

Collaboration between preschool and primary school teachers for successful transition: Results of a National Survey

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Summary

Many researchers have highlighted the importance of continuity in the life of children during their transition from Preschool to Primary School. The collaboration between teachers of both educational levels strengthens the continuity and contributes to the smoother transition of children. The purpose of this survey, which has a sample of 1602 preschool and primary school teachers, was to explore their views on collaboration practices between them, which would facilitate the transition of children from Preschool to Primary School. Data collection was done using a questionnaire. The statistical analysis showed that teachers agree with the implementation of many appropriate practices. In particular, they refer to preschool teacher and child visits in primary school, joint student events, children and teacher visits Pre-school, joint meetings of teachers in order to discuss learning and teaching issues.

Key words: Pre-school, Primary School, transition practices, Greece

Introduction

The transition from Preschool to Primary School is an important event for children and it is a challenge that, to a certain extent, determines their future educational experiences. The adjustment in Primary School and the confrontation of changes that are caused from the transition of children to the next level of education are important, and many research studies have shown that a positive principle in school is linked to their future school success. On the contrary, children who have adjustment difficulties in their attendance in the early years of primary school are more likely to continue experiencing social, behavioral or academic difficulties in later years of their school life (Niesel & Griebel, 2007).

Transition is a shared responsibility of many people in order to be turned into a positive experience for children. It is a continuous effort to build links between

teachers, parents and communities. A continuity of programs between Preschool and Primary education (Mangione & Speth, 2002).

Preschool programs and school readiness are considered important in order to improve the transition from Preschool to Primary School. Preschool aims at smoothing potential difficulties and bridging the gap between Preschool and Primary School education. In the first school years, basic skills, related to social and cognitive skills, are developed for the success of children in school. In Primary School, not only is the flexible program of Preschool becoming more demanding (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2009), but also is the school environment itself.

Teachers are the ones who are committed to helping children become acquainted with the new context. The connection with the knowledge chapters that children bring to Primary School implies the linking to the learning in Preschool (Brooker, 2008. Einarsdóttir, 2007). The transition of children from Preschool to Primary School is facilitated by the pedagogy co-ordination of preschool and primary school teachers (Broström, 2005). These two institutions should follow the same teaching methods and apply a joint curriculum (Fabian & Dunlop, 2007). The continuation of certain practices and routines is established through closer communication and mutual professional respect among teachers and contributes to a sense of belonging while the continuity of the curriculum acknowledges that learning that was acquired in Preschool will continue in the first grade of Primary School (Peters et al., 2009).

Transitional transition practices that are related to communication and collaboration between teachers at both levels of education are of major importance in helping students to overcome any difficulties they may encounter when they come from Preschool to Primary School (Ahtola et al., 2012. Skouteris et al., 2012. Rous et al., 2010. LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2008. Gill et al., 2006).

Unfortunately, regarding the Greek reality, the rule is the lack of continuity in program and teaching and educational practices, as well as the lack of collaboration and understanding between teachers of different educational levels (Psaltis, 2008). As it is obvious in researches, there is a lack of relationships and information between schools and teachers during the transition period (Downer, Driscoll, & Pianta, 2006). However, it is necessary to strengthen the links between the two educational levels in order to ensure continuity in many areas between preschool and primary education (Brooker, 2016: 136, Fabian & Dunlop, 2007).

Methodology

This paper is part of a national research and was done using a questionnaire. The quantitative research was chosen as it allows the collection of large volumes of data from a large sample of respondents and the connection of two or more characteristics (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

The technique that was applied is the Proportional Stratified Sample Surveys. According to this technique, the sample was divided according to the characteristics of the population in the layers (educational regions of Greece) and then random samples were selected from each layer. The stratified sample survey was designed to ensure the representation of all sections of the population, to reduce the estimation error and to have a sufficient number of subpopulation subjects. This technique generally leads to estimations with a high level of precision.

The aim of this paper is to investigate the views of Greek teachers on collaboration among them, which will facilitate pupils' transition from Preschool to Primary School.

Research Tool

In this research paper, the questionnaire was chosen as the most appropriate tool for collecting research data, as it can lead to quick, accurate and cost-effective collection of research data (Bryman & Bell, 2015). In particular, a questionnaire of closed-ended questions was developed based on the research objective. There were 14 transition practices about cooperation between preschool and primary school and teachers were required to select to which degree they consider them suitable to be implemented in schools.

The sample

The target population is teachers of Primary Education (preschool teachers, teachers of 1st and 2nd class of primary school and directors of primary school) of the 13 educational districts of Greece.

The sample of the survey was selected by the laws of sampling and represents 4% of all preschool teachers, 4% of teachers of 1st and 2nd class of the total of each educational district and 4% of the directors of primary schools of the total of each

educational district. The figures for the total number of teachers in each district were provided by the Ministry of Education. The final sample size was 1,602 teachers and more specifically 784 preschool teachers, 634 teachers and 184 directors of primary schools.

Research Findings

The data analysis provided by the primary data survey was done using the statistical analysis program SPSS 23.0.

Table 1 shows the absolute (f) and relative (%) frequencies as well as the mean (M) and standard deviations (SD) of teachers' responses concerning their opinions on groups of children who may have a higher risk of experiencing a difficult transition from Preschool to Primary School. The questions are presented in order of priority, from the highest to the lowest average.

Table 1

Absolute (f) and relative (%) frequencies, mean (M) and standard deviations (SD) of teachers' opinions on groups of children who may have a higher risk of experiencing a difficult transition from Preschool to Primary School

	«I totally disagree»	«I disagree»	«Neutral attitude	«I agree»	«I totally agree»	M	SD
	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)		
Preschool teachers and children visit the Primary School	15 (0,9)	72 (4,5)	271 (16,9)	726 (45,3)	506 (31,6)	4,14	,84
Primary School invites preschool children to participate in joint events	25 (1,6)	91 (5,7)	270 (16,9)	726 (45,3)	487 (30,5)	4,01	,90
Students of 1 st Grade of primary school visit the Preschool in order to share their experiences about school	68 (4,3)	151 (9,4)	340 (21,3)	694 (43,4)	347 (21,7)	3,98	1,05
Joint meetings of preschool and primary school teachers on the life and development of children	47 (2,9)	140 (8,7)	384 (24,0)	734 (45,8)	297 (18,5)	3,69	,97
Teachers visit the Preschool in order to talk to preschool children for Primary School	44 (2,8)	140 (8,8)	466 (29,1)	680 (42,5)	270 (16,9)	3,62	,96
Joint meetings of preschool and primary school teachers in order to coordinate their education and teaching methods	47 (2,9)	164 (10,3)	424 (26,5)	684 (42,8)	280 (17,5)	3,62	,96

Preschool and primary school teachers visit the classroom of others and observe how they work (educational practice)	105 (6,6)	186 (11,6)	492 (30,7)	566 (35,3)	253 (15,8)	3,42	1,09
Teachers visit the Preschool in order to get to know the pupils who will have in the 1 st grade in the next school year	94 (5,9)	224 (14,0)	491 (30,7)	513 (32,1)	277 (17,3)	3,41	1,11
Informal contacts of preschool and primary school teachers in order to discuss the social and academic skills of children	88 (5,5)	191 (11,9)	526 (32,9)	606 (37,9)	188 (11,8)	3,38	1,02
Written reports on the experiences and condition of each child follow the pupils of the preschool to the Primary School	130 (8,1)	221 (13,8)	461 (28,8)	551 (34,5)	235 (14,7)	3,34	1,13
Toddlers attend classes in the 1 st Grade of primary school	185 (11,6)	242 (15,1)	465 (29,0)	460 (28,7)	249 (15,6)	3,22	1,22
Visits of the directors of primary school to Preschool	168 (10,5)	322 (20,2)	638 (40,0)	358 (22,4)	109 (6,8)	2,95	1,06
Preschool and primary school teachers teach together in the 1 st grade of primary school during the first period.	403 (25,2)	483 (30,2)	428 (26,7)	199 (12,4)	88 (5,5)	2,43	1,15
Preschool teacher follows children in the 1 st grade and teaches there some lessons	496 (31,0)	507 (31,7)	353 (22,1)	159 (9,9)	85 (5,3)	2,27	1,16

According to the findings of the Table, there are several variations in the views of teachers on the appropriate practices related to the successful transition of children from Preschool to Primary School, as shown by the average of their responses. More specifically, the most appropriate practice is considered "The preschool teacher and the children visit the Primary School" and the practices "Primary School invites preschool children to participate in joint events" and "Students of 1st Grade of Primary School visit Preschool in order to share their experiences for school" follow. The average of teachers' answers to these practices is above the middle of the scale, equal to 3, which means that they have high levels of agreement as to their suitability. More specifically, more than eight out of ten teachers report that they agree (45.3%) or totally agree (31.6%) that the practice of " Preschool teachers and children visit the Primary School" is appropriate for the transition of

children in Primary School. Accordingly, almost three out of four teachers report that they agree (45.3%) or totally agree (30.5%) that the practice "Primary School invites preschool children to participate in joint events" is suitable for the transition of children to primary school. Similarly, 43.4% and 21.7% of teachers agree or totally agree with the practice of "Primary school pupils visit Preschool to share their school experiences."

The practices that follow are "Joint meetings of preschool and primary school teachers of primary education for the life and development of children", "Teachers visit the Preschool to talk to preschool children for Primary School", "Joint meetings of preschool and primary school teachers to co-ordinate their teaching and teaching methods ", " Preschool and primary school teachers visit the classroom of others and observe how they work (educational practice) ", "Teachers visit the Preschool in order to meet the students who will have in the 1st grade in the next school year", "Informal contacts of preschool and primary school teachers in order to discuss the social and academic skills of children", " Written reports on the experiences and the condition of each child follow the pupils of the preschool to the primary school", " Toddlers attend some primary school classes", where teachers present relatively moderate to high levels of agreement regarding their suitability.

On the contrary, the average of teachers' responses to the practices of "Visits of the directors of Primary Schools in Pre-schools", " Preschool and primary school teachers teach together in the 1st grade of primary school in the first period" and "Preschool teacher follows children in the 1st grade and teaches there some lessons", are found below the middle of the scale, which means that teachers consider them as not so suitable for the transition of children from Preschool to Primary School.

Conclusions - Discussion

The results of the survey showed that teachers consider that there are many appropriate practices related to the smooth transition of children from Preschool to Primary School. The participants were asked to express their opinion for fourteen transition practices. There are several variations in their views, as shown by the average of their responses.

More specifically, the most commonly cited practice for all three groups of teachers is that preschool pupils should visit primary school before the start of the

new school year (Gill et al., 2006). As it can be seen, 45.3% and 31.6% of teachers report that they agree or totally agree, respectively, on the appropriateness of this practice. These findings are similar to those found in international research (Einarsdóttir et al., 2008; Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2000). In Greece, these visits are usually programmed by Pre-schools in cooperation with Primary Schools at the end of the school year and are individual transient activities aimed at familiarizing children with the new school environment and teachers and better adapting during their studies in the first grade. This practice should be repeated several times during the school year.

A large number of teachers have pointed out as an appropriate practice that Primary School invites preschool children to participate in joint events. In all, almost three out of four teachers report that they agree (45.3%) or totally agree (30.5%) with this practice. As shown by the research, this practice is also widespread in foreign schools (Einarsdóttir et al., 2008. Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2000). These are often festive events or even presentation of program endings that have been implemented jointly, on topics that interest students of both educational levels.

One more practice was answered at a high frequency by the teachers of the sample. Primary school pupils visit the Preschool in order to share their experiences about school. According to Einarsdóttir and his associates (2008), this practice is rarely implemented. Few teachers use it. But the Greek teachers of the sample consider such a practice to be a very good idea.

The average of teachers' answers to the above practices is above the middle of the scale, equal to 3, which means that they have high levels of agreement as to their suitability.

A set of practices follows that a large percentage of teachers of the sample think is appropriate to be used in order to make it easier for children the transition from Preschool to Primary School. Teachers report relatively moderate to high levels of agreement as good practice in joint meetings between preschool and primary school teachers to discuss about the life and the development of children. These meetings will help the educators of both educational levels to understand the role of each other and to develop a greater degree of interdependence and communication with each other. However, this practice does not have a good response abroad (Einarsdóttir et al., 2008), except perhaps in case of children with disabilities. The following selected practices, where teachers visit the Preschool in order to get

acquainted with pupils and talk to them about Primary School, are also not often implemented by teachers in other countries even if they are considered as good ideas (Broström, 2005). This visit could be extended by carrying out an activity with children (reading a book, etc.). So, when preschool children go to Primary School they will see a familiar person. Of course, we do not know whether the same teachers apply these proposals in practice.

Another two of the given practices are largely in line with the teachers. Joint meetings of preschool and primary school teachers in order to coordinate their education and teaching methods or to discuss the social and academic skills of the children (Dockett & Perry, 2013. Ahtola et al., 2011. Wildder & McIntyre, 2012. LoCasale-Crouch et al. . Gill, Winters, & Friedman, 2006. Einarsdóttir et al., 2008). These, in combination with the visits of preschool teachers in the Primary School and vice versa of the preschool teachers, where they observe the way their colleagues work, enrich their knowledge and are informed about educational issues (Einarsdóttir et al., 2008). Teachers of the two educational levels should follow the same teaching methods and apply a joint curriculum (Fabian & Dunlop, 2007), which will lead teachers to a more positive perception of the work of their colleagues and will contribute to the recognition of the continuity of learning gained in preschool in the 1st grade of Primary School (Peters et al., 2009).

By using written reports on the experiences and the situation of each child (portfolios) that follow the pupils of the preschool in Primary School, teachers will have a useful way of linking the experiences and performance of children in the preschool (Sherley, 2011. Peters et al., 2009). These envelopes will include students' work and will record their weaknesses and abilities. In this way, teachers can be informed from the beginning of the school year about the knowledge and skills that are already acquired by children so that they can help and further support them.

Another practice that teachers find as a good idea is that toddlers attend classes in the 1st Grade of Primary School. Children know beforehand the new way of teaching, their anxiety about the unknown is reduced, and they adapt more easily to their future new environment.

However, this is not one of their original suggestions, perhaps because it is difficult for teachers to disrupt the flow of their teaching.

The less-preferred practices where the average of teachers' answers is below the middle of the scale , which means that teachers consider their suitability to be low

for the transition process, are the visits of the directors of Primary Schools in Preschools (Gill et al. 2006), a preschool teacher and a primary school teacher teach together in the 1st grade of Primary School and the preschool teacher follows the children in the 1st grade and teaches some lessons there (Einarsdóttir et al., 2008). Few teachers felt it is important to teach at the next level, since they did not receive the appropriate training. Besides, this collaboration is difficult to apply in practice because of the incompatible preschool - primary school hours, the shortage of teachers' time and the distance of the buildings. Moreover, we must not overlook the different goals and aspirations of the two educational institutions and the prejudices of the other side.

In general, all research teachers have expressed a positive attitude towards the usefulness of many transitional activities. But we cannot know which of them are used in practice and how often or their effectiveness. This would be of great interest to be seen in a next research effort.

Effective co-operation between preschool and primary school teachers is important in order to build children's abilities during their transition from Preschool to Primary School (Skouteris et al., 2012). It is very positive that the teachers of the sample seem to be open to greater levels of communication and cooperation. The key features that must distinguish this cooperation are continuity, planning and positive attitude towards each other.

School institutions should work in order to reinforce the continuity between school levels. The best acquaintance between the two schools can only lead to positive results. It will assist teachers to learn about the way the colleagues of the other educational level work, understand their difficulties and find common teaching codes. Furthermore, we must not forget that the common aim of both is the education and socialization of children.

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