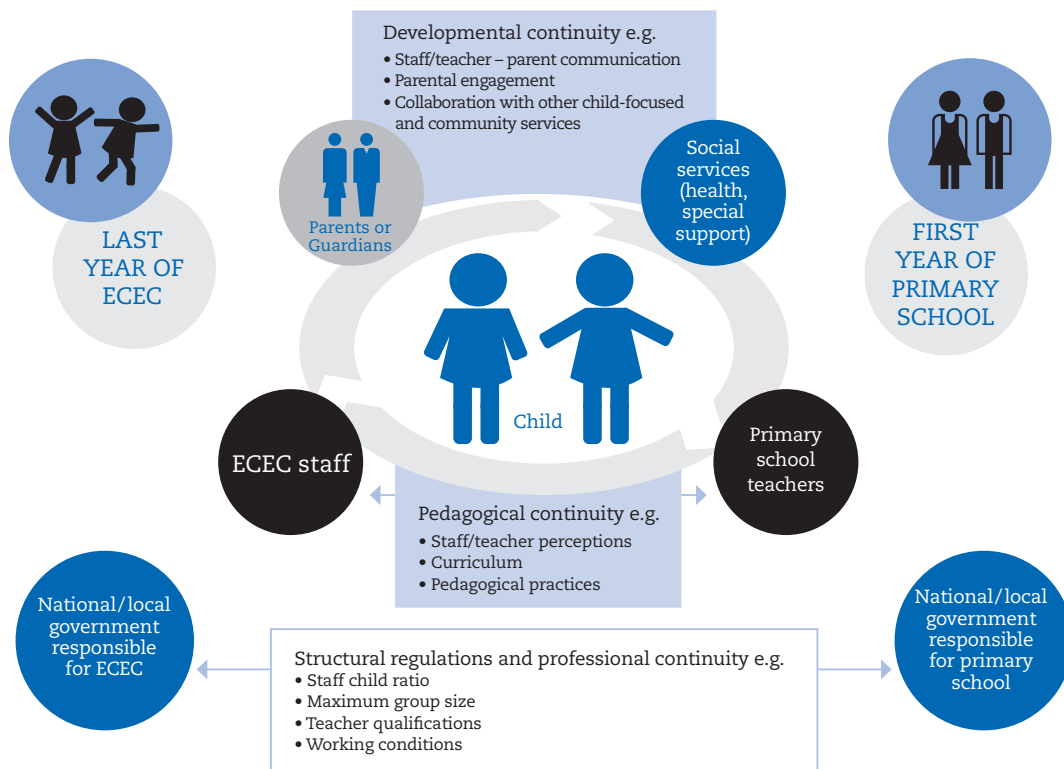
Initial education and training is the first opportunity for professionals to learn about each other's professional contexts and to start to understand themselves as equal collaborators. In the majority of jurisdictions, training on transitions is common during initial education and in-service training, in particular for ECEC staff (see Table 1.5, Chapter 1). While aligning qualification levels of staff in both educational sectors may require a longer planning period, rolling out joint professional development for both levels can be an important first step, particularly if it includes training on transitions. In doing so, it is pivotal to avoid any hierarchy between the two groups and allow both sides sufficient time for preparation and participation. The ECEC approach can be as informative for the beginning of primary school as the other way around, ensuring that children are being picked up where they stand rather than where they are expected to stand. Thus measures to level the playing field for mutual benefits can be a key ingredient in improved collaboration. For instance, in Finland ECEC staff and primary education teachers receive training on transitions during initial education, which promotes greater consistency in transition activities and facilitates collaboration across sectors.

View transitions as dynamic change processes

Transition is a holistic concept, involving not merely the facilities the child moves away from and transits to, but also the child themselves, their parents, social services, ECEC staff, primary school teachers, and national and local authorities. As we saw in Chapter 5, the transition experience, as with any other learning experience, is shaped by multiple factors in the child's learning context (OECD, 2012). The involvement of and collaboration among parents, ECEC settings, primary schools and other early years' services are key for a positive influence on children's developmental continuity and transit to school (Figure 6.1; and see Rimm, Kaufman and Pianta, 2000; Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Bronfenbrenner 1986). In line with the ecological and dynamic models of transitions, Ahtola et al. (2011a) conclude that the child must be surrounded by a "web of relationships" whereby all participants influence each other and each of them facilitates children's transitions between two different learning environments (Lillejord et al., 2017).

Some participating countries have set up working teams to enhance collaboration among professionals of different sectors. In the Netherlands, a good example of close collaboration between ECEC settings and primary schools are the "*startgroepen*". These enable collaboration on ensuring continuity in children's development; offering similar programmes, aligning goals, etc. These collaborations are monitored and evaluated by researchers, who have noted positive results.¹

Figure 6.1 Multiple factors and connections are at play in transitions



View transitions as the shared responsibility of all actors

Strong, trustful and respectful collaboration between parents and ECEC settings and schools can help ensure a smooth transition to school by co-developing children’s competencies and learning dispositions. However, sharing child development information with parents is a practice that is still much more prevalent in preschool than in primary school (see Table 1.5, Chapter 1). Despite important steps in enhancing parental involvement on transitions, further efforts are needed, especially to reach families from disadvantaged backgrounds. Participation of these types of families is more difficult, given the number of obstacles they face to take an active role in children’s learning and development. Jurisdictions recognise the need of further developing practices to involve parents from vulnerable groups, especially given increasing diversity due to migration. Misconceptions of the role of ECEC and lack of awareness of the importance of the transition process also hinder parental engagement. The rationale, goals and tasks of the transition programme should be clearly explained to parents. Countries should consider adapting their policies to parents needs and provide multiple opportunities for parents to participate in transition activities.

In **Norway**, there is broad agreement that a good transition between kindergarten and school depends on both institutions facilitating a holistic education that ensures the individual child’s need for safety and continuity. This means that preparations for school must have a broad perspective and be seen in connection with the child’s surroundings, family, peers, kindergarten and school. A 2016 White Paper to the Norwegian parliament on the content of ECEC – *Time for Play and Learning* addressed, among other themes, the topic of transitions. This has fed into the country’s revised *Framework Plan for the Content and Tasks of Kindergartens*, which is to be implemented in August 2017. The framework clearly states that kindergartens should facilitate children’s transition to school in collaboration with schools and in co-operation with parents.

Overcome structural roadblocks to co-operation and continuity

Countries need to improve the structural conditions to support ECEC and primary school staff's co-operation around transitions. In the majority of countries (11 out of 19), pre-primary school teachers spend more time in direct contact with children, leaving them less time for other duties such as preparation and co-operation than their primary school peers (see Table 1.5, Chapter 1). These longer on-site hours for ECEC staff were cited as a challenge to co-operation. There are other structural factors that also need to be addressed. For example, the logistical barriers for co-ordination are greater if ECEC centres and primary schools are not located in the same place. Furthermore, the discrepancies in ECEC staff and primary school teachers' salaries, working conditions and level of qualifications in many countries (see Table 1.5, Chapter 1) explain in great part the tensions across sectors and the limited co-operation.

Create conducive working conditions for staff to focus on transitions

Apart from their education, there are external factors (such as the working environment, salary and work benefits) that matter for ECEC staff's sense of self-efficacy and their ability to meet children's needs (Shonkoff and Philips, 2000; Chapter 3). Staff need to believe in their effectiveness, and feel able to organise and execute the courses of action needed to achieve desired results in the class or playroom (Fives, 2003). Wages are one of the most relevant factors affecting working conditions, job satisfaction and teachers' effectiveness (Huntsman, 2008; Moon and Burbank, 2004; Murnane and Olsen, 1990). There is evidence that low wages in ECEC affect staff behaviour towards children and increase turnover rates, which has a negative impact on transitions (Huntsman, 2008).

If transitions practices and cross-institutional cooperation are to be seen as success stories rather than as additional administrative requirements, staff need to be able to take on their transition-related roles during their regular working time and with specialist support where needed. The use of special counsellors, such as in Slovenia, and several countries' success in bringing pre-primary and primary teachers' time allocations into line, may provide sources of inspiration to other countries (OECD, 2016a; Slovenia Country Background Report).

Address the physical factors hindering co-ordination

A physical integration of centres and schools may support inter-sectoral co-operation, as the examples of integrated schools or campus models suggest (e.g. Wales (United Kingdom), Austria and many northern European countries). In the majority of jurisdictions (65.9% or 27 of 41 jurisdictions), pre-primary education is provided in the same building or on the same premises as the primary school (Table 2.2, Chapter 2). This may soften the transition to school as children usually do not have to change building and are already familiar with the space and rooms, as well as with the staff. Moreover, the monitoring of child development may become more continuous as information can more easily be shared and methodologies more easily aligned. If ECEC children move on to a variety of different schools, additional local structures, such as transition co-ordinators or counsellors, may be needed to ensure information flows between various institutions.

Place an emphasis on good leadership

Leadership is an issue cutting across the different challenges and strategies highlighted in the chapters of this report. Leadership is pivotal for supporting staff and teachers, and making transitions work well for children (Chapter 3). Leaders affect setting quality through staff composition (hiring and firing staff) and through staff professional development opportunities (Branch et al., 2009). Leadership can also foster a high level of staff quality by motivating and encouraging team work and the sharing of information (OECD, 2006; 2012). Research finds that in primary schools in which principals are engaged in instructional leadership, teachers more often collaborate and engage in

reflective dialogue, as well as in practices where teachers observe other teachers' classes, and have a shared sense of purpose (OECD, 2016b).

In most countries the responsibility for managing successful transitions is mainly in the hands of individual centre leaders and school principals, who act as role models for staff. Some of them may even be seen "as visionaries and motivators for a joint concept on transition" (Austria Country Background Report). ECEC managers and primary school principals who want to ensure smooth transitions need to be knowledgeable about the latest reforms and policies and how they can affect the implementation of transitions. They should also be knowledgeable about the importance of early childhood education (Desimone et al., 2004), particularly since collaboration over transitions with other institutions and decisions on professional development are often their responsibility.

It is crucial that settings leaders have the means to understand staff needs and enable them to take part in on-site and off-site training programmes when additional development is needed. They can also make the strategic choice to bring in additional support or specialist staff when needed. For all of these tasks, leaders not only need to be highly skilled, but they also need a clear legal environment for their work – such as for the sharing of information on children as in Wales (United Kingdom) and Austria. They also need support to exercise their role effectively, for instance with the help of counsellors such as in Slovenia.

Ensure a supportive legal framework for transitions

Structural hurdles may also be of a legal nature: several countries reported challenges linked to the exchange of information on individual children and child records between ECEC centres and primary schools, rendering individualised transition support and co-operation more complicated. Providing accommodating legal environments, such as provisions for the exchange of child records in Wales (United Kingdom), and allowing staff sufficient time to co-operate can be an important step forward.

Denmark is one of few countries where the broad goal of transitions is specified in a law. The *Act on Day Care Facilities*, introduced in 2007, mentions that one of the purposes of ECEC is to create coherence and continuity between facilities and make transitions between facilities coherent and age-appropriately challenging for the children. In Slovenia, transitions are reflected in the *Organisation and Financing of Education Act*. This act mentions that one of the objectives of education in Slovenia is ensuring the optimal development of an individual regardless of their gender, social or cultural background, religion and ethnicity. A good transition to school is part of this "optimal development" thinking. By law, ECEC provisions and schools are supposed to collaborate to achieve this, and their co-operation should be explained in schools' annual work plans.

Encourage local leadership, backed by a clear national policy framework

In federal countries there can be large regional differences in curriculum content, pedagogical concepts, or minimum standards as the responsibility for regulations, design and/or content lie with state governments. In most other countries, responsibilities for transitions are with local authorities or the provider (see above). This may also complicate support for children transitioning from an ECEC setting to school as standards for ECEC and primary education settings may vary widely between states. When ECEC is offered mainly by private providers the co-ordination between ECEC and primary school settings or between different levels of authorities may be even more complex.

Where settings themselves have autonomy in deciding how transitions are taken care of, the result can be a wide range of practices with little alignment between them. In Austria for instance, because of the decentralised ECEC system, ECEC settings often do not co-operate with primary schools. Denmark and Norway also highlight that the decentralisation of transition responsibilities

results in variations between municipalities in how transitions are handled, and thus, in varying levels of transition quality.

On the other hand, transition policies and practices that consider and are adapted to particular contexts and individual needs are more likely to be effective in promoting a smooth start in school (Hirst et al., 2011; Peters, 2010). There is a need to raise awareness of the importance of transitions at the national level, while fostering local leadership and ownership of transitions fit for local needs, including different cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, societal needs, and (parental) expectations in particular contexts. Many countries provide national guidelines on transitions, but they do not prescribe specific practices on how to involve the different stakeholders. This freedom to organise the transition activities at the local level has a range of benefits, but it also results in variations between municipalities, ECEC settings and schools on how they handle children's transitions.

Develop a national plan, strategy and guidelines to encourage coherence in transitions

Several countries have developed ways of ensuring greater coherence across local levels in how transitions are organised. They have done so by creating national plans, strategies and guidelines that can be followed at the local level.

For example, Wales (United Kingdom) was finding that the Foundation Phase curriculum framework for three to seven-year-olds was not being implemented everywhere coherently, resulting in variations in quality, in transitions and in how the framework was used. In response to this issue, a *Foundation Phase Action Plan*² was developed and published in late 2016. The plan consists of a number of approaches to improve consistency across ECEC and primary schools. These include updating training of staff, improving initial teacher training, providing further parental engagement support materials, and school-to-school support.

Austria has developed a cross-national strategy to facilitate co-operation between ECEC and schools to strengthen transitions (Box 2.6, Chapter 2). Many stakeholders were involved in the development phase of this strategy, which is expected to ensure good guidance for settings involved in transitions, and should improve the co-ordination of school entry.

Combine national and local leadership

Many countries take a combined approach, encouraging national and local leadership (see Table 2.4 in Chapter 2). In Wales (United Kingdom), the Welsh Government takes an overarching strategy for breaking the links between poverty and deprivation (*Rewriting the Future*), while delegating leadership to Regional Education Consortia to support schools to take forward key priorities at the local level. Norway is highly decentralised, with municipalities taking the responsibility for ECEC and primary school while the national government makes strategic decisions to ensure effective transitions for all children. The government has made various efforts, including the transfer of responsibilities of ECEC from the Ministry of Children, Equality and Social Inclusion³ to the Ministry of Education and Research in 2006 to strengthen the coherence between ECEC and school. To ensure leadership and cooperation at the local level, the newly revised *Framework Plan for the Content and Tasks of Kindergartens* accentuates the ECEC leader's responsibility to ensure coordination between the various services provided to families with children. A national guide on transitions also supports local actions and leadership on transitions.

Ireland takes a national inter-departmental approach. The Department of Education and Skills and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs have made good transitions an objective of education provision as part of the *National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy 2011-2020*. The *National Curriculum Framework (Aistear)* and the quality framework for early childhood (*Siolta*)

both devote considerable attention to the topic of transitions and provide numerous resources such as an online self-evaluation tool. It is now a requirement for ECEC settings and schools to collaborate and transfer information on children's learning and to enhance the quality of transitions. For this, transition templates are being piloted. Other proposed activities include the establishment of local networks, the dissemination of information to families, reciprocal visits by primary and preschool staff and children to schools and preschools and the development of materials and books to support children with the transition process.

In the Netherlands, the national government facilitates and supports local leadership. The Ministry of Education has drawn up agreements with the 37 largest municipalities on the goals of "vve" (*voor en vroeg schoolse educatie*), targeted, free programmes for disadvantaged children, spanning the preschool and kindergarten ages to support children during the transition stage. The government also provides extra funding to enable the municipalities to achieve their goals. A recent study shows that because of extra funding to these municipalities, transitions between ECEC and school have significantly improved (CPB, 2016). In addition, the number of boys in the first years of primary education who have to repeat a school year has significantly decreased, indicating that these activities are helping boys become more ready for school during their ECEC years.

Mainstream transition into existing equity measures

While strong transitions are important for all children, they are especially important for disadvantaged children as they are at a greater risk of developmental losses. Low-quality transitions often affect more children from disadvantaged backgrounds than their better-off peers (Isaacs, 2008; Melhuish et al., 2015). PISA findings show that the probability of low performance in mathematics is largely the result of cumulative social and economic disadvantages (OECD, 2016b). Missing out on pre-primary education affects disadvantaged children more than it affects advantaged children. On average across OECD countries, a socio-economically advantaged student who did not attend has an 8% probability of low performance in mathematics, whereas a disadvantaged student who did not attend pre-primary education has a 25% probability of low performance. This gap increases with the accumulation of other risk factors such as immigrant background, not speaking language spoken at school at home, living in a single-parent family (OECD, 2016b). Currently, children with the following backgrounds or learning needs are likely to receive support during the transition stage as part of the equity programmes:

- with parents with low income or educational backgrounds
- with parents with immigrant, traveller or indigenous backgrounds (suggesting language and cultural differences)
- with parents living in poor areas or regions (suggesting low social and cultural capital in the community and, often, dysfunctional communities)
- with special needs because of (mental or physical) health issues.

These background factors are often found to overlap and, when they do, the process of transitions for the child will become far more complex as it involves multiple hindering factors, suggesting bigger social, economic and cultural differences between the environments of the child at home, and that of ECEC and of primary schooling. Thus, the magnitude of challenges becomes larger, calling for systemic interventions involving all actors from relevant public services, e.g. not only ECEC and primary schools, but also community and family services, health and social services. Research has shown that children's early school adjustments, including higher levels of social skills and academic competence, in particular those of disadvantaged children, are enhanced when both children and families participate in "comprehensive transition programmes"⁴ (Margetts, 2007). It is important that transition challenges for these children should be properly understood and transitions should be mainstreamed into various equity measures.

Provide comprehensive equity measures

In Wales (United Kingdom), tackling poverty has been a high policy priority for the past decade. It has developed the 2011 *Child Poverty Strategy*, followed by a revised strategy to reaffirm the government's ambition to eradicate child poverty by 2020. The government recognises that child poverty does not exist in isolation. It has therefore carefully designed key programmes that fit together as a comprehensive package. ECEC and transitions are embedded in these programmes. For example, a new *Additional Learning Needs Act* was introduced to strengthen the role of local authority nurseries and settings in supporting children with additional learning needs, and a new code accompanying the act will contain guidance on transitions for those with additional learning needs. The *Rewriting the Future* strategy sets out a range of actions to reduce the student attainment gap between children from the most deprived background and their peers. The strategy is supported by a *Pupil Deprivation Grant*, which funds coordinators who can help with the transition of children with special educational needs or additional learning needs at each school; staff dedicated to work with families experiencing difficulties or children from disadvantaged backgrounds in larger primary schools; free school meals, including for three and four year olds. Furthermore, the “Flying Start” programme was designed to provide free quality childcare to parents with children of two and three year olds living in disadvantaged areas. The policy objective is to increase the proportion of three year olds achieving or exceeding their developmental milestones by 5 percentage points, and is backed up by a curriculum framework. The sector is still poorly paid in the UK, which makes it challenging to ensure a sufficiently skilled workforce, in particular in the poorest communities. Thus, the curriculum framework can help even the least-skilled ECEC staff to understand the milestones as well as to learn to work with children of disadvantaged families, including in transitions (Welsh Government, 2014).

Direct financial measures to children with the greatest needs

In some countries, fees for ECEC services often become a financial burden for parents. If children do not participate in ECEC because families cannot afford it, there is a risk the children with disadvantaged background will fall behind before they start schooling and there will be larger cultural differences between their homes and primary schooling. In the majority of OECD countries, pre-primary education is free of charge for all families. In countries which charge parents fees for pre-primary education, there are usually some targeted measures, such as waiving fees for low-income families. Japan aims to lower the financial burden of ECEC for households by matching the fees to parents' income level, halving the fees for the second child, and making ECEC free for every third or further child. Additionally, low-income households can receive further financial aid. Furthermore, to ensure that more children can benefit from formal early learning experiences, some municipalities may dispense with parental fees for ECEC altogether. Some municipalities also provide financial aid for families in need, e.g. covering the costs of school supplies, transport, and lunches. In Finland, fees depend on the number of children in the family and their income, as well as the time spent in ECEC. In Denmark, parents with income below a certain threshold receive both a general subsidy for a place in ECEC and an “aided place subsidy” from the local authority.

Focus on special learning needs

Children with language difficulties are more likely to face obstacles when learning to read in primary education, regardless of the teaching method (Laloux, 2012). One of Austria's main country-wide objectives is to stimulate language development, which is indirectly linked to the topic of transition into primary school. In 2008, an agreement was ratified between the federal government and the federal states to introduce mandatory early language learning support in early learning provisions. Kindergarten and school teachers have to assess language development to define what language learning support is needed for children with a poor knowledge of German so as

to facilitate children's entry and transition into primary school, and to create better conditions for future education and employment opportunities. In Slovenia, parents of children with special needs are supported by law, the Placement of Children with Special Needs Act, which provides an opportunity to participate in expert-team meetings to discuss the development of their child and to plan the transition to school.

Support parents from disadvantaged backgrounds

Participation in transition activities by migrant parents and indigenous families is found to be more difficult to achieve. Countries have made efforts to reach this group of families by adapting support materials to their language, and training staff to work with and support these families. Further efforts need to take parental background elements into account to increase the chances of a successful transition. Working with parents with migrant or indigenous backgrounds to support their child's language learning can create trust and can foster a closer relationship with parents and communities.

Slovenia supports the education of Roma children guided by a strategy adopted in 2004 and amended in 2011. Special projects for the Roma community are put in place to establish trust and facilitate smoother transitions between kindergartens, schools and Roma families. The projects assign Roma assistants and offer diverse activities in the settings (e.g. visits of Roma children to kindergarten). In the Netherlands, ECEC institutions are encouraged to collaborate with parents, especially in the "vve" targeted programmes for disadvantaged children. The programmes provide in-service training, including how they can collaborate with and provide support to parents.

Provide supplementary support for disadvantaged children

Process quality (e.g. staff-child interactions and pedagogical practices) is often shaped by structural quality (e.g. staff-child ratios and group size). Staff-child ratios and class size may vary between ECEC and primary school classrooms, with often less favourable conditions in primary schools (See Table 1.5, Chapter 1) (Ebbeck et al., 2013). In ECEC settings, children are typically engaged in activities which staff require collaboration, while in schools, teachers are often given the sole responsibility for children's learning, which leaves less time for teachers to respond to children on an individual level (Karila and Rantavuori, 2014; Pianta, 2004). While some children may do well in large classrooms (Li et al., 2012), children from low-income, disadvantaged or second-language backgrounds may do better in smaller classes and with more individual attention (Bennett, 2007). Transitions should address the specific challenges for disadvantaged children arising from different regulations in ECEC and primary schools, and provide supplementary support where needed.

Support transition research and monitoring to improve policy

There is a general consensus on the scarcity of research on transitions and, in particular, on specific factors that are linked to improved child development. It is important to close the current knowledge gap in order to support policy makers to make better-informed decisions.

Most of the available findings on transitions are based on studies in English-speaking and Nordic countries. In the United States, research on transitions is vast, based on data drawn from large-scale longitudinal studies such as the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten sample (ECLS-K) (Little et al., 2016; Schulting et al., 2005), on data from small-scale studies looking at specific issues related to transitions (Welchons and McIntyre, 2017; Wildenger and McIntyre, 2012) or on experimental studies and evaluation of programmes. In Australia, Ireland, New Zealand and the United Kingdom, there are also a number of studies looking at transitions to primary school. Finland has proactively reviewed international literature to promote research-based practices in transitions to school, which helped to create political and social interest in and understanding about the complexity of

transitions. In Denmark, transition is gaining a greater political focus. The government is funding a research project on transition with a focus on children from low socio-economic backgrounds. There is also evidence from other countries, generally gathered through smaller qualitative studies, but nonetheless insightful and informative (e.g. Germany, Italy, the Netherlands). However, more international research is needed.

Encouraging more monitoring of transitions can also help to identify whether ECEC settings and schools are delivering good practices, to level quality across regions and to provide feedback for further development. Jurisdictions, however, report that transitions are not commonly monitored (See Table 1.5, Chapter 1). To ensure quality transitions for all children, transitions should be monitored as part of the overall ECEC monitoring e.g. curriculum implementation and child development. Relevant examples of monitoring transitions include Norway's national surveys to monitor transitions; Sweden's longitudinal study during the transition period; Finland's study on children's perception on transitions; the evaluation of the *Brückenjahr* transition project in Germany.

The following research gaps and questions are highlighted in the chapters that make up this report. They are often part of the political debates on ECEC in general or related to transitions.

Answer key questions on institutional arrangements

- **Should the final year of ECEC be compulsory?** This will be a costly policy decision. Thus, questions include whether this will benefit all children or disadvantaged children, in particular by improving their participation rates; whether it will facilitate coherence between ECEC and primary schooling, etc. This topic often raises concerns over “schoolification”.
- **Should the number of ECEC hours be increased?** This is also a costly policy intervention, but many countries have recently increased the number of free hours as ECEC entitlements or shifted from half-day to full-day kindergartens, primarily to increase the participation of children in ECEC, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Another objective is to better align the structure of ECEC with that of primary school as children may often spend longer hours in primary schools than in ECEC. While a consolidated body of research has shown the benefits of increased participation in ECEC, research findings on the optimal length of ECEC per day are inconclusive. Furthermore, the benefits of having similar programme structure in ECEC and primary school on transitions have not been studied (Yan and Lin, 2005; Sammons, 2010).
- **Should ECEC involve a half or full day?** Related to the above policy concern is the question over the benefits for children of having a full-day of ECEC. Some research has shown full-day kindergarten may facilitate better transitions, allowing a more relaxed pace and adequate time for preparing for transition (Winters, Saylor and Phillips, 2003). More flexible daily schedules allow children to be more involved in planning activities and more engaged into more process-oriented activities (Yan and Lin, 2005). However, there is very little research to link the benefits of having a full-day kindergarten with smoother transitions into school, such as whether it enhances pedagogical continuum between ECEC and primary school, leading to better child development.

Identify the specific areas for alignment in transitions

The specific factors that should be aligned between ECEC and primary schools remain more than explicit in the literature. The following questions have been identified as particularly in need of research:

- What are the effects of curricula and pedagogical continuity on a smooth transition from ECEC to primary education?

- What are the effects of documenting and mapping children’s learning and development in ECEC, what kind of documentation about the child should be transferred from ECEC to school, and how should child development information be used in school? Which risks are connected to the absence of information on children’s preschool acquisitions for primary school teachers?
- How can pre-service and in-service training contribute to successful transitions; e.g. what are the effects of having the same contents specific to “transition issues” in both pre-service and in-service training for ECEC staff and primary school teachers; what are the effects when ECEC staff and primary school teachers take the same course or workshop on “transition issues” in their pre-service or in-service training?

Identify the ingredients for effective parental and community engagement

Although some research suggests how children and parents experience the transition, there is still a need for further research into the factors that influence participation by children and families in transition programmes, from the perspectives of these key actors. Questions include:

- What forms of collaboration can promote positive outcomes for children, parents and staff?
- What transition activities can help families support children’s transition to primary school?
- What forms of collaboration with community services can enhance a smooth transition to school?

Understand more about equity in transition

There is shortage of literature on the effects of transition programmes in different contexts (such as children from migrant backgrounds, with linguistically diverse needs, with special educational needs, and from lower socio-economic or lone-parent households). Research is needed to explore the effects of transition practices on at-risk or disadvantaged children and parents.

Notes

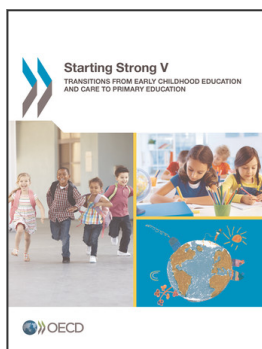
1. See www.startgroepen.nl.
2. See <http://gov.wales/topics/educationandskills/foundation-phase/action-plan/?lang=en>.
3. The Ministry of Children and Family Affairs until 2006.
4. Programmes that are developed in collaboration with stakeholders and where children and their families have a number of opportunities to get familiar with school in formal and informal settings.

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