

INTRANS CROSS COUNTRY REPORT



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INITIAL TRAINING AS A SIGNIFICANT FORUM TO BUILD PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCES FOR SMOOTH AND INCLUSIVE EARLY YEARS' TRANSITIONS

Belgian (FL), Finnish, Italian and Slovenian experiences and practices

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1. Introduction

In the last years, more attention has been given to the acknowledgement that transitions across the home environment, early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings and compulsory school education (CSE) mark significant changes in the life of children and their families and communities (Balduzzi et al., 2019). Moreover, there is an international consensus that positive experiences of transition can be a critical factor for children's wellbeing and for their future success and development, while negative transitional experiences can have lasting challenges leading to poorer educational performance, especially for societally disadvantaged children (Dumčius et al., 2014). Adopting a more unified approach to caring and learning (*educare*) across educational settings to sustain continuity of children's experiences over time, can significantly improve children's educational achievement and socio-emotional development. In turn, promoting inter-institutional professional learning communities of ECEC and primary school staff, as well as involving parents in the transition process, are considered as the key factors in ensuring successful transitions (Brooker, 2008).

ECEC centres have an important impact on the conditions that foster warm, smooth, and inclusive transitions. The [InTrans project](#) aimed at studying and reinforcing that impact.

In the InTrans project we understand good transitional practices as favouring warm and inclusive transitions across the home, ECEC, and primary school environments. These practices increase the wellbeing and learning opportunities of a diversity of children, specifically vulnerable groups such as children living in poverty, and/or children with migration background, and/or children with special needs. The project supports the acknowledgement that by installing a professional collaboration across institutional and professional boundaries, ECEC professionals and teachers feel better supported to ensure warm and inclusive transitions for all children and families.

The literature emphasises that four processes are important for having all the elements to create smooth transition (Dumčius et al., 2014):

- structural continuity,
- pedagogical continuity,
- professional continuity,
- continuity with the home and community.

Based on these processes, the InTrans project disseminates and upscales at policy and training level the 'lessons learned' from other developed approaches, projects and studies that have worked on the

above-mentioned elements, with the aim of influencing the systemic conditions needed to implement good transitional practices on a wider scale in ECEC and primary school. The ultimate goal is to ensure that more children and families, especially the most vulnerable ones, can benefit from transitional warm and inclusive practices. To do this, InTrans upscales existing good practices, by working on three essential aspects of the competent system:

- Level of policy and governance,
- Level of in-service training of ECEC professionals and teachers; and
- Level of pre-service training of future ECEC professionals and teachers.

This paper focuses on the third point, namely the level of pre-service training institutions.

Aims of the project

In the entire InTrans project, the *direct target group* are the people and institutions who can support and create the systemic conditions for ECEC and primary school professionals (intermediary target group) to feel competent and work better with a diversity of children and families (final target group) during institutional splits in the educational overall system. Besides working on policy and in-service training level, the project aimed at studying and raising awareness on the pre-service training level. More specifically, InTrans studied how do the various pre-service learning environments understand and implement the inclusive transitions taking place in early childhood education, preschools, pre-primary education, and primary schools. In addition, it investigated how the pre-service training's curricula and pedagogical practices related to the inclusive transition could be improved.

On the level of pre-service training, the main aims were the following:

1. Participating pre-service trainers and organizations are aware of the importance of inclusive transitions.
2. Participating pre-service trainers and organizations gain knowledge on good practices of inclusive transitions.
3. Pre-service training organizations of different professional profiles involved in ECEC and primary schools get to know each other and seek opportunities to collaborate.

This project initiated the debate on curricula alignment of different professional student profiles in relation to transition, child image and parent image, resisting the top-down schoolification pressure and school-readiness thinking.

Method

The partners involved in the part of the project related to the analysis of the initial training institutions are representatives of the following countries: Belgium (Flemish Community), Finland, Italy, and Slovenia. Each partner developed [local reports](#) on the role of transitions in their initial training curricula for future ECEC and primary school professionals. This report brings together and critically reflects on the results of the local studies.

The overall frame for the locally implemented projects was designed in the InTrans partner meetings. The local projects were set up, conducted, and analysed by each project partner in 2022. They were planned to meet the local needs. All local projects produced descriptions of the pre-service training system in each participating country. Partners also organized focus group discussions to bring initial training organizations' representatives together to describe and reflect on the main contents and implementation of the transition studies in each participating organisation. In all, the focus group discussions proved to be fruitful and stimulating for the participants.

The countries involved have their unique educational system and context in which the transitions are implemented. The variation realized in the local projects was partly due to the differences in the ECEC system. Namely, Belgium has a split ECEC system, and Italy is in the middle of a system transformation from a split to a unitary system. Finland and Slovenia have a unified ECEC system, and an established cooperation with the primary education. The country profiles of the participating countries can be found [here](#).

Each country also has its own cultural and historical situation where certain kinds of transition phases prove to be actual in the policy debate. Naturally, such contextual elements significantly influence the issues that are relevant for the transitions and continuities in each country. In all, various kinds of transitions and the pre-service education regarding them was considered in this project. Therefore, some partners focused on the transition from childcare/home to preschool, and some from ECEC to primary education. In many European countries the need for constructing smooth transitions is not yet debated enough, which indicates weak recognition of their significance. When planning the local projects, it was relevant to anticipate that the same situation occurs in the initial training context. It was also known that initial training is provided at multiple educational levels, as well as in multiple institutions and organisations. Thus, it was reasonable to ask whether the pre-service training activities and work take place in silos and how this possible problem could be solved by strengthening the awareness of transition continuities or discontinuities and by developing new forms of collaboration.



This cross-country document summarizes the InTrans partners' (Belgium, Italy, Finland, and Slovenia) notions expressed in the local reports and it provides critical overall reflections and recommendations to be adapted in each context. The local reports and their authors can be found [here](#). They provide an interesting portrait of the different pre-service systems and the implementation of the pre-service education regarding the inclusive transitions in each country. The following report will not repeat the local reports' descriptions of the local pre-service systems but attempts to weave together their main insights and to provide a cross-analysis of the main related themes. Following the conceptual frame of the whole InTrans-project briefly described at the beginning of this document, pre-service education is considered in this document from the perspectives of structural, pedagogical, professional and the home and community continuities. Inspiring practices from the partner countries' pre-service trainings are presented in each section. The last chapter concludes the main notions and presents some recommendations for the policy makers and pre-service training providers as well as the teachers in the initial training institutions.

2. Initial training as a foundation for future professionalism

The vision regarding the role and responsibility of initial training is broadly shared among the international organisations, such as the European Union (EU), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Early childhood education and care (ECEC) professionals are seen as the major driver of the quality of an ECEC system. The breadth of professional training of ECEC staff is seen to be positively associated with attitudes and practices related to process quality (OECD, 2020). Furthermore, the European Commission's recent report on *How to recruit, train and motivate well-qualified staff* (European Commission, 2020), stresses the crucial role of competent well-trained ECEC staff in developing high quality ECEC systems. In addition, the results of the international research support this notion. For example, the research overview conducted by the ET2020 Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care under the auspices of the European Commission states: 'The workforce is central to ECEC provision as it accounts for the greater part of the total cost of early childhood services and is the major factor in determining children's experiences and their outcomes. For these reasons, the initial and ongoing training of ECEC staff seems to be critical for ensuring quality of early childhood services and for the inclusion of all children.' (ET2020 Working Group on ECEC, 2020). Initial training creates a foundation for future competencies. Together with the various kinds of in-service training models it promotes professionals' continuous

professional development that is required in the rapidly changing society (see for example OECD 2020).

In the CoRe project (Urban et al., 2011) 'competence' in the early childhood education and care context was understood as a characteristic of the entire early childhood system. The competent system develops in reciprocal relationships between individuals, teams, institutions, and the wider socio-political context. A key feature of a 'competent system' is its support for individuals to realise their capability to develop responsible and responsive practices that respond to the needs of children and families in ever-changing societal contexts. At the level of the individual ECEC professional, being and becoming 'competent' is a continuous process that comprises the capability and ability to build on a body of professional knowledge, practice and develop and show professional values. Although it is important to have a 'body of knowledge' and 'practice', practitioners and teams also need reflective competences as they work in highly complex, unpredictable, and diverse contexts. A 'competent system' requires possibilities for all staff to engage in joint learning and critical reflection. This includes sufficient paid time for these activities. A competent system includes collaborations between individuals and teams, institutions (pre-schools, schools, support services for children and families...) as well as 'competent' governance at policy level.

The above notions of the CoRe project have inspired us to consider the initial training from the systemic perspective too. On the one hand, the initial training supports practitioners and professionals in their individual learning processes. On the other hand, it must consider the institutions, communities and societies in which future professionals work and collaborate. These issues are partly related to the contents of the pre-service training but also to the ways initial training is provided and structured in various societal contexts. However, the content and structure of the initial training are not separate entities. Instead, together they form a frame to define a country-specific understanding regarding the functions of ECEC institution, its position among other child and family related institutions as well as the required competences in the field.

3. Main findings from the data analysis of the local reports

3.1. Structural continuities or discontinuities

In order to have warm and inclusive transitions additional work on a structural, more systemic level needs to be done. This is called *structural continuity* and it concerns the level of governance in order to stimulate pedagogical continuity, continuity with the home and community and professional



continuity. Structural continuities may for example refer to the structures and practices in which various institutions are brought together to enable the coherent collaboration. In the context of pre-service training, this for example means the systems in which pre-service training for various professional groups is provided under the same administrative authorities. In many countries, part of the ECEC professionals are trained at the higher education level and part of them at the vocational level. In such cases, also other kinds of practices are required to avoid structural discontinuities.

The conducted local projects described the initial training provision of those professionals who work in the early years' transitions. As mentioned above, the partner countries represent both split and unified ECEC systems. At the level of pre-service training this means that the initial training for the professionals in the split system countries like Belgium and Italy is organized in separate institutions. In Italy, the initial training of pre-school teachers¹ (3-6) and educators (0-3) are very different even though the working tasks assigned to them are quite similar. Due to the Italian ECEC system transformation, the Italian ECEC professionals' initial training is transforming and still has elements originating from the split system. Finland and Slovenia have the unitary ECEC system. However, ECEC is provided separately from the primary schools. Still, both countries emphasize the coherent education system with smooth continuities and therefore ECEC and primary teachers' initial training is organized in the same institutions, at university level. Yet, the initial training for ECEC nurses in Finland and preschool teachers' assistants in Slovenia is provided at different educational levels and in the separate institutions. Moreover, all participating countries share the situation in which initial training is provided in multiple institutions. Such structural separation may constitute a gap of the encounters of various professionals working in the field.

In Finland and Slovenia, the ECEC teacher and primary teacher education are provided by the same institutions which gives possibility for professional continuity, but according to the data obtained from interviews with professors and students of both programmes, there is a big window for growth. The [Belgian \(FI\) study](#) illustrates the consequence of the split ECEC system on the initial training: the training of childcare workers, preschool teachers and pedagogues of young children are provided separately. In general, there is no structural continuous collaboration between the initial training

¹ The professional titles vary in the InTrans partner countries. Therefore, we use the country-specific titles when referring to a certain country. When referring to the staff members in general, we use the concept professionals. A summary of the European professional titles can be found here, Annex 2 https://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/EInfancia/documentos/early_childhood_and_care_-_how_to_recruit_train_and_motivate_well-qualified_staff.pdf

institutions preparing future childcare and preschool teachers. There are some examples of inter-institutional learning activities, but not in an embedded structural way.

The structural changes take time. Therefore, it is relevant to ask how training institutions can challenge these splits? How can they create more structural continuity within the training institutions themselves, which will lead to having more pedagogical continuity, continuity with home/neighbourhood and professional continuity across the early years? How can they ensure that short term solutions will be transformed into more structurally embedded solutions in the curriculum?

Based on the Finnish and Slovenian experiences the unified structure does not fully guarantee the adequate joint initial training for the professionals. The [Finnish local report](#) indicates that even if the initial training for all teachers working in the pre-primary – primary education transition is located at the same university units, there are still a wide range of institutional boundaries that may cause difficulties if aiming to build a shared understanding, knowledge, and language for the further collaborators. The Slovenian experiences are similar. Even though study programmes for Preschool Education and Primary Teacher Education are conducted at the same faculties of education, the ECEC students think that there is not enough cooperation among the lecturers to connect the content from both programmes. The [Slovenian local report](#) also describes that students of the Preschool Education programme feel to be treated as inferior by their colleagues from the Primary Teacher Education programme. However, in both countries, a strong wish to build a common understanding seems to be clear, but daily life brings many practical, discipline-based, and historical boundaries to cross. The situation clearly illustrates that both the structures and institutional practices in the initial training institutions are based on the historically and culturally constructed beliefs regarding the position of ECEC, preschool and primary education institutions as well as the positions of each professional group.



Box 1. Inspiring examples and practices regarding the structural continuities

FINLAND

National Forums to gather pre-service training institutions and organisations together to create a shared vision and understanding regarding the future development of the initial training.

The Finnish system gives an inspiring experience of the policy level actions to strengthen the collaboration between various initial institutions and units. The structural and vision level coherence among the initial training for teachers and ECEC professionals has been emphasised, and the Ministry of Education and Culture has funded two Forums to build a shared vision for the initial training. First, in 2019, the Minister of Education and Culture launched the work of the Forum for Developing Education and Training Provision and Programmes in Early Childhood Education and Care. The mandate of Forum was in 2019 –2020. The Forum drafted a proposal for a development programme for all levels and forms of education and training in early childhood education and care for the years 2021 –2030. (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2021.) At the same time, the Teacher Education Forum has also continued its work. This Forum has published the Development Programme for the teacher education 2022-2026. (See <https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/164179/TeacherEducationDevelopmentProgramme.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>). Now, both Forums continue their work. The experiences have indicated that a real need for such Forums exists. Such forums could be the first step to overcome structural discontinuities.

3.2. Pre-service training as a forum to build a foundation for the professional continuities

Notions of professional continuity in the curricula

Professional continuity of transition process is understood as the coherence of qualifications and attitudes of staff working in various ECEC and compulsory school organizations. E.g., ECEC educators and schoolteachers may have different expectations on cognitive and non-cognitive development of children and their 'readiness' for school, which may create barriers to their successful transition. Therefore, the research suggests the importance of continuous and joint training of ECEC and primary school staff as well as constant communication and knowledge sharing between ECEC and school settings (OECD, 2006).



Pre-service training may act as a fruitful platform to build a foundation for professional continuity. This can be implemented by having enough training contents that deal with the professional continuities as well as the ways in which the initial training is organized, especially how much joint activities the pre-service students from various programmes have. In the case of the initial training institutions, this also means creating relationships amongst the institutions themselves, and the lecturers and students. Such relationships and discussions could help the initial training communities to become more aware of the colleagues' knowledge and ideas and to construct a shared understanding about the transition phenomenon. In addition, they could help the lecturers to formulate the aims and contents as well as the teaching practices of each course addressed the phenomenon. By having such a shared understanding, the lecturers could also help the students to understand the position of each course in the transition entity. In all, this would give space for multidisciplinary, multidimensional, and multi-professional understanding about the transition.

The picture drawn based on the local reports tells those transitions are included in the initial training contents, but improvements are required. The topic of smooth and inclusive transition as an independent topic is rather rarely included in the study programmes. The Finnish, Belgian and Slovenian local reports indicate how complex and multidimensional the transition phenomena are. According to these reports, transition issues are implicitly taught in many courses, but the coordination of the contents is lacking. Transition is considered from the pedagogical, psychological, cooperation orientation perspectives. When inclusion is considered, special education and support for children with special needs orientation, universalism, and equity orientation as well as multicultural and super diversity orientation are seen significant to study. In addition, the lack of shared understanding and conceptual frame regarding the inclusive transitions were noticed. The Belgian report presents a notion that the vertical continuity present in the curricula is mainly related to what comes next (for example from preschool to primary school), instead of also paying attention to where the children 'come from': when children and families transition to a new level of the educational system, it is not just about 'going towards something new'; it is also about 'leaving behind something we know'. To create soft transitions, both these elements should be considered.

The Slovenian focus group discussions reinforced the same notion about the transition topic as very cross-curricular. Without a coherent transition framework shared by all course lecturers, such practise may be fragmented and therefore challenging for the students. Thus, transition should not only be considered as a cross-curricular topic but should be held as a separate subject. A rather broadly shared view was that study programmes should be more connected with the aim of raising better awareness of each other's work and being better empowered to ensure the smooth transition in various kinds of

transition situations. This may happen by providing a specific course regarding inclusive transitions. To avoid fragmentation, such course is necessary to be embedded in a continuous and coherent way of thinking through the whole curriculum. Again, this stresses the need of coherent framework that the whole pre-service community can follow in providing the lectures.

Interprofessional collaboration amongst initial training institutions

When talking about transitions, one crucial point is creating interprofessional collaboration. In Belgium, the theme is addressed in some of the courses. The curricula present good practices to be shared and valued (see the box 2). However, work needs to be done to make this interprofessional collaboration more structural and efficient. Concerning the students, interesting interprofessional practices exist, but they seem not always coherently embedded in the curricula, and they mostly depend on the individual choices and interests of students. More interprofessional work is present at the level of the lecturers of the two sectors (training childcare and training preschool), although mainly related to specific projects and research. The Belgian situation portrays the situation in other partner countries, too.

The joint practice periods were rare in all participating countries. Also, students did not always have opportunities to familiarize themselves with the daily practices in all institutions involved in the transitions. For example, Slovenian students report the importance of having the opportunity of visiting various working environments during their study practice. Students of Preschool Education have experiences with observing the practice in the first grade, while the students of Primary Teacher Education do not have the opportunity to visit Preschool. In Finland, some organizations had planned to organize a longer, joint practice period for the ECEC teacher students and the primary teacher students in the context of pre-primary – primary transition. However, the idea is still waiting for the implementation due to multiple practicalities. The focus group discussion conducted in the context of local projects highlighted inspiring examples, good practices and interesting proposals to improve the initial training practices.



Box 2. Inspiring examples and practices regarding the professional continuities

BELGIUM

In Belgium, the idea of creating common round tables for lecturers came out during the focus groups. Through thematic round tables for lecturers of different training institutions, themes related to *educare* and smooth transitions could be discussed in an inter-institutional way, and lecturers could get to know each other and set basis for further collaboration.

| The internship within the common *educare* module

In the internships, attention is given to involving external partners, so that students can see the networks that can be created with the ECEC centre (with social organizations, health organizations etc.). For example, pedagogues working in childcare have to make contact with surrounding preschools to develop transitional practices.

| The buddy system within internship

Students in pedagogy of the young child and preschool education get the opportunity (as voluntary and not mandatory choice) to have a reflective buddy from the other orientation to exchange and discuss experiences in their internship.

ITALY

| Joint courses regarding early childhood pedagogy, family pedagogy, intercultural pedagogy

Joint workshop activities in which students from various courses can compare and reflect on their placement experiences with the facilitation of an experienced academic tutor. These latter activities could act as a bridge to connect the internship experience of the students of the two degree courses, centring the collegial reflection on shared themes - such as observation, documentation, educational continuity - and thus favouring the co-construction of a common pedagogical ground and the cross-fertilization of educational knowledge.

FINLAND

| Multidisciplinary courses which examine challenging situations in a multidisciplinary manner

The participants of those courses may be lawyer students, social work students, or teacher students.

| Jointly constructed courses

Jointly constructed courses in the context of various research or development projects, where students can identify the perspectives of other professionals or institutions.

| A joint course

A joint course in which information transfer and shared language related to cooperation and documentation are taught for example by using conversation simulation and other methods.

SLOVENIA

The study programmes of Preschool Education and Primary Teacher Education are carried out at the same institution, which means that despite different programmes, they have some common lecturers, who teach at both levels.



Knowledge on history and rationales of ECEC

As is well known, the cultural beliefs regarding the function and activities of educational institutions change slowly. To understand the very essence of warm transitions and *educare*, a good understanding of the history of the ECEC system is important. In Belgium, the analysed curricula do address the concepts and issues related to integrated and split ECEC systems. More discussion would be needed on the societal goals/rationales of ECEC provision, to make clear that ECEC systems are not stable realities, but constructions made in a specific time and context with specific explicit and implicit goals. This would help students in putting the ECEC system of their own context into perspective, which ultimately can help them question it and reflect on ways to challenge it. A crucial element for collaboration, and in general for the implementation of the curricula in practice, is represented by the internship period. Both Belgian lecturers and ex-students recognize the importance of a good internship, and the need to have more moments to reflect individually and in group on their experiences. This would help in connecting theory and practice, which is one of the critical points underlined both by ex-students, lecturers and those responsible of the initial training institutions. Similarly, reflectivity-emphasized issues were also stressed in the [Italian local report](#). Finnish and Slovenian reports do not highlight such issues. Obviously, such elements are strongly embedded in the current university level initial training practices that they are taken for granted and do not need to be mentioned.

3.3. Pedagogical continuities

Transitions

The initial training's contribution to the pedagogical continuities is very much related to the content of the pre-service training. As mentioned above, the local projects focused on various transition phases. Therefore, the pedagogical perspectives addressed in the projects somewhat varied. Regarding the transition phenomenon, some commonalities were found. In all countries, vertical transitions seemed to be better recognised than horizontal transitions. Thus, horizontal continuity, although present in the subjects, needs to be better explored in the curricula to make it more concrete for students. In practice, this means the need to develop study contents that focus on working inclusively and relationally with parents from various backgrounds as well as the pedagogical practices that stress daily continuities. In addition, transitions were more often considered as one moment perspective than as a process. Previous research literature has emphasised the processual nature of transitions. The transition to school is not a one-time event, but rather a process of continuity and change that relate to the relationship, teaching style, environment, space, time, and

contexts for learning (Fabian & Dunlop, 2006, see also Annex 1 Dumcius et al. 2014). Thus, such things are significant to be included in the contents of the initial training.

Finally, some signs from a school readiness orientation were perceived although it was also possible to notice awareness of the opposite view, namely the emphasis of the idea that schools should be ready to welcome the children. For example, the Slovenian local report describes how schoolteachers expect preschool teachers to better prepare children for school; on the other hand, preschool teachers expressed that the first-grade learning process is not adjusted to children's development etc. In the focus group discussions, better cooperation was seen as an opportunity for all professionals to re-consider the role of both institutions. Interestingly, the Belgian local report's analysis of the curricula also indicates the schoolification trend but gives a different perspective. Namely, based on the Belgian curricula analyses it looks like the more children grow, the more the curricula carry a 'disembodiment' of the child, focusing mainly on cognitive development, understood as paying attention to the 'head', but almost forgetting the rest of the body. Since working with young children is inherently connected to bodywork, this is a very crucial theme to be further developed when wanting to train future ECEC staff. This is a relevant notion to consider also in the transition from pre-primary education to primary school. The problem with presenting the school-ready approach as a truth is that this will lead students to unintentionally exclude societally disadvantaged and vulnerable children and families in their future practice. That is why a clear understanding of these concepts seems crucial, too.

Educare

As mentioned, the local projects addressed various transition phases. Therefore, there were some variations in the pedagogical perspectives that came up in these reports. In the split system context, the overall picture regarding the function of ECEC institutions and the pedagogical ideas implemented in the institutions appeared to be relevant. In Belgium and Italy, the *educare* approach was significant. During the project, the state of affair in interpreting and implementing the *educare* approach was observed to be transforming. According to the Belgian local report, the involved initial training institutions in the Flemish Community of Belgium are going through a transition process: although there is a tendency towards an *educare* approach that would support warm and inclusive transitions, many contradictions and coexistence of different messages are to be found in the curricula. *Educare* is not yet present in a structural and coherent way in the contents and organization of the initial training for future ECEC professionals, and its implementation still depends to a certain extent from sporadic experiences or from the interests of individual students and/or teachers. This is



underlined also through the words of the teachers and those responsible of the initial training institutions who took part in interviews and focus groups. In certain cases, although the *educare* philosophy and the concepts of warm transitions are well approached, some specific concrete examples might partly contradict this same perspective, which can in the end confuse students. Working on all the above-mentioned themes would help in growing future ECEC professionals that can value the pedagogical, social, and economic functions of ECEC through collaboration with colleagues, families and communities. Ultimately it would mean contributing to developing competent systems (Urban et al., 2011), based on an *educare* approach that would support fostering warm and smooth horizontal and vertical transitions.

In Italy, the greatest obstacle perceived in the local interviews was the curriculum that tends to train and subsequently orient students mainly towards primary school to the detriment of early childhood pedagogy. The curriculum modelled prevalently on compulsory schooling, centres on the content of the disciplines, and recalling, on the methodological and didactic level, the primary school model is therefore in strong discontinuity with a pedagogy based on the children's interests, exploration and on play, in the *educare* perspective, practised in the services and schools for 0–6 children.

Box 3. Inspiring examples and practices regarding the pedagogical continuities

BELGIUM

Educare approach to support pedagogical continuities

- *Educare* is a specific common module for both future pedagogues working in childcare and preschool teachers.

FINLAND

Joint courses for ECEC and primary teacher students to strengthen pedagogical continuities

- Pedagogy of Pre-primary and Primary Education (4 credits) The student conceptualizes the educational continuum built from early education to primary education. The student outlines the role of the teacher as part of the child's growth environment. Students can view early childhood education, pre-primary and primary education as a coherent whole within the framework of childhood sociology, identifying interpretations of different periods from childhood. Students are familiar with the transitional stages of early education, pre-primary and primary education from the perspective of social



3.4. Continuity with the home and community

In literature, transition to school is seen as a family transition, and not just the child's move. Effective transition approaches, therefore, need to take families and community into account (Fabian & Dunlop, 2006). The notion is relevant in other transitions too. With the increasing heterogeneity of today's families, parental involvement, and partnership with ECE and schools is crucial to adjust (pre-)school services to ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and other forms of diversity (Neuman, 2000). Thus, collaboration and communication with parents is a crucial competence for students.

The local reports indicate that collaboration is taught in the initial training courses. In general, the aim is to construct competences that would support the professionals in building reciprocal relationships with parents. However, some challenges in the daily collaboration practices are present in each country. The initial training should take these challenges into account and offer the students tools to tackle them. For example, the Finnish local report describes how such things could be considered in the context of curricula discussion with parents.

The Slovenian local report also highlights the importance of collaboration with parents. The Slovenian notions also indicate that context-specific issues must be considered when teaching pre-service students such content. In Slovenia, some challenges regarding the postponement of schooling have taken place. Therefore, this situation partly gives a frame for the course contents. As the parents have the final decision on keeping their child a year longer in preschool, preschool and school professionals should be aware of their obligation to support parents in the phase of their child's transition. If professionals work transparently, communicate regularly, and establish a stronger cooperation with parents in the last year before school, parents will gain more trust in both institutions but especially in elementary school, which could lead to a lower number of postponed schoolings. Consequently, the foundation for such competences must be provided in the pre-service training.

In the Belgian local report, the reciprocal and equal partnership with parents is also noted. Furthermore, the importance of a *co-educare* approach and collaboration with parents is recognized. However, sometimes contradictive messages are given in which the relationship with families seems to be embedded in the framework (still) in an instrumental way (parents need to adapt to the implicit or explicit ideas of the school) instead of in terms of a real partnership and dialogue. In addition, Belgian local report emphasizes the position of the local communities. Creating an educational community also encompasses being aware of the needs of the local communities surrounding the ECEC centre, as neighbours can be future parents or (volunteer) co-educators for the children (e.g.,



going with the children to a bakery means that the baker in the store interacts with children and educates them informally and indirectly as well). The curricula of the training institutions preparing future childcare workers and pedagogues (Bachelors and vocational training) underline the importance of creating a connection with the community and the neighborhood, and space is given to how to create inter-sectoral collaboration. However, these themes are not always explored in detail with concrete examples that can help students in connecting theory and practice.

Box 4. Inspiring examples and practices regarding the continuity with home and community

BELGIUM

- One training institution stimulates students in reflecting about their own ‘identity story’, by connecting it to the community and family they grew up in.
- In another institution, the community approach is even the starting point of the preservice training of future preschool teachers and pedagogues, who are respectively seen as ‘urban educators’ and ‘city pedagogical coaches’ in the context of a metropolitan city and superdiversity.

FINLAND

- The learning activities in which students can critically reflect the ECEC practices and their own communication with the parents and learn to build such collaboration practices where parents could hold an equal position with the professionals.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

High-quality initial training is one of the key tools to guarantee the quality of ECEC and primary education services. Smooth, inclusive transitions are seen to strengthen children’s and families’ wellbeing (Balduzzi et al.,2019) and therefore they are significant from the quality perspective, too. Furthermore, to be competent to build such transitions in their working life activities, professionals are required to work relationally, and recognize their own and other professionals’ expertise as well as cross institutional and professional boundaries (Edwards,2011).

Obviously, there is no one and only right way to organize initial training that would build good competences to foster smooth and inclusive transitions. The actual contextual issues must be considered if the local needs are wished to be met. However, the analysis based on four local reports

indicates that pre-service training must be improved to construct a steadier foundation for smooth transitions.

- First, the structure of the pre-service training should be revised. The way this will be implemented is related to the structure of the education system in each country. In the countries having the integrated ECEC system with close relation to primary education the structural revision requirements are different than in those countries having a split ECEC system. The Finnish and Slovenian examples show that deep enough collaboration is not guaranteed just by having the pre-service education in the same institutions as universities. The location of the pre-service training and education of each professional group certainly forms a first step towards structural and professional continuities. However, to achieve real joint action and develop common understanding among the various institutions and their actors, there is also a need for a change in mindsets.
- Shared forums for the professionals working in the early years' transitions, could act as a first step to build a shared mindset that recognizes the key issues related to the inclusive transitions. Such forums need to be funded by the national, regional, or local authorities depending on the country specific initial training provision system. These forums would give the initial training planners and teachers possibility to construct a shared understanding about transitions across the various institutions as well as develop good practices for the pre-service students to learn relational expertise and work in such transitions.
- At the level of curricula improvement, more explicit content regarding the inclusive transitions is required. Now, transition is rarely explicitly expressed in the course descriptions in all partner countries. However, the recent research on transitions has contributed to the understanding about the phenomenon and these studies could be used in developing the course contents. For example, the understanding and implementation of *educare* including the whole body-mind perspective should be considered in the curricula contents. As presented in the [Belgian local report](#), it looks like the more children grow, the more the curricula carry a 'disembodiment' of the child, focusing mainly on cognitive development, understood as paying attention to the 'head', but almost forgetting the rest of the body. Since working with young children is inherently connected to bodywork, this is a very crucial theme to be further developed when wanting to train future ECEC staff. In addition, clear understanding of partnership with families beyond an instrumentalization approach would be significant to include the curricula to foster smooth transitions through co-education. To



contextualize each own system and understand the institutional and historical framework that influences the vision and practices concerning transitions, a better understanding of the different ECEC systems should be provided in the initial training. Finally, a better link of theory-practice when reflecting on transitions and *educare* with students (e.g., a better reflection on internship) is required in many countries.

- In the pre-service training practices, more connection among students of ECEC and compulsory education and among students of childcare and preschool education should be implemented, with the aim of building common understanding of smooth transition and establishing better cooperation later at the in-service level. To implement this aim, more connections among pre-service training staff specialised to a certain institutional level are required. In addition, more joint courses and experiences (for example internships) for the students from various professional programmes are needed. The joint courses could help the pre-service students in becoming more aware of the histories and fundamental perspectives on each institution. Having such experiences during their initial training, would prepare the future professionals to better collaborate and jointly develop smooth and inclusive transition practices.



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