

POLICY BASELINE REPORT SLOVENIA

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In the preparation of this report the following types of sources were used:

- legislative documents¹;
- relevant publications (see references);
- administrative data from the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport (MESS, 2016) and Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia (SORS, 2016);
- data from the focus group and the interview conducted by Educational Research Institute (ERI);
- data from discussions on the importance of soft transition conducted by parents' representatives at parent councils in primary schools (Association of parents' councils of Slovenia);
- data from research conducted in the framework of international project Transition is our mission.

¹ Throughout the report, English titles of legislative documents and links to the documents are provided in the text. All legislation is available only in the Slovenian language, except for the [Organization and Financing of Education Act](#) (1996).

Policy context and dynamics²

Governance

The education system of the Republic of Slovenia is organised as a **public service** rendered by public and private institutions that provide officially recognized or accredited programmes. By law, public schools are secular and the school space is autonomous.

The **state** (national level) acts as founder of public upper secondary schools, short cycle higher education colleges, higher education institutions; educational institutions for special education needs (SEN) children; residence halls for students, as well as supporting professional institutes in education.

The **municipality** (regional, local level) acts as founder of public preschools, basic schools (single structure primary and lower secondary education), residence halls for pupils, music schools, and adult education organisations.

Public institutions are state controlled by appointment of representatives to governance bodies, public funding, salary system, adoption of common rules and guidelines of public service, centrally adopted curricula, etc. The providers of public service are under supervision of the school inspectorate.

The **governance body** of public preschools and schools is the council, and the management body is the principal, who is also a pedagogical leader. Teachers enjoy professional autonomy and the principal has the autonomy in accordance with requirements to employ teachers of own choice.

As specified by the [Constitution of the Republic of Slovenia](#) (1991), there is a guarantee of freedom of choice in education and autonomy of higher education institutions.

Levels of the education system

The Slovenian education system is organised into several levels of education:

- [Pre-school education](#) is optional, and encompasses the centre-based early general pre-school education and care. Children can enrol as early as at the age of 11 months and attend it until the age of compulsory schooling.
- [Compulsory basic education](#) is organized in a single-structure nine-year basic school attended by pupils aged 6 to 15 years.
- [Upper secondary education](#) takes 2 to 5 years (approximal age of students: 15-19). Educational programmes include vocational, professional and general programs.
- [Tertiary education](#) includes short-cycle higher vocational education and higher education study programs.
- [Adult education](#) is marked by its considerable diversity of programmes and institutions.

Continuous professional development (CPD) is a right and a duty for all educational staff and attending programmes of CPD is a prerequisite for promotion to professional titles (Mentor, Advisor and Councillor).

² This chapter comprehends the webpage [Eurydice: Key features of the education system](#).

Structure of the national education system

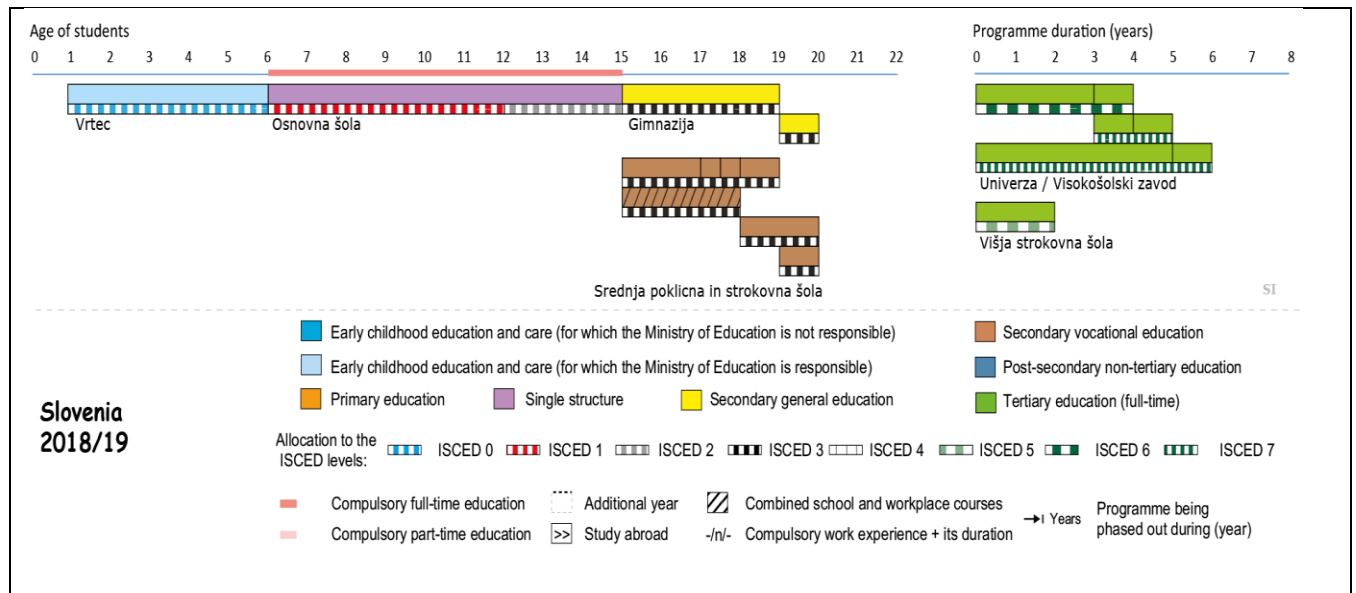


Table 1: Structure of the National Education System in Slovenia. Source: [Eurydice 2018/19](#).

Dynamics of policy consultation work at different levels of the system and interaction among them

Legislative basis

[Organization and Financing of Education Act](#) (ZOFVI, 1996) regulates conditions for performing and determines the manner of management and financing of education in Slovenia. The Act also defines that publicly valid educational programs shall be adopted on the national level by the Minister responsible for education in cooperation with the competent expert council.

Based on the conducted analysis and the focus group participants' reporting, the relevant document for updating and experimenting with the education process is the [Rules of updating the education process](#) (2014). It determines the procedure and institutions responsible for updating and experimenting the education process in the field of public service, by introducing new publicly valid education programs or new elements of publicly valid education programs (for example relating to transition from preschool to school).

Furthermore, the document determines the procedure and institutions responsible for evaluation of the education system, which takes place on the basis of national evaluation studies, which are carried out for the purpose of assistance in the formulation of educational policies. The manner of conducting national evaluation studies is determined by the Quality and Evaluation Council and submitted to the Minister for adoption.

As already written above, usually there are consultation procedures between the stakeholders in designing the education policy. These procedures should be the same for issues of transitions and any other issues.

Processes of implementing systemic change

Additionally, public institutions in the field of education (among which National Education Institute Slovenia (NEIS), Educational Research Institute (ERI), National School of Leadership in Education, Institute

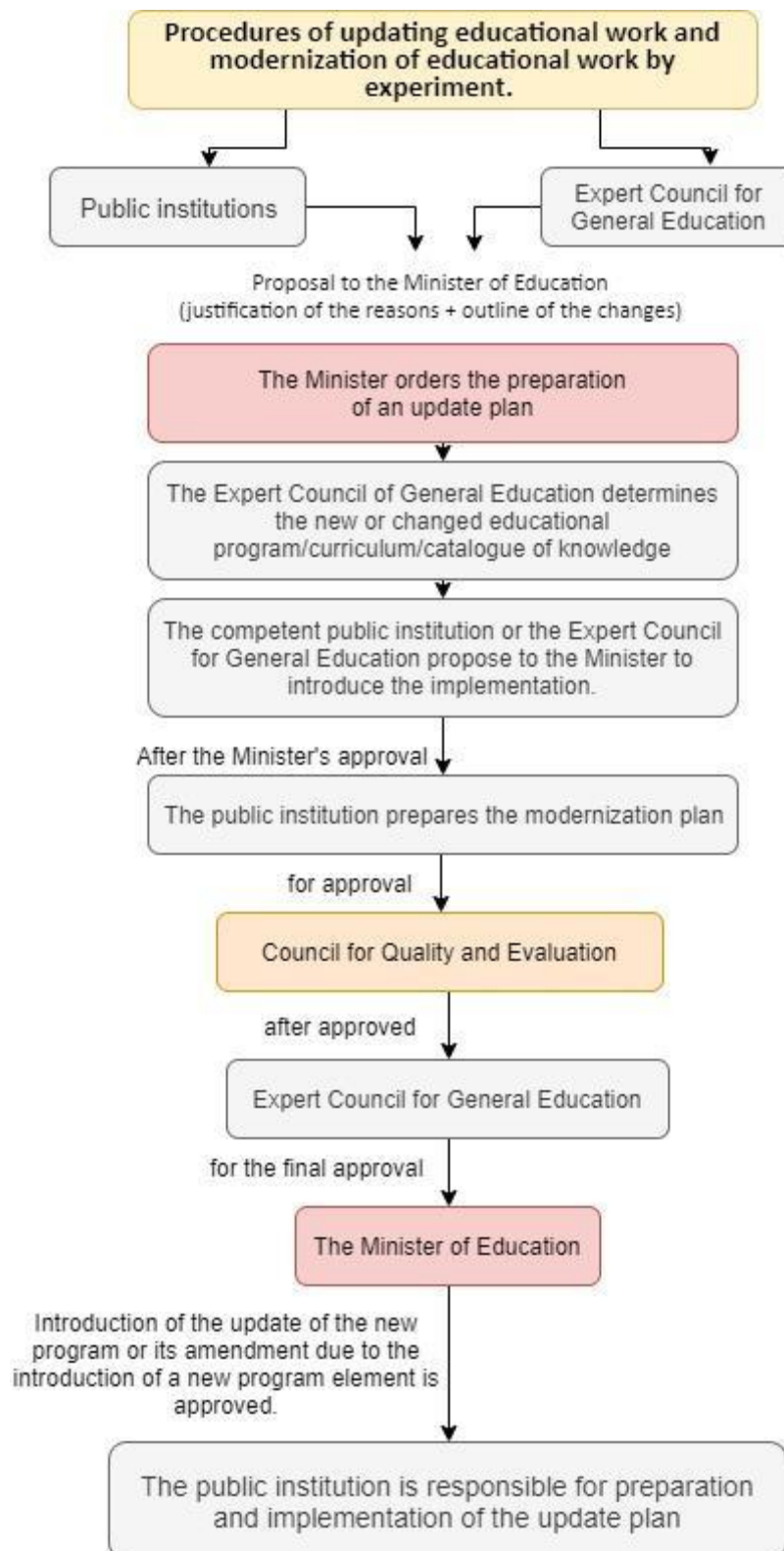
of the Republic of Slovenia for Vocational Education and Training, Slovenian Institute for Adult Education) can perform professional support and implementation of individual tasks in the procedures of updating educational work and modernization of educational work by experiment. In this case, the public institutions are responsible for preparing professional propositions in the field to which each element of updating refers. These can be based on tangible evidence, initiatives made by professionals from the practice, by parents, based on reports (i.e. Court of Audit) or findings of national and international researches (such as OECD studies, European Social Funds (ESF) projects...). Some initiatives for changes are proposed by OECD, the European Union through recommendations, which are analysed by relevant ministries in EU countries. This was for example the case with the OECD study Transitions from Early Childhood Education and Care to Primary Education - OECD Review of Policies and Practices for Transitions from ECEC to Primary Education - [Country background report Slovenia](#) (2017), which highlighted the issues and aspects of transition, which need to be considered.

The competent public institution or the competent expert council (in the field of education this is the Expert Council for General Education)³ may then propose to the Minister of Education that the procedure for preparation of a new or amended educational program or curricula or knowledge catalogues be initiated in educational organizations. The proposal includes a justification of the reasons and an outline of the changes and may be submitted after five years from the adoption of the last educational program or curriculum or catalogue of knowledge, except in exceptional cases determined by a decision of the Minister (2014, Art. 5/1). If the Minister agrees with the proposal, he/she shall order the preparation of an update plan by a resolution of the competent public institution (2014, Art. 5/3). After determining a new or changed educational program or curriculum or catalogue of knowledge at the competent expert council, the competent public institution or the competent expert council may propose to the Minister to introduce the implementation of a new or changed educational program or curriculum or catalogue in educational organizations (2014, Art. 5/4).

The modernization plan shall be prepared by the competent public institution and sent to the Council for Quality and Evaluation for approval. The competent public institution shall then send the modernization plan, with the prior approval of the Quality and Evaluation Council, to the competent expert council (2014, Art. 6/1). After the approval of the update plan by the competent expert council, the Minister shall issue a decision on the introduction of the update of the new program or its amendment due to the introduction of a new program element (2014, Art. 6/3).

The competent public institution within the framework of updating a new program or a changed program element is then responsible for preparation and implementation of the update plan; for advising and assisting in resolving specific issues arising in connection with the implementation of a new program or a revised program element; for developing initiatives for the training and implementation of training of professionals and making proposals for training changes; for data collection and processing in accordance with the update plan; for analysis and interpretation of processed data and proposal of measures; for preparation of the final report and any interim reports on the updating of the new program or the modified program element and for other tasks ordered by the ministry (2014, Art. 7/1).

³ The role of the [Expert Council for General Education](#) is to decide on professional matters in the field of general education and to provide professional assistance in making decisions and preparing regulations.



Source: [Rules of updating the education process](#) (2014)

The [Rules of updating the education process](#) (2014) also determine the procedure and institutions responsible for experimenting with the education process in the field of public service. The competent

public institution or the competent expert council may propose to the Minister that a new program element, new solutions at the implementation level that systematically or substantively interfere with the program or novelty in the field of organization and financing of the education system be tested on a sample of preschools, schools or adult education organizations. This process envisages the most significant changes and has therefore the strictest status. On the basis of the proposal for the introduction of the experiment, the Minister shall decide by a resolution on the introduction of the experiment or the rejection of the proposal for the introduction of the experiment. If he/she decides to initiate an experiment, the Minister shall issue a decision on the commencement of the experiment, instructing the competent public institution to prepare a plan for the experimental implementation of a new program element or novelty on a sample of educational organizations (2014, Art. 11/1).

The MESS writes laws and subordinate legislation and brings them into line with representative associations of municipalities. Though it is not obligatory, the ministry seeks opinions of other relevant associations (associations of preschools, principals, parents). Before issuing the rules on norms and standards (which cover teaching responsibilities of the teaching staff, the criteria for the provision of the counselling service, the administrative, account-keeping and technical services and the classroom/grouping criteria, qualification requirements for the staff, space and equipment requirements), the Minister shall seek the opinion of the Expert Council for General Education and the teachers' union – the Education, Science and Culture Union of Slovenia (in case of the norms and standards for the provision of education in ethnically mixed areas, the Minister shall seek also the approval of the Italian and Hungarian Self-governing National Communities).

Preschool and school teachers are actively involved in the preparation of the curricula. The NEIS working groups are composed of teachers, university and NEIS experts and they prepare the curricula.). According to [Organization and Financing of Education Act](#) (ZOFVI, 1996), the educational staff can also be members of the Expert Council for General Education, teachers are directly involved in adopting/confirming the curricula. At least a quarter of all members (26 + president) are part of the education staff at kindergartens, schools and educational institutions for SEN children.

Analysis of relevant policy documents ⁴

Structural continuity

The principle of cooperation between educational institutions from various levels is emphasized in relevant systemic steering curricular documents and in the basic legislation regulating the fields of preschool and school education.

The overarching legislative document is the [Organization and Financing of Education Act](#) (ZOFVI, 1996) which pertains to both preschool and basic education. It stipulates conditions to carry out education (preschool, basic, special needs etc.) and determines governing and funding.

There are special laws for each level of education: the [Kindergarten Act](#) (1996) for the field of preschool education and the [Basic School Act](#) (1996) for the field of basic education. For both levels, there is a series of other legislative documents (rules, regulations, orders, decrees). Regulations regarding transitions are limited to the enrolment procedure and the identification of school readiness ([Basic School Act](#), 1996). The [Kindergarten Curriculum](#) (1999) emphasises the link between preschool and school, but no central level

⁴ This chapter comprehends the summary of OECD report (2017), since the analysis of relevant policy documents is already included in this report.

measures are given. Each preschool defines activities to facilitate transitions in their Annual Work Plans (AWP).

[The Guidelines for the Counselling Service in Kindergarten](#) (1999) and [Guidelines for the Counselling Service in School](#) (1999) emphasise the importance of supporting children and pupils in making the transition to school and adapting to the school life. The role of the preschool/school counselling service is highlighted in that area. The counselling service participates in the planning, establishment and maintenance of appropriate conditions for the safe and supportive educational environment that allows the child's/pupil's optimal progress. According to Guidelines, the counselling service supports all the participants in the educational process (thus also in the transition period), including parents and teachers.

In [Kindergarten Curriculum](#) (1999, p. 14), the principle of vertical cohesion and continuity, which draws upon the cooperation and continuity of work between preschool and school, is mentioned among the basic principles of implementation, strongly emphasising that *'it is important that the preschool is not converted into school and that it insists on its fundamental specifics'*.

Preschools can be organized as an independent institution or as a unit of the school (as a school branch, i.e. it is associated with the school (the so-called vrtec pri šoli - 'preschool at the school' and is also typically located in the same building; the principal, administration and counselling service are shared). In regard to transition, this is a very important characteristic of the preschool, as for example in some schools, the preschool and the first-year class may be located very close together. This situation is more common in rural areas and smaller towns. According to the [Organization and Financing of Education Act \(ZOFVI, 1996\)](#), a public preschool may be established if the inclusion of at least ten groups of children is guaranteed. If there are less than 10 groups of children, the preschool may be associated with the school.

There is no specific cooperation between various levels (the state and municipality) in regard to the transition. Legislation and other steering documents are adopted at the national level. According to ZOFVI (1996), public preschools and schools are founded by municipalities

Generally, there are no separate financial and physical resources to support transitions; i.e. regular funding includes financing transition. Preschools and schools are financed by municipal and state budgets and other sources (donations, preschools also from parental fees, which are adjusted to the family's social economic situation).

Professional continuity

Qualifications for preschool and school staff are regulated at the national level. Preschool and basic school teachers have different initial education (duration and content). They are all trained at the tertiary level (at the Faculties of Education), preschool teachers at ISCED 6 (bachelor or first Bologna cycle; professional higher education programme) and basic school teachers at ISCED 7 (masters or second Bologna cycle). With the curricular reform (1996-1999), preschool and primary education teachers took part in the Supplementary Study Programme conducted at the Faculty of Education and financed by the ministry responsible for education, which qualified them for work in the 'new' first grade.

In-service education and training (CPD, see *Levels of the education system*) is a professional duty and right according to the [Organization and Financing of Education Act](#) (ZOFVI, 1996) and the [Collective Agreement for Education in the Republic of Slovenia](#) (1994). In-service training can be organized together or separate

for preschool and school teachers. Teachers can also participate in (national) conferences that are held for both groups of teachers.

In schools, two teachers are present in the first grade (as suggested by the [White Paper on Education](#) (1995) and stipulated by the [Basic School Act](#), 1996). According to the [Basic School Act](#) (1996), the first teacher is a primary education teacher and the second is a preschool teacher; exceptionally, a second teacher can also be a primary education teacher. The purpose of this additional professional is to help with the transition and individualization and make transitions 'softer' and less stressful for children. Moreover, a second teacher, being a preschool teacher, helps ensuring pedagogical continuity with preschools and helps adequately care for first-year pupils. A second teacher is present for 10 to 20 hours per week, depending on the number of pupils in the classroom or the number of Roma pupils; this means that usually two teachers are not present during all lessons. In regard to two teachers in the first grade, the concept envisioned by the school reform in the 1990s was that the preschool teacher would be 'in transit' between preschool and school – she/he would leave the preschool, work at a school for a year or more (preferably with 'her/his' preschool children) and then return to work in the preschool. ZOFVI (1996) explicitly foresees this possibility in the employment section: for a period of one school year, a school may employ a preschool teacher who has an employment relationship in a preschool for teaching in the first grade, morning care and after-school classes/activities. For the duration of the employment contract with the school, the preschool teacher's employment contract in the preschool is temporarily suspended in accordance with relevant laws.

Moreover, the primary education teacher was suggested to go with 'her/his' pupils from the first grade to Year 3 ([White Paper on Education](#), 1995).

Pedagogical continuity

As already mentioned, the [Kindergarten Curriculum](#) (1999) and [Basic School Programme](#) (1998) were prepared in the same comprehensive curricular reform in the 1990s, thus a similar theoretical framework and principles hold for both. The main difference between the two is that the Kindergarten Curriculum is much more flexible. It is an open and flexible national document with specified principles, goals and examples of activities for two age groups, but not structured in detail. The preschool teacher has the autonomy to choose what, when and how activities are implemented. There are no compulsory topics within the activity area or any standards to achieve.

Throughout the preschool period, developmental pertinence of activities is highlighted. However, within activity areas (e.g. language, mathematics), cross-curricular areas and routine activities (e.g. sleeping/resting, meals), many activities in preschool take place that help children develop relevant competences and skills. The NEIS experts and some preschool principals highlight the following competences that are being developed in preschool (all deriving from the Kindergarten Curriculum) as particularly relevant for functioning in the school environment. Developing these competences is not seen as the preparation for school, but as developmentally pertinent activities supporting the child's learning and development in the preschool period: developing autonomy of children in all areas (e.g. to be able to dress on their own, to go to the toilet – take care of themselves); encouraging metacognitive abilities; introducing and using written language, developing phonological awareness; understanding and using mathematical knowledge; understanding basic principles of scientific research; using technical terms within subject areas; knowing the differences between preschool and school; developing concern for safety; being able to focus and persist in activities; being able to make decisions and take responsibility for

decisions; improving general knowledge ('widening horizons'); developing the competence of cooperation with others.

In regard to the transition, the main aspect of the reform was extending the duration of compulsory schooling from eight to nine years by enrolling a year younger pupils (i.e. six-year-olds). Before the curricular reform, the 'Educational programme for preparing children for school' (1981, cited in the [White Paper on Education](#), 2011) was implemented for this age group by preschools and was compulsory for all children in the last year before entering school (it could also be carried out in schools). There were great variations in the organization (e.g. the number of hours provided) and in the content of the programme, which no longer allowed all children to develop their potentials ([White Paper on Education](#), 1995). The new entrance age aimed at tackling these issues. That coincided with changes in the understanding of the concept of school readiness (from the normative 'readiness is a norm/milestone that a child reaches' to a process, readiness to learn in each developmental period). Lowering the school entry age had a strong implication for transitions and entering into school (the school programme has to be adapted to the child's developmental level and his/her learning process). Thus, new subject curricula for all the subjects in the first grade were developed in the 1990s which reflected the developmental characteristics of pupils and the way of learning which suits six-year-olds. Important knowledge standards (e.g. writing, reading) aim at a gradual, in-depth and individualized acquisition of knowledge; this means that the attainment of the objectives is distributed across the first three years of school – the first cycle of basic school (for those pupils who need a slower pace).

There is no separate curriculum for the first grade; it is incorporated in the Basic School Programme. Each subject has a separate curriculum – one document for all the years in which the subject is taught; thus, to put together the curriculum for the first grade you should look for relevant parts in separate subject curricula. Moreover, all documents pertaining to the Basic School Programme are relevant also for the first grade (e.g. After-school classes and other forms of care in the nine-year school: the concept).

The changes in the new [White Paper](#) (2011) did not directly tackle transitions. The most relevant aspects of this White Paper for transitions were the early introduction of reading and writing skills in order to ensure the optimal development of children's language competences, thus enabling the continuity of literacy at school.

During the curricular reform (1996-1999) and in the years that followed, a lot was done to ensure a successful transition (the Supplementary Study Programme for preschool and basic school teachers to be teaching in the 'new' The first grade; study group sat the NEIS). Nowadays, there are no guidelines (at the national or municipality levels) on strategies to support the staff in ensuring a successful transition. As mentioned before, the role of the preschool/school counselling service is highlighted in supporting children and pupils in easing their transition to school; however, there are no specific strategies on how to do that for counsellors or teachers. At the local level, specific strategies have been developed and implemented within the network of preschools and schools included in the Step by Step programme since 1995 (Step by Step Slovenia).

Continuity with families and community

The [Kindergarten Curriculum](#) (1999) emphasizes cooperation with parents. In regard to transition, preschool and school practices are well established. Most commonly, parents are involved in the transition process through parents' meetings organised by preschools and schools.

None of these activities are determined, there are variations from one preschool teacher to another in how many and which activities (s)he would plan and implement. According to the interviews with principals, conducted within the OECD research, the most common practices preschools and schools apply to help with the transition are:

(1) preschools: (a) conversations between preschool teachers and children about school, the development of emerging early literacy, independence in dressing and personal hygiene, (b) organizing meetings and lectures for parents (in the preschool) and (c) visits to schools;

(2) schools: (a) visits (preschool children visit the first-year children during instruction and first-year pupils visit the preschool), (b) meetings with parents and children in schools in the final year (future first-year pupils and their parents are invited to school where they meet their future teachers and the principal and get to know the school environment) and (c) various art, cultural and sports events to which children from preschools are invited.

Moreover, preschools and schools prepare special publications for parents where they present their programmes, goals, topics and methods of work. It is a general publication, with no special reference to the transition.

The most common collaboration of ensuring good transitions for children are visits to school. These visits help children get acquainted with the environment – the space and people (adults, pupils); in some cases, children also meet their future school teacher. Visits can take various forms and can be a one-time event or a series of them.

The collaboration between settings in organizing visits for children mainly aims at ensuring a smooth transition for children. However, some principals report they see these visits also as an assurance of pedagogical continuity between preschool and school – when planning visits, preschool and primary school teachers develop common topics and methods of work together (e.g. both groups agree to work on the language/speech competences of children in relation to creativity, share ideas, experiences, and practices). Moreover, mutual visits also ensure continuity for the first-grade pupils and maintain the link with their preschool experience (when they return to visit the preschool and show their progress to their former preschool teachers). In terms of collaboration between preschools and schools, the organizational status of preschool is also very relevant (an independent institution vs a unit by the school).

According to the [Rules on the collection and protection of personal data in elementary education](#) (2004), information about a child, which is necessary for decision-making in the process of determining the child school readiness, may be obtained from the preschool.

Preliminary discussion of findings emerged from interviews with key decision-makers

In order to get a deeper insight in the dynamics of policy consultation work in Slovenia **a focus group and an interview with representatives of relevant public institutions was conducted**: Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, National Education Institute Slovenia, National School of Leadership in Education, Community of Slovene Preschools and Association of Principals of Primary and Music Schools.⁵

All participants have a significant position in their institutions. They are in various ways involved in planning, organising or leading the pedagogical process, public discussions, workshops or trainings and in developing relevant legislation and conducting national and international studies (such as OECD study on transition).

They have all cooperated with each other within projects or in different programmes, from which some also refer to the topic of transition of children from preschool to school. Furthermore, they have good connections with preschools and schools nation-wide (through membership in National School of Leadership in Education, Community of Slovene Preschools and Association of Principals of Primary and Music Schools). Some of them are members of the expert group for updating the Slovenian Kindergarten Curriculum (led by the National Education Institute Slovenia) and some are members of the Expert Council of the Republic of Slovenia for General Education, which is in charge for deciding on professional matters in individual fields of education and for professional assistance in decision-making and in the preparation of regulations (defined in ZOFVI, 1996). As a consequence, they represent a valuable and credible source for analysing the dynamics of policy consultation in our context.

The focus group and the interview consisted of five sets of questions, which were prepared based on the guidelines for the policy report. The focus group with 5 participants was conducted on 7 July via Zoom platform. As one of the invited persons was not able to attend the meeting, an individual interview was carried out with him on 9 July, also via Zoom platform. Questions and the format of the meeting were the same for everybody.

Additionally, these questions were sent to the chairs of the parents' councils in primary schools, with a purpose to also hear their voices on transition. Summaries of the discussions were then sent to the Association of Parents' Councils of Slovenia, which drew up and approved a joint summary and forwarded it to us. Ideas of parents are published in the chapter entitled Parents perspectives.

Question no. 1

The InTrans project aims to influence systemic change. Therefore, we would like to know more about the process of achieving any modifications in the educational programs, in our case in the field of ensuring a soft transition. From the point of view of your institution, who is involved in proposing and implementing systemic change, who has the influence and opportunities to achieve any change?

As evident from the first part of the report and from the answers of focus group participants, there exists a firm legislative basis, which requires cooperation among different stakeholders (public institutions, professionals, parents, different councils, ministry...) to achieve any changes in publicly valid education programs or inserting new elements in those programs.

⁵ The names and roles of each individual participant are archived in the ERI project documentation.

The participants (especially representatives of preschools and schools) emphasized that there were many projects and many discussion groups regarding a soft transition, but no further action. They agreed that various initiatives or projects lead to developing guidelines and recommendations, yet the further step of implementing any modifications in the practice is often not executed due to the lack of money or not sufficient encouragement by relevant stakeholders. The participants also stated that changes are made too slowly and not bravely enough. A concrete action plan and a model of how to execute the action are required to achieve any change.

The participants agreed that quality practices and changes depend on people and staff in educational institutions. Many of them emphasized that principals need to be encouraged to support and implement the changes in their institutions. They need to be role models and advocates for change and themselves execute the practices, which they require from their employees.

"We always stress that the principal is the key person for implementation of changes. The management should have sufficient knowledge and information, as well as motivation for encouraging their employees to plan and execute changes in their practice."

Representative of the Association of Principals of Primary and Music Schools

"Principal needs to be the model for his/her employees. If I tell them to bring their children out during this epidemic time, I should also do the same – and we organized the meeting of all staff outside."

Representative of the Community of Slovene Preschools

No change happens without support - the management is responsible to provide it within the institution, yet it should also receive it from higher level institutions (local and national authorities). Moreover, national and local authorities need to be coordinated, since the national authorities are in charge of developing and the local ones of implementing relevant guidelines (especially in preschool settings, where the municipality is at the same time the founder and financier of the local preschool).

"There are more schools and preschools in our municipality. I am encouraging our mayor for some time now to establish a working group of people from all these institutions and to support our cooperation."

Representative of the Community of Slovene Preschools

The participants paid special attention to the discussion of implementing changes referring to the postponement of the admission to school. In each school, there exists a relevant committee (appointed by school principal and consisting of a physician, a school counsellor and a teacher), which is responsible to evaluate and assess the level of readiness of all children whose parents or physicians suggested postponing the admission to the first year of school. The focus group participants stated that preschool teachers should have a greater power to influence the decision on postponing children's admission to school. In reality, the physician's opinion usually has a greater role in comparison to the preschool teacher's, regardless of the fact that the physician has the least contact with the child. Parents' opinion as the caregivers of the child usually prevails, which is not always the best decision due to their emotional involvement. One of the participants shared the suggestion that those children, who postpone their

enrolment to school for a year and are justified to receive additional help from a specialised professional, should follow an individual plan, which should be evaluated at the end of the school year in order to monitor the improvement of the child.

Question no. 2

The topic of soft transition was thoroughly discussed during the implementation of the nine-year basic school. The list of literature⁶ includes documents that were developed in that period. These documents also encompass ensuring a soft transition from the systemic point of view (presence of a preschool teacher in the first grade, etc.). Furthermore, preschool and first grade teachers were actively involved in the development of the new curriculum. In your opinion, how come that the topic of soft transition regained on its importance? What are the reasons for the current need of more intensified work on soft transition?

Most answers to this question were related to the increase of postponing the children's admission to school in the recent years in Slovenia and the need of investigating the reasons why so many children enrol to school one year later.

The participants identified certain problems, which result in not following the adopted legislation and official guidelines regarding ensuring soft transition. These problems are:

- Staff management (in the first grade, there are two teachers: one school teacher and one should be preschool teacher; yet, it is more economic and efficient from the financial and administrative point of view to employ school teachers than preschool teachers, as they are allowed to teach also in others than just the first grade);
- Lack of understanding the importance of having preschool teacher in the first grade and in general, lack of collaboration between these two preschool and school systems;
- Parents and teachers are not satisfied with methods of teaching used in the first grade (too big differences between didactic approaches and ways to learn in preschool and school);
- Learning in school is too much focused on achieving knowledge standards already in the first grade;
- Lack of space in classrooms in school (not enough space for all desks and chairs and for arranging the classroom in a similar way as in preschool);
- Calculations of parents, in which settings (preschool or school) is better to have a child (regarding the financial, responsibility or logistic aspect).

"Changes regarding transition are needed on various levels, from early education to secondary and tertiary levels. They are all connected. Therefore, cooperation of different sectors is of crucial significance if we want to preserve quality in education."

Representative of the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport said that one of the reasons to have a higher number of postponed admissions to school could also be related to the increase in the number of

⁶ The list of literature that addresses the topic of soft transition was sent to the focus group participants in advance. They were requested to revise the document and adjust it. Documents from this list presented the baseline for this document.

children, who were identified as children with special education needs. This challenge has already been investigated in a certain way.

Two participants of the focus group stated that when receiving job applications and conducting interviews with candidates, they are often left disappointed. They (future preschool or school teachers) sometimes lack knowledge on general topics of education (such as formative monitoring) or do not have an extra motivation or spark to do the work. They are prepared to follow the instruction for school curricula and would not enrich the education process with new ways and ideas.

"If we want creative children, we also need creative teachers."

Representative of the National School of Leadership in Education

The focus group participants suggested the following recommendations to decrease the number of postponed enrolments:

- More autonomy and decision-making power to teachers;
- Formative monitoring/focusing on providing feedback to each child;
- Tutors, peer-to-peer mentors for children;
- Promotion of child-centred approaches;
- Advocating for more quality training of pre-school and school teachers on the topic of transition;
- Raising awareness of principals on the importance of supporting more quality training of pre-school and school teachers on the topic of transition;
- Promotion of professional development among pedagogical staff and collaboration between different institutions.

Question no. 3

Various stakeholders (educators, teachers, parents, managers, decision-makers, etc.) are involved in the process of transition. It is important that all these different stakeholders build a common understanding of the importance of ensuring smooth transition. What is the foundation or starting point, on which these different stakeholders build an understanding of the importance of ensuring a smooth transition? Where do we start from?

Various studies show that special attention needs to be paid to the transition of children from vulnerable backgrounds. When we think about transition, do we also think about inclusiveness and equal opportunities - in what way?

The focus group participants agreed that the children and their needs, characteristics or capabilities should always be the focus of our professional discussions, regardless of the topic or field of education.

An important aspect towards building the common understanding of the importance of ensuring a smooth transition is also better collaboration between different profiles, especially between preschool and school teachers. Better mutual respect and more exchanges of used practices are consequences of greater collaboration. Furthermore, expectations regarding children's abilities and already gained achievements are more unified. There is also more understanding of assigning roles among preschool and school

teachers, as well as greater opportunities for professional growth, since they are able to learn from each other and improve their pedagogical approaches dedicated to 5- or 6-years old children. If more collaboration is ensured, there is also better flow of information about children or working with children. Therefore, the collaboration between different institutions should be encouraged.

At this point, the matter of staff management has arisen again.

The collaboration between preschool and school teachers is not the only one mentioned at the focus group. The participants also emphasized the importance of collaboration between preschool and school professionals and parents. In their opinion, more ways and approaches for this collaboration should be encouraged. Overall, they agree that collaboration and exchange between different profiles is crucial for building common understanding and for improving any process in school. Some of the participants also expressed their concern on the work of school counsellors. Recently, the amount of their paperwork increased, which results in having less time of working in classrooms with children or offering support to teachers.

"Parents need to feel secure and trust the staff. Otherwise they pass their fears to children. We should empower preschool and school teachers to be professional in their communication with parents, on how to present children's strengths and weaknesses and give support to parents, as well as to encourage them in their parenting role and use this communication to share their expectations, concerns."

Representative of the Community of Slovene Preschools

Pedagogical staff also need to have the knowledge and skills on how to adapt school curriculum and not just simply follow the written instructions in order to ensure a smooth transition. Very vivid is a statement of one of the participants, who said that teaching or interpreting the school curriculum is an art and that is why a teacher should be an artist. But in reality, a lot of teachers are simply following the curriculum, interpreting it as instructions. The school curriculum is the base document, from which teachers start. But its interpretation and implementation depend on the pedagogical skills of the teacher. Participants agreed that some preschool and school professionals are not sufficiently creative and do not dare to try new didactical approaches.

"The Curriculum is a "catalogue", guideline for teachers. But to interpret this document and adjust it to the needs of children is the art of pedagogy. The teacher should be flexible and creative."

Representative of the National Education Institute Slovenia

The focus group participants shared their opinion that individualisation should not be the goal of teachers, as too many individual hours of teaching for special needs children (according to their special individual programme) could lead to counterproductive effect on children, who are taken from the classroom, and has totally different methods of working in comparisons to others. Again, they all confirmed that teachers as adults should be able to adapt, to be open-minded, have a child-oriented view and help children to learn in any way they want to. And most importantly, each child should feel safe in school.

Question no. 4

The framework for ensuring soft transition is defined by various strategic guidance documents. It is defined e.g. that the same teacher should teach the class in their first three years of school; that the program and curriculum should be adapted to six-year-old children. Furthermore, it is defined, how school hours and lessons are organized and space conditions are ensured, as well as the presence of a preschool teacher in the first grade... Which guidelines that are written in these documents do you follow at your work? How do you address these challenges or what concrete solutions do you propose in order to carry out concrete actions or implementation of the written proposals?

All participants agreed that guidelines are well conceptualized, useful and rational. Yet in the present, these guidelines were gradually less and less considered. Based on this, the participants recognize it is necessary to return back to these documents, start following the guidelines and implement them back into practice.

The importance of collaboration arose again. Some of the participants highlighted that in the future, more joint trainings, workshops and further education should be organized in order to connect preschool and school teachers.

"Common trainings for professionals of different profiles would enable the exchange of various experiences and perspectives, which could contribute to better cooperation."

Representative of the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport

Question no. 5

**What do you think needs to be done to successfully address the challenges of ensuring soft transition?
What support would you need for this?**

The participants already addressed these questions during the focus group. To sum up, the following should be taken into consideration:

- raising the competencies of teamwork and promoting networking between professionals on different levels (preschool and school);
- providing support and encouraging pedagogic professionals to be creative and act as inspiration to one another in order to present certain content in various open ways;
- discussion on how to establish conditions for successful cooperation between preschool and school and preparation of recommendations for the faculties of education, where future pedagogic professionals are educated;
- embracing the importance of creating a stimulating environment (for children and adults);
- changing the form of trainings and further education for pedagogic professionals, aiming at being more reflective and based on their practice;
- organizing interinstitutional trainings and encouraging the exchange of good practices;
- further education of principals and encouraging them to be a role-model for making a change.

Parents' perspective

We obtained the parents' perspective from two sources: from the questionnaire conducted in the frame of the international project Transition Is our Mission (TIM)⁷ and from discussions on the importance of the soft transition, which were conducted by parents' representatives at parent councils in primary schools. This discussion was encouraged by the Association of Assets of Parents' Councils of Slovenia and conducted on the basis of questions sent in advance by the Centre for Quality in Education Step by Step, while the questionnaire was part of the analysis of the current situation on the topic of transition in three partner countries. Members of parents' councils were engaged in the discussions (parents of children from grades 1-9). We aimed at obtaining information about the reasons for increased numbers of postponing the school admission of children, showing the parents the feeling of being heard by decision-makers, as well as identifying and approaching the challenges regarding transition that parents face.

Postponement of schooling

The procedure of postponed schooling is as follows: article 45 of the Primary School Act states that parents must enrol the first-grade child who will reach the age of six in the calendar year. For children who face major health problems and injuries, severe speech problems, etc. and the postponement of enrolment is suggested by an external expert (specialist doctor, paediatric psychiatrist, speech therapist), postponing of schooling for one year is possible regardless of the date of birth. If the child does not have special problems, the reason for the delay is often the level of child's maturity observed by the parents and the preschool teacher (usually this refers to children born in November and December). In this case, too, it is mandatory to determine the child's readiness to enter school (Article 46 of the Primary School Act). This is done by a psychological test that most often assesses the child's intellectual abilities, but focuses less on emotional and social maturity, which are also very important factors when entering school. The procedure of postponement is such that the parents submit a written request to the commission for determining the readiness of the child to enter school. The commission - consisting of a school doctor (paediatrician), a school counsellor, a primary school teacher and a preschool teacher - finally makes a written proposal to the principal, who issues the final decision to postpone schooling.

The parents themselves pointed out that as a group they are very heterogeneous and that it is necessary to distinguish between "listening to the parents and listening to the expectations of one parent or one family".

Parents highlighted that they choose to postpone schooling of their children because the system allows it and because they follow their principle "to ensure the best for their child" - not just in short term (1st grade being "difficult" in sense of learning goals, process etc.) but also in the sense of long term benefit for the child (allowing them additional year "for play and later easier catch up with older peers"). This thinking implies that in the broader society understanding that children need to be prepared for the schools and not vice versa, is still very much present.

Parents stated that schools consider each proposal for postponed schooling individually and in the best interest of the child. The parent's request is carefully processed from several aspects, there is very little rejections. Parents find it very important that schools their proposals are taken into consideration seriously, professionally and individually.

⁷ See Appendix

Inclusion in primary school's life

What the parents emphasized is that they want as much exchange of information as possible, they want to be more involved in their children's schooling.

They also highlighted that they have a lot of fears themselves, which no one takes into consideration. Parents want to be recognized as part of the school community when their child enters primary school. More experienced parents (who have more children already in higher grades) can also contribute to the sense of accepting "fresh parents" by empowering them to "appropriate involvement in the education of their children".

"We should also be received/greeted by the parent's representative at particular primary school on the first day of school".

Representative of parents

Inconsistency of practice and systemic conditions

In the discussion, parents emphasized that systemic conditions that refer to the transition period are well set, the problem lies in the implementation. During the years, the practice has distanced from the idea of the first grade, planned in the school reform in the 1990s.

Concluding remarks

Main findings, trans-national trends and tensions

The main findings refer to the OECD Starting strong V, *Transitions from early childhood education and care to primary education (2017)*, OECD *Transitions from Early Childhood Education and Care to Primary Education, Review of Policies and Practices for Transitions from ECEC to Primary Education Country Background Report – Slovenia (2017)* and UNICEF report – *School readiness and transitions (2012)*. The main results also derive from the data collected from the focus group and the interview within the InTrans project, from the data collected from the research done in the TIM (Transition is our mission) project and from the answers gathered from ZASSS (Zveza aktivov svetov staršev Slovenija - Association of Assets of Parents' Councils of Slovenia).

There is no pressure for decentralisation or recentralization of the transition system

After conducting the analysis of relevant documents and overviewing the school system in Slovenia, we agree with the OECD *Transitions from Early Childhood Education and Care to Primary Education (2017)* that there is **no pressure for decentralisation or recentralization of the transition system**. Since the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport is responsible for preschool and basic education (integrated primary and lower secondary levels), there is no tension or lack of collaboration at the level of national authorities. The amount of collaboration among representatives of the focus group also shows that different organizations collaborate in the research and processes of change in the field of education.

Systemic solutions are appropriate, but the implementation of transitions in practice is not always adequate

Participants in the focus group stated that there are many discussions on the topic of transition among different stakeholders, but they lack concrete goals and determination to implement the findings from the discussions.

As already mentioned, the topic of transition received a lot of attention when the curricular reform took place between 1996-1999. At that time, a lot of attention was paid to the gradual introduction of the new programme, learning and developmental suitability of this program and its implementation for 6-year-olds, appropriate training of professionals in the first grade, two professionals were introduced in the first grade. Much attention was also paid to the preparation of premises at school, which should be adapted to younger children. After this initial period of topicality, the topic of transition has been largely overlooked. In the last few years, however, the professional and lay public has once again shown increased interest in it. Especially because the share of children whose school admission was postponed, has been steadily increasing. There also exists the common speculation that the increased number of special needs children correlates with the postponed admission, which was not proven by the NEIS research. This issue should be further investigated.

Data show that the main challenge facing transitions today is that, in general, it is no longer carried out as it was planned in the 1990s. As a conclusion, the systemic solutions for ensuring soft transition (such as the preschool teacher being the second professional in the 1st grade), which were already written, should be reconsidered and implemented back into practice. It is also important to encourage principals to follow these guidelines and to direct their preschool and school teachers to consider them. Furthermore, pre-service training programmes for future preschool and school teachers should also focus more on the topic of transition and the existing systemic solutions.

The system of introducing changes is well-structured, there lacks action in implementation of those changes

The data gathered from the focus group, analysis of the documents (e.g. The [Rules of updating the education process](#), 2014) and the overview of the school system in Slovenia gave us a better insight of possibilities for conducting any change in the field of education. There are many mechanisms and organizations that can propose, evaluate and also implement the change, but focus group participants stated that changes occur too slowly and not bravely enough. They agreed that various initiatives or projects lead to developing guidelines and recommendations, yet the further step of implementing any modifications in the practice is often not executed due to lack of financial resources or not sufficient encouragement by relevant stakeholders.

Ensuring professional connections/collaboration between preschool and primary school professionals

At the time when the school entry age began to lower, there was a lot of attention given to the in-service training of primary-education and preschool teachers to be working in the first grade. It was compulsory for teachers to enrol in the supplementary study programme to get ready for one-year younger students (to reflect on developmental characteristics of pupils and the way of learning which suits six-year-olds). Additional consideration should be given to reintroducing these topics more systematically into the pre- and in-service training system. More emphasis should be placed on joint training of professionals and, in general, the collaboration of preschool and primary school teachers.

In-service trainings should be organized for preschool and school teachers together, in order to develop common understanding about developmental needs of 5- and 6-years 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 different professional identities and different understandings of preschool and school teachers' professional missions. The school teacher's mission is to teach (they also feel strained by the curricula and the achievement of goals and standards therein), whereas the preschool teacher's mission is to support the child's learning and development and to help develop values, attitudes and habits. (UNICEF, 2012).

The importance of implementing already developed systemic solutions

An important systemic solution, which was not largely implemented, is employment of preschool teachers as second professionals in the first grade and their rotation between preschool and primary school. Furthermore, according to the White Paper on Education (1995), the teacher should follow the same group of pupils from the first to the third year. Principals do not apply this recommendation due to organisational obstacles (i.e. a preschool teacher cannot substitute in other grades).

Importance of strong leadership

Transitional practices also depend on the understanding of preschool and school principals of the importance of soft transition among different learning environments. They are the ones who set vision and ensure structural conditions for professionals (resources, time and space for joint meetings, training of staff, employment). Yet the leaders also need the support of national authorities (placing transition on

political agenda and supporting leaders in development of practices that lead to soft and inclusive transitions).

Cooperation between preschool, school, families and local communities

It would be necessary to work on the awareness of the institutions that the transition period is a process in which the whole family is involved, not just children. In Slovenia, parents are given the opportunity to make important decisions concerning their child in connection with the transition to primary school (postponement of schooling).

To increase parent involvement and foster relationships, schools must create frequent opportunities to communicate with parents. Activities must enable the school to respond to parents' suggestions and concerns. Thus involved, parents feel more comfortable, confident and empowered in their significant role in their child's development. Strong family-school partnerships are especially important for those families most alienated by traditional schooling practices. But on the other hand, parents have a strong influence on a child's delayed schooling. In practice, it happens that the opinion of the parents prevails over the opinion of the expert commission. This raises the question of the role of the expert commission and power relations. The institution should create a safe space for open dialogue in which to discuss dilemmas, fears, concerns, consequences for the child with delayed enrolment. Open dialogue can also set the common understanding of schooling practices. Some families' beliefs, social and cultural backgrounds, or their expectations of what is educationally helpful to their children may differ from those of school personnel.

Furthermore, the focus group participants stated that preschool teachers, who know the child really well, do not have enough influence on making the decision of postponement, which again raises the question of their professional role in the expert commission, which decides on the child's postponement or transition to school.

The participants also suggested strengthening cooperation with other child development services and local communities in order to build common understanding among them and to improve different school processes. In general, it seems that better cooperation between all involved stakeholders (parents, preschool, school, local community...) would ease the transfer of relevant information, which leads to smoother transition of children.

Organizational structure of preschools and power relations

It is also important to consider governance methods and power relations between institutions. In Slovenia, preschools can be an organizational part of primary school, which means that the service and management are shared. In such cases preschools often claim for their challenges or interests to be of less worth than those of schools.

Implications for further steps

Since one of the reasons for greater interest in the topic of transition is the increased number of postponed admissions to school, the focus group participants suggested the following recommendations to potentially overcome the issue:

- more autonomy and decision-making power should be given to teachers;
- formative monitoring/focusing should be used to provide feedback to each child – the necessity for this became especially evident during home-schooling due to the Covid-19 pandemic;

- parent involvement should be increased and relationships between school professionals and parents fostered;
- supportive parenting and stimulating home environments should be encouraged as one of the strongest predictors of school performance during primary school and beyond;
- tutors, peer-to-peer mentors (from higher grades) for younger pupils should be introduced;
- child-centred approaches should be promoted;
- quality training for preschool and school teachers should be better advocated;
- professional development among pedagogical professionals and collaboration between different institutions should be promoted.

Based on the answers of the focus groups participants, we developed some general implications for improving the situation in the field of education, with the focus on transition. We suggest:

- to raise the competencies needed for teamwork and to promote networking between educators;
- to refer to the existing guidelines and where needed define concretely how transitions should be implemented; this would consequently lead to more unified process of transition in schools across the country;
- to encourage and support creativity in educational processes so they use appropriate child-oriented didactical approaches; this is relevant for all stakeholders on different levels (preschool and school principals, local and national authorities, educators of future preschool and school teachers);
- to discuss different ways of cooperation between preschool and school;
- to embrace the importance of creating a stimulating environment (for children and adults);
- to change further trainings and workshops for pedagogical professionals in order to make them more reflective and practice-oriented;
- to organize interinstitutional trainings and encourage the exchange of good practices;
- to provide further education for principals and encourage them to be role-models for making a change;
- to establish more cooperation between all relevant institutions, stakeholders.

Based on the results from interviews with children and parents, we conclude that children are looking forward to entering primary school and that parents have mostly pleasant feelings regarding the transition. However, we can still suggest that:

- no matter the setting (school, preschool) relationships between children and (preschool) teachers and relationships among children are very important;
- we cannot forget that play is the key principle for learning in early childhood, when young children gain the knowledge they need for primary school success and needs to be present also in school setting;
- (pre)school personnel need to answer, react to parents' dilemmas regarding transition (e.g. child readiness, ability to concentrate, ability to follow instructions and ability to sit still).

Discussions within the focus group and the interview led to the agreement that projects should be more action-oriented, not just aimed at developing guidelines etc. Following are some ideas on how to follow this agreement:

- Introduction of interinstitutional professional learning communities as a model for ensuring soft transition – ERI.
- Developing materials for parents of first graders/children in the last year of preschool in order to inform them about transition - ERI.
- Developing materials for teachers about the importance of child-centred approaches, ensuring pedagogical, developmental and professional continuity.
- Developing materials for teachers on how to establish partnership relations with parents and how to support parents in developing supportive and stimulating learning home environments – ERI.
- Update pre-service training programs for future preschool and school teachers; revising the meaning of guidelines for ensuring soft transition – MESS, NEIS, Faculties of Education.
- Developing recommendations for modifying the existing curricula for future preschool and school teachers on the topics of ensuring soft transition, professional identity, building common understanding, child-centred approaches, unified expectations – MESS, Faculties of Education, ERI.
- Modification of administrative procedures regarding the employment with the aim of ensuring easier transition of preschool and school teachers both institutions – MESS.
- Recommendations for redefining school counsellors' work tasks – less administration, more direct support for teachers and pupils – MESS, NEIS.
- Preschool curriculum renewal is in progress – including implications from different researchers, projects... - MESS, NEIS.

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