START

A good start for all: Sustaining Transitions across the Early Years

Literature review on transitions across early childhood and compulsory school settings in Europe.

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Rockingham Primary School

International Step by Step Association (ISSA) as associated partner

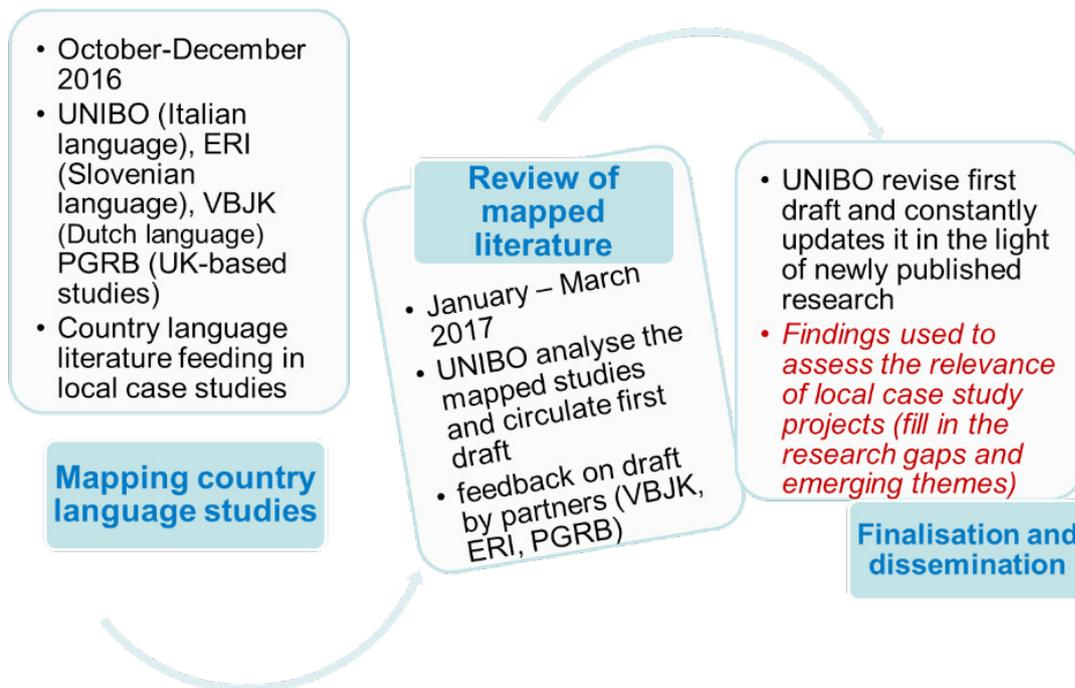Mensen voor Mensen Poverty Advocacy Group as associated partner

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Introduction

The aim of this literature review, conducted as part of the START project, is to deepen the understanding of transitions across ECEC settings – and between these and CSE settings – by critically analysing the findings of empirical studies carried out in EU Member States over the last decade. In conducting this review, a systematic approach has been adopted in order to provide a comprehensive overview of existing research: both English language studies and studies written in the languages spoken in the countries participating to the project (Italian, Dutch and Slovenian) were included. Compared to literature reviews previously published on this topic (Dockett & Perry, 2013; Peters, 2010), the added value of the literature review conducted within the START project is the specific focus on EU-based research and the inclusion of studies published within edited books and monographies. Up to date, existing reviews on transition practices and approaches have included mostly findings derived from the analysis of publications retrieved through international research databases or indexed journals. This might imply that the findings derived from studies published within monographs, edited books and national scientific journals – which are the most typical forms of research dissemination in the EU landscape – tend to be overlooked and left at the margin of mainstream international debates. By shedding light on the findings derived from such publication sources, this literature review offers valuable insights in terms of investigating the multiple understandings and approaches underlying transition practices across a variety of policy contexts, educational systems and pedagogical traditions typical of EU Member States.

In addition, as systematic and comprehensive literature studies on this topic have become increasingly common in recent years (Boyle et al., 2018; Peters, 2010; Dumcius et al., 2014), the need to focus on a newer generation of studies has emerged. For this reason, the studies reviewed in this literature could be considered the product of a 'second-generation' of transition research, adopting as theoretical frameworks for investigating transition processes the conceptualisations derived from previous research studies, which are considered as foundational (Dunlop, 2014; Corsaro & Molinari, 2005; Griebel & Niesel, 2004). By classifying as 'first-generation research' those studies published until 2010, the present review takes into account only publications released in the time frame between 2010 and 2019.

Methodology and procedures

The aim of the literature review illustrated in this report is to map, synthesise and critically analyse the findings of existing studies on transitions across different services within ECEC split systems (eg. childcare and preschool) as well as between ECEC and compulsory school education (CSE) institutions. At every stage of the process, the researchers conducting the study adopted systematic procedures in order to select, search and screen relevant contributions to be included in the literature review according to agreed criteria.

- October-December 2016
- UNIBO (Italian language), ERI (Slovenian language), VBJK (Dutch language) PGRB (UK-based studies)
- Country language literature feeding in local case studies

Mapping country language studies

Review of mapped literature

- January – March 2017
- UNIBO analyse the mapped studies and circulate first draft
- feedback on draft by partners (VBJK, ERI, PGRB)

- UNIBO revise first draft and constantly updates it in the light of newly published research
- *Findings used to assess the relevance of local case study projects (fill in the research gaps and emerging themes)*

Finalisation and dissemination

In the first phase, partners in each participating country (VBJK, UNIBO, ERI and PGRB[1]) were asked to map national language studies and synthesise their findings by using a shared template. In the second phase, the coordinating research unit (UNIBO) carried out a qualitative meta-analysis of research findings by implementing data extraction and narrative synthesis procedures.

Selecting criteria

The specific criteria determining which studies should be included in the analysis were jointly elaborated by the international research team and referred to:

- publication date: considering relevant research – only primary sources – published after 2010;
- geographical location: only studies carried out in EU Member States were selected, as retrieved in national and international research databases, published in books and academic journals or as project reports;
- research design used: only empirical studies were included;
- type of settings where research was conducted: the topic of transitions across ECEC and CSE has been widely considered, by taking into account both the transition between childcare and pre-school and between this and primary school; transitions between the home context and ECEC or school were also considered as well as studies focusing on educational continuity;
- subjects involved and type of data collected: studies investigating practitioners' and teachers' perceptions, parents' perspectives, children's lived experiences and outcomes were included as well as those examining policy documents and transition programmes.

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1   Pen Green Research Base

Searching

The literature search was conducted by using a two-pronged approach, with the coordination team (UNIBO) conducting searches for English language studies and contributing partners (UNIBO, VBJK, ERI, PGRB) searching for country language studies.

The coordination unit, using a sensitive search strategy, identified relevant key terms (early childhood education and care – transition – preschool – kindergarten – primary school – continuity – readiness) and organised searches using comprehensive search strings on international electronic bibliographic databases such as SSCI, ERIC, SCOPUS and PsycInfo. Non-indexed publications or grey literature were also sourced through hand-searching in academic journal, university catalogues and institutional websites. A backward and forward snowballing approach has also been applied in order to identify new candidate papers to analyse.

Studies published in national languages were retrieved by each project partner through national databases and manual searches in specialised journals. The coordination unit prepared detailed guidelines for partners outlining the search strategy, search terms and the main objectives of the current review, as well as a template to be used in order to summarise and translate the data extracted into English language.

- Timeframe: 2010-present
- Scope: academic publications, research reports, grey literature (only empirical studies)
- Database searches & hand-searches (books, chapters, grey literature)

TEMPLATE TO BE FILLED OUT ➡

Title & Abstract
Aim of the study
Background *(national education system/ policy context)*
Theoretical framework OR pedagical approach / vision
Methodology and methods
Main findings
Strenghts/limitations of the study
Critical comment from the researcher *(in which way the study is relevant for our project)*

Screening

Systematic selection of retrieved studies was carried out on the basis of previously defined inclusion criteria. Screening procedures involved two stages: abstract screening and subsequent full-text screening.

Mapping

The mapping of existing literature was elaborated starting from the analysis of the descriptive characteristics of each selected publication (research objectives, methodology and methods, participants and characteristics of the transition practices studied).

Data Extraction

The textual extracts that were relevant for the analysis of studies' findings were annotated on an additional grid (complementary to the previous one illustrated above) that allowed to organise and systematise information from each study in descriptive categories that are typical of qualitative research.

Narrative synthesis

The results of the empirical studies selected were analysed in-depth by grouping significant text extracts in thematic categories which were discussed in narrative form. As the purpose of the literature review was, in first instance, to inform the design of country case-studies, thematic categories were clustered with specific reference to the participants' groups involved at each case-study location, namely children, parents and professionals. Finally, implications for practice are discussed.

Mapping results

Geographical distribution

As a result of the search, snowballing and screening procedures described above, 40 studies2 were selected and included in the in-depth analysis carried out within this literature review (table 1). Out of the 40 studies analysed in the review, 9 were from Sweden, 5 from Germany; 5 from United Kingdom (including England and Scotland); 4 from the Republic of Ireland; 3 from Belgium (one of which available only in Dutch language); 3 from Italy (2 of which available only in Italian language); 2 from Slovenia; 2 from Finland; 2 from Poland and 1 from the following countries: Denmark, Netherlands, Portugal, Norway, Malta. In addition, one cross-national study including findings from research carried out in Germany, Slovenia and Austria was also identified (Niklas et al. 2018) but it was not included in the literature review as the data from EU Member States and countries outside EU (Australia, Colombia, Nicaragua) could not be dis-aggregated.

Sweden = 9 studies • 6 articles *(of which 2 linked publications)* • 5 chapters in edited books *(of which 2 linked publications)*	(Ackesjö, 2017) (Ackesjö, 2014-2013, *linked publications*) (Garpelin et al., 2010) (Hellblom-Thibblin et al., 2017) (Lago, 2014) (Markström & Simonsson, 2017) (Sandberg et al., 2017) (Simonsson, 2015) (Wilder & Lillvist, 2017a -2017b, *linked publications*)
Germany = 5 studies • 3 articles *(of which 2 linked publications)* • 4 chapters in edited books *(of which 2 linked publications)*	(Arndt et al., 2013; Rothe et al., 2014 - *linked publications*) (Griebel & Niesel, 2013; Griebel et al., 2017 - *linked publications*) (Hanke et al., 2017) (Krinninger & Schulz, 2017) (Reichmann, 2011)
UK (England & Scotland) = 5 studies • 3 articles • 2 chapters in edited books	(Brooks & Murray, 2018) (Fisher, 2011)* (Jindal-Snape & Hannah, 2013) (Neaum, 2016) (Wickett, 2017)
ROI = 4 studies • 4 articles • 1 chapter in edited book (*of which 2 linked publications*)	(Doyle et al., 2012) (O'Connor & Angus, 2012) (O'Farrelly & Hannessy, 2014) (O'Kane & Hayes, 2013 + O'Kane, 2013)
Belgium = 3 studies • 3 articles *(of which 1 in Dutch language)*	(Amerijckx &Humblet, 2015) (Peleman, Van Avermaet & Vandenbroeck, 2019) (Van Laere & Vandenbroeck, 2017)
Italy = 3 studies • 1 article in *Italian language* • 1 article in English language • 1 edited book in *Italian language*	(Cecconi, 2012) (Coggi & Ricchiardi, 2014) (Picchio & Mayer, 2019)
Slovenia = 2 studies *in Slovenian language* • 1 edited book • 1 article	(Vidmar, 2017) (Vonta et al., 2013)
Finland = 2 studies • 4 articles *(2 + 2 linked publications)*	(Ahtola et al., 2012-2011) (Karila & Rantavuori, 2014; Rantavuori et al., 2017)
Poland = 2 studies • 2 chapters in edited books	(Kiening, 2013) (Kiening, 2017)

2   Linked publications (publications drawing on the same research study) are counted as one study only.

Denmark = 1 chapter in edited book	(Jensen et al., 2013)
Netherland = 1 article	(Hamerslag et al., 2017)
Portugal = 1 article	(Correia & Marques-Pinto, 2016)
Norway = 1 article	(Kalkman & Clark, 2017)
Malta = 1 article	(Sollars & Mifsud, 2016)
Cross-national studies = 1 article	(Niklas, F., Cohrssen, C., Vidmar et al., 2018)

Table 1: geographical distribution of included studies

* As the study illustrates the implementation of an action-research project which builds on the need analysis reported in a previous article (Fisher, 2009) to which the present one (Fisher, 2011) is directly linked, for the purpose of this literature review the findings from both studies have been included.

Characteristics of included studies

The mapping exercise revealed that the majority of existing studies investigating transitions in the context of EU Member States are focusing on transitions from ECEC to CSE institutions (Brooks & Murray, 2018; Ackesjö, 2017; Hellblom-Thibblin et al., 2017; Sandberg et al., 2017; Wilder & Lillvist, 2017a-2017b; Wickett, 2017; Vidmar, 2017; Rantavuori et al., 2017; Griebel et al., 2017; Krinninger & Schulz, 2017; Hanke et al., 2017; Kiening, 2017; Hamerslag et al., 2017; Neaum, 2016; Correia & Marques-Pinto, 2016; Sollars & Mifsud, 2016; Lago, 2014; Ackesjö, 2014-2013; Rothe et al., 2014; Karila & Rantavuori, 2014; Jindal-Snape & Hannah, 2013; O'Kane & Hayes, 2013; O'Kane, 2013; Arndt et al., 2013; Griebel & Niesel, 2013; Kiening, 2013; Jensen et al., 2013; O'Connor & Angus, 2012; Doyle et al., 2012; Reichmann, 2011; Doyle et al., 2012; Cecconi, 2012; Ahtola et al., 2012-2011; Fisher, 2011): these are including also studies carried out in 'bridging settings' such as reception classes in England, junior infant classes in Ireland and preschool classes in Sweden. Transitions from daycare centres or from home to preschool are instead far less investigated (Picchio & Mayer, 2019; Peleman, Van Avermaet & Vandenbroeck, 2019; Markström & Simonsson, 2017; Van Laere & Vandenbroeck, 2017; Simonsson, 2015; Amerijckx &Humblet, 2015; Vonta el al., 2013) and even less explored are transitions within ECEC settings such as moving along different playrooms or units (O'Farrelly & Hannessy, 2014; Garpelin et al., 2010) or transitions from refugee introductory groups to mainstream settings (Kalkman & Clark, 2017).

By examining the focus of included studies (table 2) it can be noticed that existing research on transitions is mostly focused on exploring the perspectives of the actors involved in transitions processes such as professionals – ECEC practitioners (n = 19) and primary school teachers (n = 12) – parents (n= 17) and children (n = 11). Twelve out of the 40 studies included in the review encompass a focus on policies as well. In most cases, such studies are contesting mainstream discourses and approaches – i.e. school readiness – on the ground of empirical findings showing that their implications on ECEC practice produce a negative impact on children and families (Peleman, Van Avermaet & Vandenbroeck, 2019; Brooks & Murray, 2018; Van Laere & Vandenbroeck, 2017; Wickett, 2017; Neaum, 2016; Amerijckx & Humblet, 2015; Rothe et al., 2014; Arndt et al., 2013; Jensen et al., 2013; O'Connor & Angus, 2012). In other cases, the analysis of policy contexts is taken as starting point for reflecting on how professionals could be sustained in improving their practices (Vidmar, 2017; O'Kane & Hayes, 2013; O'Kane, 2013) or for triggering policy consultation processes involving relevant stakeholders (Jindal-Snape & Hannah, 2013).

Tools and strategies for sustaining the collaboration among ECEC and CSE professionals – as well as cooperation with children's families – over transitions are explored in one fifth of the studies included in the review (Vidmar, 2017; Hanke et al., 2017; Karila & Rantavuori, 2014; Rantavuori et al., 2017; O'Kane & Hayes, 2013; O'Kane, 2013; Vonta et al., 2013; Ahtola et al., 2012-2011; Reichmann, 2011; Fisher, 2011). Finally, only 5 studies display as research focus the assessment of children's cognitive

and non-cognitive skills associated with school readiness (Hamerslag et al., 2017; Coggi & Ricchiardi, 2014; Kiening, 2013; Doyle et al., 2012; Ahtola et al., 2012-2011). In this sense, it is worth noting that EU-based research on transitions – being mostly focused on exploring the understandings and experiences of professionals, parents and children as agentic participants – is positioned in stark contrast with the majority of international research focusing on 'readying children for school' (Dockett & Perry, 2013)

RESEARCH FOCUS	POLICIES		*Contesting school readiness discourses by examining their implications for children, parents and professionals:* (Peleman, Van Avermaet & Vandenbroeck, 2019) (Brooks & Murray, 2018) (Van Laere & Vandenbroeck, 2017) (Wickett, 2017) (Neaum, 2016) (Amerijckx &Humblet, 2015) (Rothe et al., 2014; Arndt et al., 2013) (Jensen et al., 2013) (O'Connor & Angus, 2012) *Analysis of policy contexts and implications for practices:* (Vidmar, 2017) (O'Kane & Hayes, 2013; O'Kane, 2013) *Policy consultation research:* (Jindal-Snape & Hannah, 2013)
	PRACTICES / TOOLS	ECEC/home environment	(Vonta et al., 2013)
		CSE settings	(Fisher, 2011) (Vonta et al., 2013)
		ECEC / CSE settings	(Hanke et al., 2017) (Vidmar, 2017) (Karila & Rantavuori, 2014; Rantavuori et al., 2017) (Vonta et al., 2013) (O'Kane & Hayes, 2013; O'Kane, 2013) (Ahtola et al., 2012-2011) (Reichmann, 2011)
	PERSPECTIVES /LIVED EXPERIENCES	CSE teachers (including special needs teachers)	(Kiening, 2017) (Sandberg et al., 2017) (Vidmar, 2017) (Wickett, 2017) (Wilder & Lillvist, 2017a) (Karila & Rantavuori, 2014; Rantavuori et al., 2017) (Rothe et al., 2014; Arndt et al., 2013) (O'Kane & Hayes, 2013 + O'Kane, 2013) (Vonta et al., 2013) (Cecconi, 2012) (Correia & Marques-Pinto, 2016) (Fisher, 2011)
		ECEC practitioners (including special need assistants)	(Brooks & Murray, 2018) (Hellblom-Thibblin et al., 2017) (Markström & Simonsson, 2017) (Sandberg et al., 2017) (Van Laere & Vandenbroeck, 2017) (Vidmar, 2017) (Wickett, 2017) (Wilder & Lillvist, 2017a) (Correia & Marques-Pinto, 2016) (Sollars & Mifsud, 2016) (Amerijckx & Humblet, 2015) (Karila & Rantavuori, 2014; Rantavuori et al., 2017) (Lago, 2014) (Rothe et al., 2014 + Arndt et al., 2013) (O'Kane & Hayes, 2013; O'Kane, 2013) (Vonta et al., 2013) (Cecconi, 2012) (Fisher, 2011) (Garpelin et al., 2010)
		children	(Picchio & Mayer, 2019) (Peleman, Van Avermaet & Vandenbroeck, 2019) (Kalkman & Clark, 20017) (Sandberg et al., 2017) (Sollars & Mifsud, 2016) (Simonsson, 2015) (Ackesjö, 2014-2013) (Lago, 2014) (O'Farrelly & Hannessy, 2014) (Fisher, 2011) (Reichmann, 2011)
	PERSPECTIVES /LIVED EXPERIENCES	parents	(Ackesjö, 2017) (Hanke et al., 2017) (Griebel et al., 2017; Griebel & Niesel, 2013) (Kiening, 2017) (Krinninger & Schulz, 2017) (Van Laere & Vandenbroeck, 2017) (Wickett, 2017) (Wilder & Lillvist, 2017b) (Correia & Marques-Pinto, 2016) (Sollars & Mifsud, 2016) (Amerijckx &Humblet, 2015) (O'Farrelly & Hannessy, 2014) (Rothe et al., 2014; Arndt et al., 2013) (Jindal-Snape & Hannah, 2013) (Vonta et al., 2013) (Fisher, 2011) (Reichmann, 2011)

RESEARCH FOCUS	**ASSESSMENT OF CHILDREN'S READINESS AND DEVELOPMENT** (cognitive & non-cognitive), including socio-emotional adjustment	*Adjustment Scale for Early Transition in Schooling* (Hamerslag et al., 2017) *School readiness assessment tool for evidence-based early intervention in 'scuola dell'infanzia'* (Coggi & Ricchiardi, 2014) *Classroom Behaviour Inventory Preschool to Primary Scale* (Kiening, 2013) *Short Early Development Instrument: S-EDI* (Doyle et al., 2012) *Standardised testing of academic skills* (Ahtola et al., 2012-2011)

Table 2: research focus of included studies

Analysing the selected studies according to the methodological approach used for conducting research (table 3), it emerges that almost half of the studies (n= 19) adopted an exploratory approach (including survey and longitudinal designs) to the investigation of transitions by focusing on perceptions and lived experiences of participants – i.e. professionals, children and families. Six studies were conducted by using ethnographic research methods – such as fieldnote observations, ethnographic interviews and content analysis – for collecting and analysing data. Five studies focused on the assessment of children's school readiness and adjustment through standardised instruments (Hamerslag et al., 2017; Coggi & Ricchiardi, 2014; Kiening, 2013; Doyle et al., 2012; Ahtola et al., 2012-2011) whereas only one study was conducted by using a programme evaluation design (Reichmann, 2011). Five studies were carried out as action-research and/or development projects focused on transformative practices (Picchio & Mayer, 2019; Rantavuori et al., 2017; Vonta et al. 2013; O'Kane & Hayes, 2013; Fisher, 2011). Finally, six studies were conducted as policy analysis, focused on the critical review of documentary sources such as steering documents and curricula (Vidmar, 2017; Neaum, 2016; O'Kane, 2013; Jensen et al., 2013; Jindal-Snape & Hannah, 2013; O'Connor & Angus, 2012).

RESEARCH APPROACH	**exploratory studies** *(focus on perceptions and lived experiences of actors involved in transitions)* including surveys and longitudinal designs	(Peleman, Van Avermaet & Vandenbroeck, 2019) (Brooks & Murray, 2018) (Ackesjö, 2017) (Griebel et al., 2017; Griebel & Niesel, 2013) (Hanke et al., 2017) (Hellblom-Thibblin et al., 2017) (Kiening, 2017) (Markström & Simonsson, 2017) (Van Laere & Vandenbroeck, 2017) (Vidmar, 2017) (Wickett, 2017) (Wilder & Lillvist, 2017a-2017b) (Correia & Marques-Pinto, 2016) (Sollars & Mifsud, 2016) (Amerijckx &Humblet, 2015) (O'Farrelly & Hannessy, 2014) (Rothe et al., 2014; Arndt et al., 2013) (Cecconi, 2012) (Garpelin et al., 2010)
	ethnographic research *(fieldnote observations, ethnographic interviews)*	(Kalkman & Clark, 2017) (Krinninger & Schulz, 2017) (Sandberg et al., 2017) (Simonsson, 2015) (Ackesjö, 2014-2013) (Lago, 2014)
	action-research and/ or development project *(focus on transformative practices)*	(Picchio & Mayer, 2019) (Karila & Rantavuori, 2014; Rantavuori et al., 2017) (Vonta et al., 2013) (O'Kane & Hayes, 2013) (Fisher, 2011)
	programme evaluation design	*small-scale qualitative evaluation [pre-/post- intervention design] of the programme 'School kids support kindergarten kids'* (Reichmann, 2011)
	assessment of school readiness / adjustment	(Hamerslag et al., 2017) (Coggi & Ricchiardi, 2014) (Kiening, 2013) (Doyle et al., 2012) (Ahtola et al., 2012-2011)
	Policy analysis *(focus on analysis of documentary sources such as steering documents and curricula)*	(Vidmar, 2017) (Neaum, 2016) (Jensen et al., 2013) (Jindal-Snape & Hannah, 2013) (O'Kane, 2013) (O'Connor & Angus, 2012)

Table 3: methodological approaches used for conducting research

Concerning the theoretical framework adopted for investigating transitions (table 4), it could be noticed that most studies included in the review are carried out within a (bio)-ecological perspective drawing on Bronfenbrenner's systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and its subsequent developments (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) emphasising the interrelatedness between human agency (capacity to act) and the evolution of institutional as well as socio-cultural contexts. In some cases, references are made to dynamic ecologically oriented models of transition that have been developed by translating Bronfenbrenner's system theory into the specific context of educational transitions (Rimm-Kaufmann & Pianta, 2000; Dunlop, 2014; Griebel & Niesel, 2004). Interpretative perspectives (Corsaro & Molinari, 2005; van Gennep, 1977) and socio-cultural perspectives (Rogoff, 2003; Wenger, 1988) have been used as research framework in six and four studies respectively. Critical (Petriwskyj, 2014) and social pedagogy perspectives (Vandenbroeck, Coussée, & Bradt, 2010) have been adopted as theoretical framing in five studies, whereas developmental psychology theories in three studies – as displayed in more details within the table reported below.

THEORETICAL FRAMING	**Ecological perspective: (bio)-ecological system model** (Bronfenbrenner,1979; Bronfenbrenner, 2005); **dynamic ecologically oriented models of transition** (Rimm-Kaufmann & Pianta, 2000) (Dunlop, 2014) (Griebel & Niesel, 2004)	(Sandberg et al., 2017) (Hellblom-Thibblin et al., 2017) (Wickett, 2017) (Correia & Marques-Pinto, 2016) (Sollars & Mifsud, 2016) (Amerijckx &Humblet, 2015) (O'Farrelly & Hannesssy, 2014) (Rothe et al., 2014 + Arndt et al., 2013) (O'Kane & Hayes, 2013 + O'Kane, 2013) (Ahtola et al., 2012-2011) (Fisher, 2011) (Griebel et al., 2017 + Griebel & Niesel, 2013) (Reichmann, 2011) (Hanke et al., 2017) (Kiening, 2017) (Kiening, 2013)
	Socio-cultural perspective: identity construction theories (Rogoff,2003), **border theories** (Wenger, 1998)	(Ackesjö, 2014-2013) (Rothe et al., 2014 + Arndt et al., 2013) (O'Farrelly & Hannesssy, 2014) (Karila & Rantavuori, 2014 + Rantavuori et al., 2017)
	Interpretive perspective: rites of passage (van Gennep, 1977); priming events (Corsaro & Molinari, 2005); **family as 'educational configuration'** (Norbert Elias)	(Ackesjö, 2014-2013) (Simonsson, 2015) (Lago, 2014) (Sandberg et al., 2017) (Krinninger & Schulz, 2017) (Kalkman & Clark, 20017)
	Critical and post-structuralist theories (Popkewitz et al., 2003) (Petriwskyj, 2014)	(Hellblom-Thibblin et al., 2017) (Wilder & Lillvist, 2017a-2017b) (Markström & Simonsson, 2017)
	Social pedagogy (Cameron & Moss, 2011; Vandenbroeck, Coussée, & Bradt, 2010)	(Peleman, Van Avermaet & Vandenbroeck, 2019) (Van Laere & Vandenbroeck, 2017)
	Developmental psychology theories on children's readiness to learn	(Doyle et al., 2012) (Coggi & Ricchiardi, 2014) (Hamerslag et al., 2017)

Table 4: theoretical perspectives adopted for framing research on transitions

Narrative synthesis of findings emerging from in-depth review

Transitions from the perspectives of children

The meta-analysis of research findings drawing on children's experiences and point of views revealed that certain factors might contribute to hinder their successful transitions from one educational setting to the following one. Educational aspects connected to the use of time (integrated experience in ECEC vs shorter and fragmented experiences in CSE) and to the organisation of space (flexible arrangements in ECEC vs rigid arrangements in CSE) drastically change in the transition from ECEC to CSE institutions and this makes it difficult for children – especially for those with additional needs – to settle in the new context.

In this regard, research findings show that a *certain degree of continuity in the physical arrangement* of ECEC and CSE settings across transition classes might facilitate children's understanding and successful participation in educational activities and routines. As described by Ackesjö (2014) in her study exploring children's transitions from preschool to preschool class in Sweden:

> 'The environments in the preschool and preschool class were quite similar, suggesting that children have opportunities to recognize the activities in the preschool class, based on their experiences from preschool, even if the educational setting of the preschool class also was influenced by the school culture.' *(Ackesjö, 2014; p. 10)*

Moving on to a new environment also signifies an implicit change in institutional rules and teachers' expectations. The older children become, the more they need to get used to adult-initiated and directed learning activities and for this reason children might experience a sense of loss of control over the learning environment, which might be particularly challenging for children who are not acquainted to formalised learning or who are not yet familiar with the dominant language spoken in the classroom (Picchio & Mayer 2019; Kalkman & Clark, 2017). Also in cases where children enter a collective educational environment for the first time, many psychological and emotional challenges can be identified. Observations of children from disadvantaged backgrounds in Belgian preschools demonstrate how starting pre-school can be an anxious, overwhelming and stressful experience for the youngest children (eg. experiences on crowded outdoor play ground). The lack of a sufficient number of attentive staff throughout the whole day – in combination with a pedagogical approach that prioritises cognitive learning over caring – create a situation where children who are not yet confident or are more introvert have to learn to take care of themselves and demand their own opportunities to learn the language. Consequently, the children with the most caring and learning needs, paradoxically have to learn to become autonomous without the appropriate support of staff or caring climate in the pre-school (Amerijckx & Humblet, 2015; Peleman, Van Avermaet, & Vandenbroeck, 2019). Broström (2005) used the term 'cultural shock' to refer to such situation: in this sense, too many children are still experiencing the transition to (pre)school as a cultural shock, where the challenges they have to face on an everyday basis tend to hinder – rather than stimulate – their learning.

Parallel to this, children seem to experience a fundamental change in their identity as learners over the transition from one setting to another: whereas they were used to be perceived as competent and autonomous children by childcare workers or preschool teacher, they often tend to be perceived as 'incompetent novices' by preschool or primary school teachers in the new setting.

These aspects have implications for rethinking the relationship between ECEC and CSE in terms of *educational continuity, meaning that teachers across the two settings should take joint responsibility for children's transitions by rethinking their own practices within a more coherent pedagogical approach* (Ackesjö, 2014; Fisher, 2011). Lack of communication between teachers can contribute to a lack of educational continuity which impacts the most on children from disadvantaged background.

Moreover, the aspect related to transition into a new group of peers – implying a re-definition of children's social roles and identity – should not be underestimated. As reported in the previously mentioned study (Ackesjö, 2014) exploring children's perspectives in transitions by using a mosaic approach (Clark & Moss, 2011):

> 'The children in this research project emphasized that the most problematic element of the transition from preschool to the preschool class was not the meeting with a new culture or a large school yard; rather, it was the separation from old friends and entry into new communities that children pointed to as the greatest threat or worry in transition'. In this sense, the *social discontinuity* in transitions seems to be most problematic from children's perspectives. For children, continuing to belong to a community, where relationships with peers are already established, seems to be the foundation for a successful transition.' *(Ackesjö, 2014; p. 10)*

Research findings also show that a *certain degree of discontinuity* – eg. in the way activities are organised and relationships played out – is something children are able to cope with if favourable framing conditions are provided in terms of coherent pedagogical approaches. In this sense, children seem to both expect and desire a certain degree of *discontinuity.* For example, the findings of the study conducted by Fisher (2011) – investigating children's perspectives through drawings and written commentaries (n=2381) – showed that the majority of children reported positive expectations about moving from reception class to grade 1 such as 'looking forward to being older', 'learning more difficult

things', 'playing in a bigger playground'. On the other side, negative expectations and concerns were also expressed (n=571 out of 2381), with main reference to leaving behind friends (separation) and teachers with whom they were familiar (Fisher, 2011).

From the analysis of the literature focused on children's perspectives in transitions emerged that the lived experiences of children from migrant background are rarely investigated in research carried out within EU Member States. In this regard, only two studies were found. The Norwegian study from Kalkman & Clark (2017) explored newcomer migrant children's transitional experiences when moving from an introductory group for children with a refugee background into a mainstream day-care group by focusing on children relational agency in dealing with vertical (status of newcomers in mainstream daycare group) and horizontal transitions (connecting home-culture with the culture of the daycare setting). Their involvement in play was observed as an arena where identity and belonging are acted out in the daycare socio-cultural context, with specific reference to children's meaning-making processes. The Italian study from Picchio & Mayer (2019) investigated the experience of children from migrant background during their first entry into daycare and preschool services. The study analysed the difficulties that migrant children face during the transition from home to ECEC – as well as the competence they used to overcome them – with the aim of supporting educators and teachers in improving their practice and fostering children's wellbeing, participation in activities and social interaction.

In both studies, practitioners' intercultural awareness turned out to be crucial for creating an environment that sustains the delicate interplay between newcomer migrant children's social/cultural attachments (eg. legitimising their home culture) and the recognition of local identity discourses (eg. elicitation of meanings and expectations). In this context, ECEC professionals should take up a 'mediator role', which becomes particularly relevant in the context of small group interactions, in order to facilitate positive and significant social exchanges among children. This means:

- 'interpreting children's specific difficulties and needs – as well as enhancing their desires, competences and aptitudes – and making these explicit and visible to their peers' (Picchio & Mayer, p. 8)
- sustaining newcomer migrant children in the process of 'performing and sharing their distantly located re-makings and re-memberings of home and belonging' (Kalkman & Clark, 2017; p.11).

Both studies stressed the importance of providing stable routines (reassurance and anticipation of what comes next) and fostering play as a context of participation giving children the opportunity for being together and sharing meanings with the groups of peers (belonging to a community).

In both studies, the role of the researcher is also emphasised:

- as an *active listener and observer who give voice to migrant children's narratives* for sustaining practitioners' intercultural awareness through reflection,
- as a *facilitator* who accompanies professionals in developing new strategies to support migrant children in transition phases.

Transitions from the perspectives of parents

As attested by the findings of a growing number of studies, the role of parents as important stakeholders in transition processes has been progressively recognised in recent years (Wickett, 2017; Ackesjö, 2017; Griebel et al., 2017; Wilder & Lillvist, 2017b; Van Laere & Vandenbroeck, 2017; Kiening, 2017; Krinninger & Schulz, 2017; Hanke et al., 2017; Correia & Marques-Pinto, 2016; Sollars & Mifsud, 2016; Amerijckx & Humblet, 2015; O'Farrelly & Hannessy, 2014; Rothe et al., 2014; Arndt et al., 2013; Griebel & Niesel, 2013; Reichmann, 2011; Fisher, 2011). The lived experiences and perceptions of parents in transitions are explored in particular within two strands of research:

- research adopting a systemic perspective (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Rimm-Kaufmann & Pianta, 2000; Griebel & Niesel, 2004) where parental and child coping with transition processes are seen as interdependent,
- research framed by critical theory where voice is given to those subjects who tend to be marginalised in order to develop more inclusive transition strategies by unveiling implicit 'exclusion mechanism' underlying current practice (Petriwskyj 2014).

Research findings highlight that transition to school is perceived as a critical event not only by children but also in the life of their families (Griebel et al., 2017; Wilder & Lillvist, 2017b; Krinninger & Schulz, 2017). Whereas parents who have older children already attending school – and therefore have become familiar with school expectations – seem to predominantly perceive their role in terms of *'readying their child for school'* so that he/she will be disciplined to be a responsible pupil in the new environment, the perceptions of parents who are facing transition to school for the first time seem to be mostly focused on their child *'emotional and care needs'* (Ackesjö, 2017; Fisher, 2011).

In regard to the latter, the analysis of research reviewed in the present literature shows that novice parents share similar concerns irrespectively of the diverse country contexts where the studies were based (Van Laere & Vandenbroeck, 2017; Ackesjö, 2017; Griebel et al., 2017; Hanke et al., 2017; Wilder & Lillvist, 2017b; Correia & Marques-Pinto, 2016; Griebel & Nielsen, 2013; Fisher, 2011). In particular, the most common concerns expressed by parents before transition occurs refer to:

- worries about their child's adjustment to a new environment characterised by higher academic demands (in contrast with the playful learning approach adopted in the previous setting)
- concerns about their child's emotional security and care in the context of larger class groups,
- lack of continuity in children's peer relationships and friendship as preschool groups are divided in different classrooms.

The above-mentioned findings could be interpreted as two sides of the same coin. On one side parents' desire for their children's school success tends to shape their role in transitions in order to be compliant with expectations and norms of the school system, i.e. ensuring that their child will be a disciplined pupil in the new environment. On the other, parents fear that their children's successful start in (pre)-school might be hindered by an increased focus placed upon formalised learning, which in turn might lead teachers to disregard children's individual socio-emotional and care needs. Quite interestingly, the findings of the studies investigating both families' and professionals' perspectives on transitions reveal that – whereas parents attach great importance to the caring role of (pre-)school teachers in terms of fostering supportive relationships 'with' and 'among' the children by attuning to their individual needs –teachers tend to perceive their professional role mostly in relation to teaching and learning practice.

> 'The size and organisation of the classes were other aspects of importance for the parents in terms of ensuring the teacher's ability to establish a closer and more supportive relationship with the children, taking their individual characteristics into account. Other relevant aspects underlined by parents in the process included the importance of keeping the group of preschool peers together after transition into the primary school classes, [...], the confrontation with older peers and possible situations of violence and bullying within the school context. The latter was mentioned by all the groups of parents, both before and after the transition, but was not addressed by any of the teachers.' *(Correia & Marques-Pinto, 2016; p. 260)*

> 'Parents considered the diversity of children to be a potential enrichment for the personal, social and pre-academic learning opportunities of the children [...]. It was assumed, for example that by being in a diverse group of children, children could help each other to learn so no child would be excluded [...].'(Van Laere & Vandenbroeck, 2017; p. 7) Quite on the on the opposite, diversity in terms of children's abilities and language spoken was perceived by (pre)school teachers as an obstacle to carrying out their educational job, understood in terms of delivering structured and teacher-lead activities such as 'painting, circle-time and learning about time and the weather, mathematical initiation or sensory exercises' *(Van Laere & Vandenbroeck, 2017; p. 12)*

In addition, the findings of studies exploring parents' lived experiences of transitions highlight that – while establishing reciprocal and trusty relationship between parents and teachers is considered to be crucial for the positive outcome of children's settling in into the new environment – the dramatic change in communication patterns across ECEC institutions, and between these and CSE institutions, actually hinder the creation of such partnership. As consequence of the different policies regulating the access of parents in early childhood institutions (eg. usually parents are encouraged to accompany their child in the classroom) and in (pre-)primary schools (eg. usually parents are expected to leave their children at the school gate) parents are unable to maintain contact with teachers under the same conditions that had been established within the previous

setting. Furthermore, over the transitions between in ECEC and CSE institutions parents-teachers exchanges tend to become more formal and uni-directional, to the extent that communication contacts are mostly taking place on a predefined schedule established by the school. This gives parents very limited opportunities to exchange views with school teachers and seek advice in case their child experiences difficulties in the first period of attendance. Research findings indicate that such aspects impact negatively on the possibility to establish reciprocal and trusty relationships between parents and teachers from the outset (Wickett, 2017; Wilder & Lillvist, 2017b; Correia & Marques-Pinto, 2016; Rothe et al., 2014; Arndt et al., 2013).

The challenges connected to establishing trusty relationship between parents and professionals seems to be particularly salient when children and families from vulnerable groups are involved (Wilder & Lillvist, 2017a - 2017b; Rothe et al., 2014; Rothe et al., 2014; Vonta et al., 2013)*.* For example, studies carried out in Sweden (Wilder & Lillvist, 2017a - 2017b) highlight how, despite a rhetoric emphasising the importance of parents' expert knowledge about their own children in sustaining positive transitions for children with disability[3], traditional transition practice from preschool to compulsory schools for students with intellectual disability (CSSID) tend to 'marginalise' the voice of parents. Whereas parents attach great importance to establishing relationships of 'trust' with professionals (special educators, preschool staff, doctors and municipality coordinator for CSSID) in order to be supported in making choices for the best interest of their child[4], the special need teachers welcoming children with intellectual disability in CSSID tend to involve parents only to receive knowledge about children's healthcare needs. Knowledge about children's learning, everyday functioning and communication were gathered primarily from preschool teachers, with the result that parents of children with intellectual disability are left aside of transition processes. This generate many tensions and worries as parents of children with intellectual disability see their role as advocates for their children but – on the other side – such role is not recognised or supported by the professionals they interact with, therefore undermining the possibility of establishing reciprocal relationships and trust. In a context where decision are taken on the top of their head, parents expressed worries about how information will be transferred between home and school settings in the context of daily horizontal transitions (i.e. transport and communication) and concerns on how their child will be able to cope with the new situation (i.e. increased demands placed upon children in terms of formal learning). According to the parents interviewed, desired support would include the possibility to familiarise in advance with the new environment and teacher together with their child and to ensure continuity of relationships with peers (friendship from preschool).

Similarly, the studies from Rothe et al. (2014) highlight that the voices from parents belonging to socio-economically disadvantaged group tend to be marginalised when enrolment decision-making processes leading to children's retention or streaming toward special school are involved. In these cases, 'parents are informed about decision taken by professionals [primary school head teacher, social and health-care centres] rather than counselled' suggesting that 'alternatives to selective procedures are nearly non-existent and that parents' ideas and expectations on their child enrolment were given a low priority' (Rothe et al., 2014; p. 364)

The study conducted by Vonta et al. (2013) in Slovenia shows that in case of Roma's parents their distrust in the education system is based, on one side, on their previous negative experience with institutions and, on the other, on prejudices and stereotypes enacted by professionals, who think that Roma parents are not interested or indifferent to their children. Furthermore, the research showed that ECEC and CSE teachers do not usually adopt any differentiated approaches to come closer to the children and families from Roma communities and gain their trust. On the other hand, the research demonstrated that – when outreaching initiatives are implemented by professionals (eg. carrying out activities in the Roma settlement) – these significantly contribute to gain the trust of Roma families. Moreover, trust was also stronger when teachers planned their activities and work based on interests of Roma families.

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3   National Agency for Education (2011) *Curriculum for compulsory school for learning disabilities*. Stockholm: Skolverket.

4   As in Sweden education for children with intellectual disability is provided across different types of settings – integrated compulsory primary schools, compulsory school for students with intellectual disability and training schools – in the transition from preschool to primary school parents are faced with the dilemma of making the wrong decisions (i.e. 'receiving an adequate support' VS 'belonging within the mainstream of society').

The findings of studies exploring parents' views on transitions also shed light on factors that are associated with positive outcomes of transition processes. In particular, the following aspects seem to be associated with parents' positive perceptions of transitions (Griebel et al., 2017; Griebel & Nielsen, 2013; Hanke et al. 2017):

- receiving in advance information about the school's organisation and expectations,
- receiving advice concerning how to support children over the transition process,
- maintaining ongoing contact with school teachers in the new environment, starting from the arrangement of introductory meetings before the school starts,
- possibility for parents to actively take part in the school life throughout the transition process.

In particular, the WirKt research project carried out in Germany in order to explore the relationship between the type of collaboration activities enacted by kindergartens / primary schools and their (perceived) effects on parents revealed that the closer and more intense is the collaboration between ECEC and CSE institutions over the transition period, the stronger are the positive effects on parents in terms of perceived support. An intense level of collaboration goes beyond the traditional transition activities that are implemented in the majority of settings (such as children's visits and exchange of information between ECEC educators and primary school teachers) by encompassing:

- a division of work that values equally the contributions of ECEC and CSE professionals to joint activities (eg. joint parent evenings co-lead by kindergarten and school teachers)
- co-constructed practices across ECEC and CSE settings before and after transitions, meaning that joint activities (eg. projects, conferences and meetings, work on observations and transfer of pedagogical documentation) are *planned together* and *carried out together.*

Parents at institutions that collaborated in a more intensive way not only were significantly more content with their participation in ECEC and CSE settings, but also reported that they felt more supported and prepared to face changes than those from other settings. They stated that the collaboration among professionals facilitated the transition for children therefore they felt less worried about it. In particular, parents reported positive feelings towards early collaboration and advising opportunities, as well as toward early familiarisation with the school their children would have attended in the forthcoming year (Hanke et al. 2017).

All in all, the findings from the reviewed studies focusing on parents' perspectives converge in affirming that – *in order to sustain children's well-being and positive outcomes of transitions – it is crucial that teachers recognise and take into account parents' concerns, fears and knowledge about their own children.* In this sense, smooth and inclusive transitions cannot be achieved by focusing solely on the child: rather, it is necessary to adopt an *outspokenly 'family-centred approach' that give voice to parents within an equal and reciprocal dialogue with professionals* (Wilder & Lillvist, 2017b). More specifically, the studies reviewed stress the necessity of *envisaging participatory strategies for fostering relationships of trusts between parents and professionals* starting from an attitude that respects the characteristics and differences among families. In this sense, creating a school climate that is open to – and intentionally welcomes – the contributions from each individual parent is essential. As indicated in one of these studies:

> 'these types of aspects may be accomplished by starting from the point at which each family finds itself (and not so much from where the teachers think it is or should be) and developing specific actions to establish these partnerships' *(Correia & Marques-Pinto, 2016; p.259)*

On the side of teachers, this involves daring to ask children and parents about their experiences of transition and not assume what their answers might be. In those cases where teachers were involved in action-research projects collaboratively designed for this purpose, the results show that – *by asking the children and their parents more systematically and explicitly about their opinions – teachers gained deeper insights on how to improve their educational practices* (Vonta et al., 2013) *and this in turn had a tangible impact on the outcome for children* (Fisher, 2011).

Transitions from the perspective of professionals

The majority of studies reviewed in this literature focused on the analysis of practitioners' and teachers' narratives, which are explored either by confronting pedagogical understandings and practices across ECEC and CSE professionals (Hellblom-Thibblin et al., 2017; Sandberg et al., 207; Wickett, 2017; Vidmar,

2017; Rantavuori et al., 2017; Karila & Rantavuori, 2014; Cecconi, 2012) or by examining professionals' perceptions in combination with the views of parents (Van Laere & Vandenbroeck, 2017; Wilder & Lillvist, 2017b; Correia & Marques-Pinto, 2016; Sollars & Mifsud, 2016; Amerijckx &Humblet, 2015; Rothe et al., 2014; Arndt et al., 2013) and children (Sandberg et al., 2017; Sollars & Mifsud, 2016; Lago, 2014; Reichmann, 2011). Most studies are carried out within an exploratory design, while in a few cases the implementation of joint projects become the focus of research (Hanke et al., 2017; Rantavuori et al., 2017; Karila & Rantavuori, 2014; O'Kane & Hayes, 2013; O'Kane, 2013; Fisher, 2011).

The influence of school readiness on teachers' pedagogical understandings and practices

A transversal theme that emerged from the analysis of findings is the increasing influence of school readiness ideologies on the pedagogical understandings and educational practices of pre- and primary school teachers (Van Laere & Vandenbroeck, 2017; Hellblom-Thibblin et al., 2017; Hamerslag et al., 2017; Amerijckx & Humblet, 2015; Rothe et al., 2014; Arndt et al., 2013). In the school readiness perspective, ECEC is understood as functional to what comes next, therefore formalised learning approaches and teacher-directed learning are given priority over children's educational and caring needs in holistic sense. Although school readiness approaches have been strongly contested in early childhood research as deemed disrespectful of young children's potentialities and learning strategies (Bennett, 2013) – thus leading to counterproductive effects such as the schoolification of early childhood pedagogy (Moss, 2013) and the undermining of children's and families' democratic participation (Vandenbroeck, De Stercke and Gobeyn, 2013) – the study reviewed in this literature highlight that implicit readiness ideologies remain strongly embedded in policies and practices. An increased focus on school readiness in policy discourses can be noticed not only in those countries where the relationship between ECEC and CSE was traditionally conceived within such paradigm – for example England (Brooks and Murray, 2018; Wickett, 2017; Neaum, 2016), the Netherlands (Hamerslag et al., 2017) and Poland (Kiening, 2013) – but also in those countries where ECEC approaches were traditionally conceived within a social pedagogy paradigm – for example Sweden and Denmark (Pramling Samuelsson and Sheridan, 2010; Jensen, Hensen and Brostrom, 2013). In the latter, this shift is attested an increased focus on early literacy and formal language acquisition that is progressively gaining ground in early childhood education and care practice as well.

At the same time, implicit readiness ideologies are deeply embedded in institutional practices and their influence is increasingly visible not only over children's transitions to primary school but also over preschool transitions (from home or daycare centre). This is a particularly worrying tendency as research shows how the idea that children need to be made (pre-)school ready is especially jeopardising the democratic participation of disadvantaged children and families to educational decision-making processes, therefore contributing to reinforce existing social inequalities (Brooks & Murray, 2018; Wilder & Lillvist, 2017; Van Laere & Vandenbroeck, 2017; Amerijckx & Humblet, 2015; Rothe et al. 2014).

The findings from studies carried out in Belgium revealed that readiness expectations can generate educational inequalities when it comes to children's experiences of preschool, with potentially long-term effects. As preschool institutions work under the basic assumption that nearly every child has attended childcare, the professionals operating in these settings are expecting children to master independently the interactions with peers and to the be familiar with the 'implicit curriculum' under which preschool institutions operate (timetable, rules and values). This implies that the children whose families lack of knowledge in regard to the (pre)school culture and its expectations – most non-user families are non-native speaker or from low SES – will be put at a disadvantage by the educational practice implemented by professionals in such settings (Peleman, Van Avermaet, & Vandenbroeck, 2019; Van Laere & Vandenbroeck, 2017; Amerijckx & Humblet, 2015).

It becomes apparent that another risk associated with the increased dominance of readiness approaches is related to the stigmatization and exclusion of diversity. Studies carried out in Germany and Sweden show that heterogeneity (in terms of abilities, language and socio-cultural background) of children's groups seems to become a problem following the increased focus on formalised learning that accompanies transitions from preschool to primary school. The clear shift from a focus on play and social development in ECEC – where children's different circumstances tend to be seen more as an asset than as a challenge – to an outcome-oriented view of learning – where children's performance becoming more of a focus – very often lead to stigmatization of diversity and to the application of selective procedures (Hellblom-Thibblin et al., 2017; Rothe et al. 2014).

Finally, the studies from Wickett (2017), Markström & Simonsson (2017) and Arndt et al. (2013) shed light on how existing readiness ideologies undermine an equal collaboration between professionals and parents by viewing the participation of the latter as merely functional to the predefined educational goals set by (pre)school institutions. In spite of a rhetoric of educational partnership, the analysis of educators' and teachers' views carried out in these studies reveal an apparent imbalance of power, where the 'expertise' of professionals is valued more than those of parents:

'Although educators, in some cases, use exchanges with parents to gain information about the child's behaviour or the family situation, a major pattern of communication seems to exist in which the educators give advice and the parents receive advice. In other words, although educators and parents both may speak, the educators are often the ones whose ideas are heard.' *(Arndt et al., 2013; p. 33)*

As consequence, parents' active participation in transitions processes become increasingly instrumentalised with (pre-)school teachers placing increased expectations on parents' involvement, leading to what has been defined as *pedagogisation of the parental role* (Popkewitz, 2003). As reported in the findings from studies carried out in Sweden and England:

'With the parent-active introduction, the parents are now expected to take a more self-regulative and active position in preschool from the start, and to be active partners in the relation between home and preschool. [...] The teachers have demands regarding how the mutual trust between the parents and teachers functions, and they monitor this trust continuously. The teachers' talk leaves no room for the possibility that the parents may resist the available subject positions or create new ones. In this way, the teachers seem to shape and foster the parents, as well as teaching them how to become participating and self-regulated (not too emotional, but reflective) preschool parents [...].' *(Markström & Simonsson, 2017; p. 187)*

'During the course of reception year, as preparations for curriculum transition intensified, the flow of information changed to information flowing generally from the teachers to parents and the terminology used became more specialised. [...] There were fewer opportunities for parents to share with teachers how they supported children learning at home. [...] As the move to Year 1 drew closer, the focus of the home work changed to academic skills and parents were expected to use specialised techniques. [...] This positioned the teachers in authority, showing parents how to teach their children. Communication was one-way which limited the opportunities for parents to tell teachers about children's learning beyond school. [Also], this sometimes led to teachers believing that parents were either not involved in their children's learning or not able to support their children.' *(Wickett, 2017; p. 186 - 188).*

It could be argued that the progressive permeation of readiness discourses in ECEC is actually preventing from achieving a successful start precisely those children who comes from disadvantaged groups, by reducing their agency in learning processes (Brooks & Murray, 2018; Neaum, 2016) and by further excluding the voices of their parents from the educational debate. Such instrumental view of ECEC practitioners' educational work and parents' involvement is well exemplified in those studies which are focused on the assessment of children's school readiness through standardised scales:

'Educating caregivers [*parents*] and teachers on the structure and nature of school readiness [*through the use of S-EDI scale for children's assessment*] may help to establish a consensus and shared goal between the two groups. This could enable easier detection of the readiness domains in which a child is performing well, or areas where intervention may be required and facilitate a collaborative relationship between caregivers and teachers regarding the child's progress. It is suggested that school readiness education should be provided at the preschool level [...] so that caregivers [*parents*] and childcare providers can work to eliminate any problems a child has before he or she begins school. *(Doyle et al., 2014; pp. 384-385)*

On the other hand, the shortcomings of confronting children with a structured, formalised approach to schooling from an early age is progressively being acknowledged even within this strand of research. As reported in a study conducted in the Netherlands and adopting the Adjustment Scale for Early Transition in Schooling (ASET) in order to examine the role of socio-emotional and behavioural factors involved in children's readiness for school:

'If we ask the fundamental question whether the current trend in many countries of confronting children with a structured, formalized approach to schooling at an early age may, in fact, be a

miscalculation, especially in the context of preschool and early childhood education and care, the findings of our study give sufficient grounds to take a very critical view on this matter. [...] The increasingly early shift from play learning to a more or less structured approach to schooling may partly explain the lack of success in preschool and early childhood education in the Netherlands. [...] An alternative perspective seems called for, instead of the narrow vision of education for young children that currently prevails in methods of preschool and early childhood education as well as among many school boards, policymakers and the Inspectorate of Education.' *(Hamerslag et al., 2017; p. 13-14)*

Collaborative transition practices and inter-professional learning across ECEC and CSE

Form the findings of the studies examining the perceptions of ECEC and CSE professionals in relation to transition practices (Hellblom-Thibblin et al., 2017; Sandberg et al., 207; Vidmar, 2017; Rantavuori et al., 2017; Karila & Rantavuori, 2014; O'Kane & Hayes, 2013; O'Kane, 2013; Cecconi, 2012; Fisher, 2011) it emerges that certain factors are acting as barriers to smooth transitions.

First and foremost, the *different educational traditions, pedagogical visions and institutional cultures* characterising the history and evolution of ECEC and CSE settings imply that the pedagogical approaches and practices enacted by early childhood and primary school teachers draw upon 'understandings of learnings' and 'images of the child' which might be very distant (Hellblom-Thibblin et al., 2017; Sandberg et al., 2017; Vidmar, 2017; Karila & Rantavuori, 2014). The educational practice enacted in ECEC settings are generally grounded in a child-centred approach, which values children's play, interest and curiosity as source of learning: in this perspective, the observation of children's experiences and interactions becomes the starting point for practitioners' pedagogical planning. Quite on the opposite, a curriculum-driven approach seems to be predominant in primary school, where teachers' educational planning tend to be more focused on predetermined learning goals and outcomes to be achieved by all children within a set time-frame (Cecconi, 2012; Fisher, 2011).

Secondly, the *presence of institutional barriers* – such as staff training and working conditions that do not allow systematic exchanges among professionals working in ECEC and CSE – implies that professionals working in one segment of the education system have very limited knowledge of practices implemented in other segments of the system. In this sense, compulsory school teachers might have limited awareness of the competence previously acquired by children in ECEC, as well as ECEC professional might have limited knowledge of the expectations placed upon children when entering primary school. Furthermore, the lack of paid working hours allocated for shared planning and implementation of joint projects (eg. no-contact time, time for co-presence and inter-vision) hinder the collaboration bewteen ECEC and CSE on a more regular basis, beyond sporadic transition activities (O'Kane & Hayes, 2013; Fisher, 2011).

On the other side, the studies reviewed also highlight opportunities for overcoming the above-mentioned barriers by *creating boundaries spaces, where given-for-granted assumptions (eg. understanding of learning, image of the child) can be deconstructed and re-negotiated among ECEC and CSE professionals through joint reflection on enacted practices* (Rantavuori et al., 2017; Karila & Rantavuori, 2014; O'Kane & Hayes, 2013; Fisher, 2011). Research findings further indicate that, for boundary spaces to be *generative of a common vision* whithin which transition practices can be jointly planned and implemented across ECEC and CSE institutions, *it is crucial that inter-professional work is supported through pedagogical guidance, continuing professional development and shared methodological tools.*

For example, the findings from studies carried out in a Finnish municipality by Karila & Rantavuori (2014) and Rantavuori et al. (2017) in order to investigate inter-professional work of preschool and primary school teachers as an arena for professional learning show that providing space and time for teachers to jointly plan transition practice did not suffice – *per se* – to create a common pedagogical understanding shared by both institutions. As preschool and primary school institutions are historically and culturally constructed, the process of creating new shared understandings and practices in boundary spaces turns out to be a demanding activity for the professionals involved. In this sense, *what could make the difference in developing a common vision within which a smooth transition for children could be achieved is the supporting role of school heads and ECEC centres directors in sustaining a purpose-oriented collaboration and collective reflection among interprofessional teams.* As indicated by the findings of the two case-studies examined within the research:

'In Case 1, the professionals did not utilize each other's curricula; neither did they recognize how their planning practices failed to promote fluent transition. Instead, they planned their activities separately and individually after the joint meetings. In this way, they did not engage in collegial discussions concerning pedagogy or gain the support of other professionals. By contrast, in Case 2 the curricula of each institution were integrated into the planning and the professionals used both curricula smoothly during their collegial planning practices and discussions. This helped them to construct the purpose of the project jointly. [..] Joint planning sessions that enabled the construction of common knowledge was a key element [...]. Without joint planning and evaluation, reflective talk would not be possible. The presence or lack of such joint planning was the key difference between the two organizational narratives identified in our study.' *(Rantavuori et al., 2017; pp. 245-246)*

Similarly, the research findings of a study carried out by O'Kane and Hayes (2013) within a development project in Ireland – which involved preschool practitioners and junior infant teachers with the aim of developing a tool for exchanging information about children over transition – suggest that *the presence of coordination structures facilitating inter-institutional communication is crucial.* The main features of the project implementation were the engagement of professionals in joint meetings in order to a) clarify reciprocal expectations on those competences that – in their views - might support children making the transition; and b) to develop a shared language that could be understood by parents as well. The Children's Snapshot tool was therefore co-constructed through a *professional development process* that engaged professionals across both settings in a compromise exercise that took into account the involvement of parents in completing the form with ECEC practitioners (therefore a positive approach in opposition to a 'deficit model' was adopted). The project evaluation's results highlighted that professionals' mutual collaboration in terms of transferring information about children in transition has been identified as of values in many ways:

'[...] the development of the Child Snapshot has been found useful in assisting parents recognise the key skills necessary for transition, assisting preschool staff in their work prior to transition, and facilitating primary school teachers in preparation and planning for individual children at this time of transition. It is recommended, drawing on the findings of this study, that more coordinated structures should be put into place nationally to facilitate communication between the two early years sectors. This would enhance the quality of the transition experience for children through curricular and pedagogical continuity and strengthen the impact of the preschool experience. To maximise the positive impact of quality preschool experiences, supports for the transition to the primary school environment need to be put in place.' *(O'Kane & Hayes, 2013; p. 34).*

Finally, the findings of a *collaborative action-research project* stemming from the analysis of children's, parents' and teachers' concerns about transitions (Fisher, 2011) – and aimed at improving transition practice between the Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1 within a local authority in England – revealed that *sustained reflection within inter-professional learning communities* is crucial in order to improve the experiences of children and parents over transitions. For this reason, a group of teachers, headteachers and advisory staff was permanently established at the end of the project in order to identify key-principles and responsibilities for improving the experiences of all stakeholders as children move into Year 1. This lead KS1 teachers to eventually revise their teaching practice in the first year of primary school according to a 'developmentally appropriate curriculum', emerging from the observation of children's learning strategies. Whilst constraints were identified (in relation to *space, timing and available resources*), the documented improvement in children's learning outcomes gave teachers the motivation to deepening the professional dialogue with Foundation Stage colleagues. In such study, the following conditions were identified as key success-factors of improved transition practice:

- a whole school approach investing in teachers' professional development and training,
- teachers' planning starting from children's educational needs through the use of observations,
- collective reflection on documented practice (learning journal) allowing an ongoing improvement,
- endorsement, monitoring and support from the headteacher that made the good practice developed in the course of the project sustainable over time (Fisher, 2011; p. 40).

The insights provided by the above-mentioned studies assume a particular relevance in the light of the research conducted by Ahtola et al. (2011) in Finland. The results of this study – examining whether transition practices implemented across preschool and primary school settings contribute

to children's cognitive outcomes in the first grade – indicate that *the more preschool and primary school teachers implemented various supportive activities, the faster children's skills developed from preschool to first grade.* In particular, the research found that cooperation on curriculum issues – despite being the least commonly used practice by the institutions involved – appeared to be the most important factor influencing children's achievement in grade 1. As explained in the discussion of findings:

> 'It is possible that mutually prepared curricula create continuity between the preschool and school, offering un-interrupted teaching and learning experiences, as well as the possibility for preschool and elementary school teachers to meet and discuss their conceptions and aims regarding the child's education and upbringing, as well as to get to know each other' *(Ahtola et al., 2011)*

Conclusions

From the analysis of research findings synthesised in this literature review, the following key-messages could be drawn:

- more careful consideration needs to be given to children's views and experiences when planning transitions from one educational setting to another *(vertical transition)* or from the home environment to the educational setting *(horizontal transition)*

- in such process, special attention should be paid to the educational and caring needs of those children who are newcomers in formal settings: this mean rethinking the whole (pre)-school day starting from the perspective of the child *(welcoming approach VS adaptation)*

- European ECEC and CSE populations exist out of a diversity of children encompassing children with a migrant background who are not fluent in the majority language, children coming from families living in complex circumstances (experiencing poverty or social exclusion) and children with disabilities: therefore raising practitioners' and teachers' awareness in relation to issues of inclusion, diversity and multilingualism becomes crucial in order to foster inclusive transition and counteract the risk of generating unintentional exclusion mechanisms underlying the implementation of engrained practices

- smooth and inclusive transitions cannot be achieved by focusing solely on the child: as children's and parents' coping are interdependent, in order to sustain children's well-being and positive outcomes of transitions it is crucial that teachers recognise and take into account parents' concerns, fears and knowledge about their own children *('family-centred approach')*

- for this purpose familiarisation policies and practices, including outreaching initiatives, need to be established at institutional level in order to facilitate positive and mutual communication between parents and (pre)school staff before children start attendance

- the conditions for establishing a reciprocal dialogue – based on an equal relationship and mutual trust – between parents and professionals should be created starting from a welcoming attitude *(listening to parents VS talking to parents)* rather than viewing parents' participation as instrumental to predefined educational goals set by educational institutions

- the pedagogical understandings and educational practices enacted by ECEC and CSE professionals play a crucial role in facilitating – or rather hindering – smooth and inclusive transitions for children and families

- as practitioners' and teachers' pedagogical understandings and educational practices are rooted in different institutional cultures (ECEC and CSE), boundary spaces for inter-professional exchanges should be created in order to deconstruct given-for-granted assumptions and negotiate new meanings (eg. *image of the child, understanding of learning, education and care*)

- however, providing time and space for inter-professional work – per se – does not suffice: in order to create a shared vision, ECEC and CSE professionals should be accompanied in joint professional development pathways sustaining collective decision-making processes i.e.: *planning, implementing, documenting, reflecting on reciprocal practice*

- pedagogical guidance and continuing professional development become therefore necessary conditions for bringing about transformative change – fostering smooth and inclusive transitions – and to make it sustainable over time within ECEC and CSE institutions *(professional ownership).*

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