



Ensuring Warm and Inclusive Transitions

Co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES EMERGING FROM CROSS-NATIONAL COMPARISON

"ENSURING WARM AND INCLUSIVE TRANSITIONS ACROSS THE EARLY YEARS"



THE INTRANS PROJECT

In recent decades, educational continuity and children's transitions between the home environment, early childhood education and care (ECEC), and compulsory educational institutions, have received growing interest in both academic and policy debates. Smooth transitions between educational levels can play a significant role in children's well-being and development. In contrast, the negative impact of stressful and traumatic experiences can be long-lasting and detrimental to future success in education, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds ([EU Council Recommendation on establishing a European Child Guarantee, 2021](#); [EU Council Recommendation on High Quality Education and Care Systems, 2019](#)).

Fostering a unified approach to caring and learning (EDUCARE) across ECEC settings and beyond is crucial to sustaining children's well-being and development as well as ensuring a sense of continuity in their experiences over time. The existence of inter-institutional professional platforms for exchange and knowledge-sharing between ECEC and primary school have been further shown to be another critical factor in ensuring positive transition experiences for children and families ([OECD Starting Strong V, 2017](#)).

Nevertheless, institutional splits still characterize ECEC provision:

- Splits between services for children under-3 (usually under the responsibility of the Ministries of Welfare) and children from 3 to 6 (usually under the responsibility of the Ministries of Education)
- Splits between out of school care services (usually under the responsibility of the Ministries of Welfare) and preschool services for children from 2,5 to 12 (usually under the responsibility of the Ministries of Education)
- Splits between ECEC and Compulsory School Education (CSE).

As research shows that such institutional splits are posing many challenges to the well-being, play and learning experiences of young children – and especially for those children and families belonging to societally disadvantaged groups – promoting smooth and inclusive transition is crucial to guaranteeing the improvement of quality and equity of educational systems ([OECD, 2020](#)). Despite renewed policy attention in recent years, only sporadic policy proposals at the national and local levels have so far engaged directly with creating the conditions to improve transition practices, to make them more gradual and inclusive for a diversity of children and families.

Goal of the project

The [Erasmus+ KA3 project InTrans](#) attempts to address this gap by disseminating lessons learned from research and by upscaling 'good practice' developed within EU-funded projects conducted by the same consortium over the last 5 years. **The ultimate goal of the initiatives undertaken within the InTrans project is to improve the educational continuity and inclusiveness of ECEC by acting on two axes: *policy advocacy* and *inter-professional learning*.**

The InTrans Exchange Week meeting in Copenhagen

As part of the first axis, the project has carried out policy analysis research in the four countries involved (Belgium, Finland, Italy and Slovenia). A set of [infographics](#) with an overview of the current status of ECEC and school systems per country has been produced.

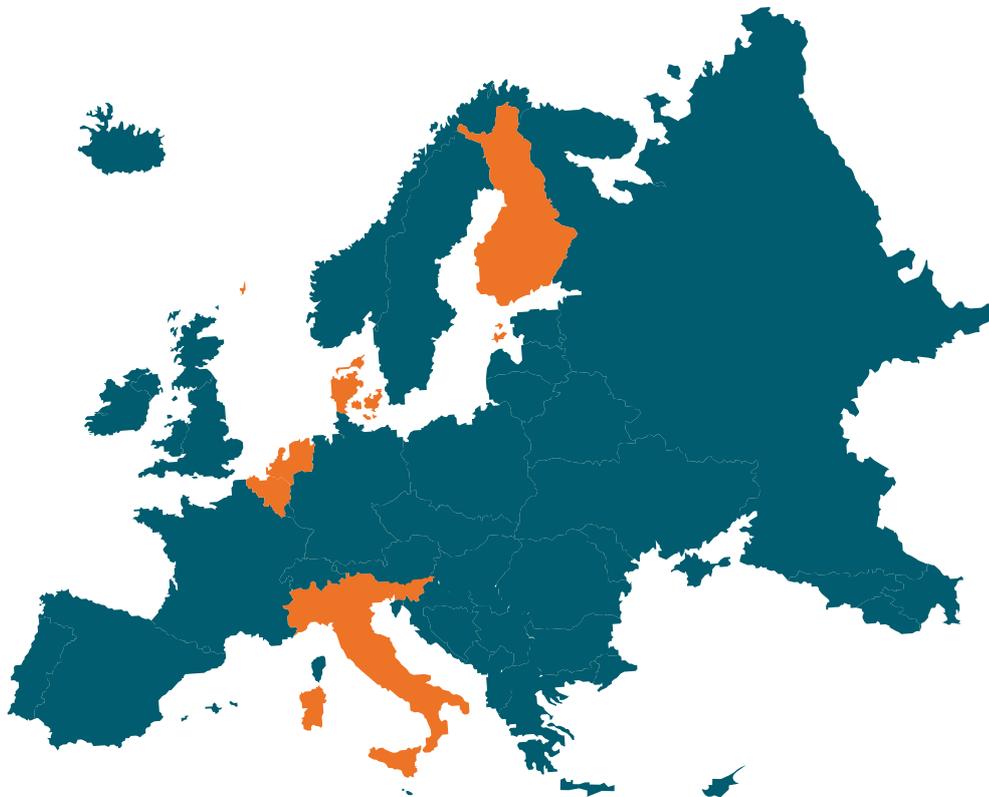
In this document we are presenting the preliminary findings that will be discussed during a high level networking exchange among policy makers and key stakeholders which will be held in Copenhagen (18-20 May 2022).

This meeting aims to provide insights and peer-learning opportunities among participants to reinforce structural, pedagogical and professional continuity in educational systems across Europe, with a view to developing educational learning communities based on a common vision shared by all stakeholders (including professionals, children and families).

Project partners: countries and organizations involved

The [Centre For Innovation in the Early Years \(VBJK\)](#) in Belgium is the coordinator of this international project. [Ghent University](#) (Centre for Diversity and Learning) in Belgium, [University of Bologna \(Department of Education\)](#) in Italy, [Tampere University in Finland \(Faculty of Education and Culture\)](#), the [Education Research Institute \(ERI\)](#) in Slovenia, and the [Danish Union of Early Childhood and Youth Educators \(BUPL\)](#) in Denmark are partners in this project, together with the [International Step by Step Association \(ISSA\)](#) leading dissemination activities.

Associated partners: Upbringing Agency (BE), Flemish Department of Education (BE), Agency of Educational Services (BE), Ministry of Education and Culture (FI), Ministry of Education, Science and Sport (SL), Emilia-Romagna Region and Gruppo Nazionale Nidi e Infanzia (IT), Holbæk Municipality (DK).



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PRELIMINARY RESEARCH FINDINGS

Challenges and opportunities emerging from cross-national comparison

This brief cross-country analysis aims to summarize the evidence that emerged during the policy analysis phase of the InTrans project. In particular, the document focuses on data and information collected through **expert interviews with policy decision-makers and stakeholders** in Belgium (Flemish community), Finland, Italy (Emilia-Romagna), and Slovenia. Interviews took place between 2020 and the first half of 2021; they were set up, conducted, and analyzed by the InTrans project partners. The analyses in question formed the basis of **four country baseline reports**¹, which portrayed the different policy contexts with particular attention to the topics of transition, educational continuity, and inclusion across the fields of ECEC (Early Childhood Education and Care) and CSE (Compulsory School Education). Therefore, **the focus of the analysis concerns the relationships between childcare and preschool provision in split ECEC systems (Italy/Emilia-Romagna and Belgium/Flemish community) and the relationship between early childhood and primary school education in the context of integrated systems (Slovenia and Finland)**. The cross-national analysis of findings is summarised in three topical paragraphs, shedding light on the main institutional and pedagogical challenges faced in each country or region regarding implementing smooth and inclusive transitions across ECEC and CSE systems.

TRANSITIONS, PARTICIPATION OF FAMILIES, AND INCLUSION

Moments of transition are crucial junctures in the personal history and educational trajectory of all children: their importance is however even more salient for children who come from societally disadvantaged groups or have special needs. Despite this, **as young children move into increasingly formalized and learning-oriented educational environments – from childcare to preschool, from preschool to primary school – less attention tends to be paid to the experiences of children in transitions and parental voices gradually receive less consideration vis-a-vis those of professionals.**

In the case of vulnerable families, the power imbalance between parents and professionals often leads to a deterioration of families' trust in educational institutions. Parents who experience negative interactions with professionals during transitions, are more likely to develop distrust towards educational settings and staff in general, leading them to disengage from educational decision-making processes, or even to postpone the transition to school for their children.

As a relationship of trust between parents and professionals is an important condition for children successfully settling in to a new educational environment, **policies aimed at sustaining warm and inclusive transitions ought to avoid focusing only on children and provide instead wide consideration to the improvement of continuity between the home environment and educational settings.**

¹The [InTrans Policy Baseline reports](#) from Belgium, Finland, Italy and Slovenia can be found [here](#).

Current policy initiatives in InTrans project countries

BELGIUM

In *Belgium*, the *Flemish Departments and Agencies of Education and Welfare* established in 2015, an *interdepartmental working group* with the stated aim of improving transition processes between the home environment, childcare and preschool. The working group developed an *action plan on transitions* seeking to develop close patterns of cooperation between public administrations and socio-educational services (childcare, preschool and family support) as tighter cooperation between local policy decision-makers and providers is seen as strategic to mainstream inclusive practices, as well as to offsetting bureaucratic barriers to organizational integration. This interconnected set-up also creates the organizational backdrop also for improving horizontal continuity among ECEC services in the local communities. In this sense, the Flemish action plan seeks to broaden opportunities for networking among professionals operating in day-care centres and preschools in the neighborhood, in order to streamline parental involvement during transitions (particularly into pre-schools).

FINLAND

In *Finland*, the centrality of parental participation is emphasized both in the *core curricula for pre-primary and early childhood education and care*, as well as by the *2018 Act on Early Childhood Education and Care*. A key message conveyed in the documents is that, to the extent that parents can frame their role as co-creators of their child's educational plan, the system should look at reciprocal partnership between families and professionals as one of the overarching goals to which to aspire. Among the many local and center-level practices that developed under the auspices of the legislation, the most common are centered around strengthening communication between ECEC, school and home. Such practices aim to enhanced the exchange of background information between families and ECEC professionals in order to identify and consider every child's individual needs and interests in pedagogical work carried out within an ECEC setting. The case for *inclusion into national guidelines on transitions of targeted support mechanisms addressing the needs of specific subgroups*, such as children with special needs, was also raised by Finnish stakeholders. Such national level guidelines would help to unify the support for children with special needs that currently varies in the Finnish ECEC and primary school settings, as this current variation is considered be problematic for children's smooth transitions.

ITALY

In *Italy*, the importance of fostering parents' participation during transitions from home to early childhood services has been stressed in the *Pedagogical Guidelines for 0-6 Provision* issued by the Commission on the Integrated ECEC System in 2021. The Commission was established under the Ministry of Education following the implementation of the *Reform on the Integrated 0-6 System* (D.L. 65/2017) with the purpose of developing pedagogical guidelines to serve as a common reference for both segments of the ECEC sector (previously split between 0-3 and 3-6 provision), thus enhancing pedagogical continuity between daycare and preschool settings. Within the document, particular attention is paid to how to foster horizontal continuity among ECEC settings, families and local communities in contexts of socio-cultural diversity.

SLOVENIA

In *Slovenia*, cooperation with parents has been emphasized in the *Kindergarten Curriculum* since 1999. In regard to transition from preschool to primary school, collaboration practices are well established. Most commonly, parents are involved in the transition process through parents' meetings organised by preschools and primary schools. However, none of these activities are pre-determined and variations exists from one teacher to the next in the number and type of activities they plan and implement.

TRANSITIONS AND INTERPROFESSIONAL COLLABORATION

Widespread capacity for interprofessional collaboration, in an operational perspective, is as crucial as the introduction of national steering documents and the implementation of new governance protocols and arrangements. While interprofessional collaboration is grounded in exchanges and interactions across institutional divides—such as those that separate childcare, preschool and primary school settings—its consolidation as a common practice may lead to the progressive dissolution of boundaries between educational spheres and to the emergence of a shared ground for mutual professional learning.

The consolidation of a discourse and practice of interprofessional collaboration, however, is contingent upon two important conditions:

1. The gradual emergence of 'shared space' at the boundary between different educational institutions, where joint initiatives and integrated practices can concretely take place.
2. The degree of readiness displayed by members of ECEC, preschool, and primary educational settings to opening up to different pedagogical visions and institutional logics, undertaking a relational process aimed at constructing a new, *continuous professional practice* underpinned by a *common language*.

A shared pedagogical vision is therefore crucial to the consolidation of practices of interprofessional collaboration. Inception of such a logic, in turn, hinges largely on a professional partnership taking root across the wider educational field, based on mutual respect and equal recognition under law, and sustained by ongoing collegial reflection and inter-professional learning.

Challenges identified on interprofessional collaboration

- *Differences in professional status and employment conditions* between staff operating at different education levels. Such disparities are seen to reinforce existing stratification patterns between professional groups. In countries with split ECEC system, childcare workers have been shown to nurture feelings of subordination to teachers employed in higher educational segments. Similarly, both in countries with split and unitary systems, preschool teachers are often under the impression that their voices are not always as heard as or valued as those of primary school teachers working in compulsory school. Perception of a power divide has been observed as being particularly detrimental to initiatives involving the deployment of childcare workers in preschool settings - or that of preschool teachers in primary classes. Deconstructing ideas of a hierarchical structure internal to education professions is one of the key challenges on the path towards systematic interprofessional collaboration.
- Differences in the professional status of daycare workers and pre/primary school teachers are often associated with differences in *working conditions. These are crucial for fostering – or rather hindering – inter-professional collaboration arrangements* (i.e. working hours, paid time without children allocated to collegial work or continuing professional development). Resolving a number of discrepancies at the level of the adult-child ratio and flexibility in teaching hours would go a long way into creating a more favorable environment for interprofessional cooperation.
- *A high degree of autonomy accorded to teachers in relation to collegial planning, especially around transitions*, also proved to represent an obstacle to inter-professional collaboration. Whereas principles of joint planning and collective decision-making are at the core of the notion of interprofessional collaboration, these ideas seem to be more established in ECEC than in primary school settings (where the implementation of transition practices might even be left to the discretion of individual teachers).

Existing conditions that could foster interprofessional collaboration in InTrans project countries

- Dissemination initiatives undertaken through the 2015 Flemish action plan have insisted on the importance of presenting successful transitions as shared, joint efforts of collaboration. In this spirit, outreach efforts aimed at promoting *best transition practices are often conducted by a team composed of representatives of different educational*

segments, so as to provide a display of interprofessional exchange and collaboration.

- In the context of the recent Reform on the Integrated 0-6 System in Italy, *Pedagogical Coordination Networks are identified as pivotal levers to support inter-institutional collaboration across 0-3 and 3-6 services and among different ECEC providers*. Pedagogical Coordination Networks are seen by experts as strategic to foster educational continuity through joint in-service training initiatives and joint planning of childcare workers and teachers around transitions. Vertical pedagogical alignment is encapsulated by *joint in-service training programs focused on the development of a common pedagogical language* shared by 0-3 and 3-6 professionals, centred on children's rights, holistic learning and well-being along a developmental continuum.
- The strategic importance of joint in-service training programs was also raised in the context of Slovenia, where interviewed stakeholders highlighted that *in the future, more joint trainings, workshops and further education should be organized in order to connect preschool and primary school teachers*. Such joint in-service training programmes are considered crucial to support preschool and primary school teachers in developing a common understanding about the developmental needs of 5- and 6-year-old children. *Joint trainings with reflection and other opportunities for professional collaboration, where they could discuss their practices and their roles would help professionals articulate mutual expectations and build relational competencies*. This is crucial due to the different professional identities and different understandings of preschool and primary school teachers' professional missions. While primary school teacher's mission is to teach, the preschool teacher's mission is to support the child's learning and development and to help develop values, attitudes and habits. Alongside providing an opportunity for debating pedagogical approaches and constructing a shared understanding of developmental needs, joint training programs are seen as a space where professionals engaged in *co-teaching practices built relational competences and, crucially, negotiated a shared vision*. Recently, renewed attention has been paid to such dimensions of transition due to the consistent rise in delayed first-grade enrolments among six-year-olds.
- In Finland, the fact that *national- and local-level governance of pre- and primary education nowadays falls under the same administration* is seen as a condition facilitating inter-professional collaboration in transition phases. In addition, the *processes of constructing the local curricula offer opportunities for professionals to collaborate and create shared knowledge*. Although such governance- and curriculum-related structural elements create a smooth context for everyday professional collaboration among preschool and primary school teachers - thus enabling pedagogical and professional continuity - it is acknowledged that inter-professional collaboration also requires *high quality leadership* to be developed both in pre-service and in-service education.

TRANSITIONS AND EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Pedagogical leadership is pivotal to the inclusive outcome of transition processes: as pedagogical coordinators and (pre)school leaders perform in critical mid-management and professional team support roles, they are positioned at a key nexus within the organization that grants them the opportunity to operate across institutional boundaries. From an organizational standpoint, **pedagogical leaders retain broad responsibility for creating the right structural conditions for educational continuity**, namely collaborative spaces at the boundary between learning environments. They are in this respect expected to set up informal but organized deliberative settings - such as participatory planning sessions bringing together families and professionals - to convene cooperative networks on the line of integrated practitioners'/teachers' meetings, as well as to schedule and oversee joint programs of professional development, inter-vision and co-teaching initiatives.

Alongside promoting collaborative practices and helping to ensure structural conditions that favor continuity, pedagogical leaders perform an essential function in maximizing every-day opportunities for the construction of an interprofessional pedagogical identity rooted in a common knowledge base. On an ideational level, in fact, educational leadership plays an equally key role in building a common understanding of the value of transitions

across multiple services, thus facilitating the consolidation of an interprofessional culture built on co-responsibility and a common educational language. *With specific respect to fostering warm and inclusive transition, pedagogical leaders and coordination figures are responsible for ensuring that the inclusive value of educational continuity gains increasing relevance among practitioners and teachers* - looking to increase awareness about hidden mechanisms of exclusion, as well as about the association between socioeconomic condition and difficulties experienced during the transition from one educational level to another.

Current initiatives implemented in InTrans project countries

ITALY AND BELGIUM

In Italy and in Belgium (Flemish community) we are witnessing the emergence, in recent years, of **local inter-institutional networks for exchange and cooperation between educational leaders involved across the ECEC, preschool, and sometimes primary school sectors**. Pedagogical coordination platforms and inter-institutional networks have been cited repeatedly throughout interviews as performing manifold important functions in support of educational continuity. One such function is that of **local steering mechanisms**. The setting-up of pedagogical coordination platforms and inter-institutional networks ensure **circulation of information, ideas and practices** particularly to educational stakeholders operating in remote or isolated contexts. In this respect, they represent a lever to maintain a coherent quality discourse across the local ECEC/preschool field. Trans-institutional platforms represent a **forum where key stakeholders can exchange views on – and advocate for – enhancing quality and equity of ECEC and CSE systems**. These platforms can further constitute a dynamic innovation space, and their framework can be used to present and promote **collaborative research and experimentation initiatives** within local communities. In Belgium, for example, in Flanders, from January 2022 onwards, 12 pilot projects on pedagogical continuity are being funded for three years by the Flemish government. A local network comprising childcare, preschool and out of school care is expected to collaborate to enable integrated ECEC for children from 0-6 years old. The pilot projects will be supported in a learning network. The project will be steered by a group with representatives of welfare and education as well as the unions. The collective goal of the project is to develop a practice model on pedagogical continuity by integrated work. The learning group functions as a space for interprofessional exchange, where ECEC managers and stakeholders can meet and discuss topics such as regulations and infrastructure, but also serves to provide key consulting and assistance to service providers that show interest in implementing continuity and integration. Furthermore, in Italy, inter-institutional pedagogical platforms have been recognized as performing a second important function in offsetting the effects of ECEC governance fragmentation, by sustaining policy cooperation mechanisms across administrative boundaries and across different providers.

FINLAND

In Finland, **a crucial function performed by inter-institutional networks relates to their levelling effect**. As ECEC, pre-primary and primary institutions are under the same administration, at the municipal level the inter-institutional working groups and networks are part of the established administrative structures and practices. However, the collaboration among the municipalities could be strengthened. Broader, **regional level trans-institutional forums could have a crucial networking effect by fostering the dissemination of good practices and facilitating mutual learning in the field**. In this respect, trans-institutional pedagogical networks might serve as **drivers of policy advocacy**, providing motivated school directors, leaders and teachers with a framework for scaling up or expanding innovative transition programs and initiatives.

SLOVENIA

In Slovenia, preschools can be organized as independent institutions or as a unit of the school which is also typically located in the same building; in the latter case the principal, administration and counseling services are shared, which means they could implement the same vision regarding the smooth transition and build on it. There is also a growing need for connecting kindergartens and elementary schools through organizing inter-institutional professional learning communities, which bring together both kindergarten and primary school professionals and have an affect on the development of a shared pedagogical vision. Inter-institutional professional learning communities are facilitated by coordinators from kindergarten and primary school and supported by principals from both institutions. In the last two years, within the framework of various initiatives, several such inter-institutional PLCs have been formed throughout Slovenia.

Learning from each other to overcome existing challenges: the value of policy exchange

Despite a growing consensus on the importance of inclusive and warm transitions across ECEC and CSE, good transition practices are still not widespread and mainstreamed in EU Member States. In order generate a deeper systemic impact, a wider strategy both at national and international level is imperative. Ministries and Governmental Departments which are responsible for ECEC and CSE at central level (i.e. Welfare and Education) or at decentralised levels (i.e. Regions, Municipalities) could collaborate in a more systematic way to create a common vision on the importance of warm and inclusive transitions for the benefit of a diversity of children and families attending early childhood services and school institutions. Research shows that fostering **pedagogical continuity, professional continuity and continuity with the home environment and the broader community** is crucial to ensuring that all children – especially the most vulnerable ones – can benefits from the positive transition experiences on their educational trajectory. In order *to produce systemic change at these three levels, however, certain structural conditions and a shared visions at policy level is needed*. Starting from the idea that a competent system is essential to make change sustainable along these lines, the initiatives carried out so far within the InTrans project has been geared toward influencing systemic conditions in each participating country or region, so that good transition practices could be disseminated and implemented on a wider scale.

High-level networking exchange among policy-makers and key stakeholders

18 – 20 May 2022, Copenhagen

The goal of this meeting is to provide insights and peer-learning opportunities among participants to reinforce structural, pedagogical and professional continuity in educational systems in their countries. For this purpose, the program includes a balanced combination of site visits - where participants will gain knowledge from inspiring practices and policies on inclusive transition – and working group meetings – during which participants will critically reflect on observed practice and exchange knowledge with colleagues from other countries.

The policy exchange is organized in cooperation with BUPL (**Danish Union of Early Childhood and Youth Educators**) which has close contact with the Danish Ministry of Education and Children as well as with Municipalities that have a long-standing experience in ensuring pedagogical and professional continuity in the educational services from birth until 12 years old.

Witnessing how ECEC staff, teachers, local administrators and stakeholder organization from different sectors collaborate closely and developed policy and reflection tools to govern warm and inclusive transitions will be an added value for policy-makers participating in the networking exchange.

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