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Positive transitions across home, ECEC and compulsory school education (CSE) are critical in promoting children's development and educational achievement: this seems especially the case for children from migrant backgrounds. However, as a consequence of entrenched institutional practices and lack of ownership the issues by the different groups of professionals involved, the way transitions are managed tends to unintentionally favour children from more advantaged backgrounds, whose families know how to navigate the educational system including its flaws. The article presents the findings from a transnational participatory action-research study (START)[1] carried out in four countries (Italy, Slovenia, England, Belgium), discussing how an inclusive transition approach can better address the needs of migrant children and families in a holistic way.

Keywords: transitions; inclusion of diversity; participatory action-research; professional development; children's and parents' perspectives

Introduction

In the last decade, the issue of educational transitions has gained a progressive relevance in the European debate both at political and pedagogical level. Studies carried out in the context of EU Member States indicate that positive experiences of transition between educational levels can be a critical factor in fostering children's development and school success, while negative experiences can produce lasting difficulties leading to under-achievement (Dumčius et al. 2014). This seems to be especially the case for children and families from migrant backgrounds or belonging to vulnerable social groups (Council of European Union 2015; OECD 2017): research shows that the way in which transitions are managed tend to unintentionally favour children from more advantaged backgrounds, whose families know how to navigate the educational system including its institutional flaws (Van Laere and Vandenbroeck 2017; Amerijckx and Humblet 2015; Rothe et al. 2014; Arndt et al. 2013).

Therefore, investigating transitions practice with a particular focus on diversity and social inequalities becomes compelling if more equitable educational outcomes are to be achieved.

Educational transitions in contexts of diversity and social inequalities: insights from European literature

Whereas ecological and socio-cultural frameworks characterising earlier literature on transitions have offered opportunities to consider broader stakeholder involvement in such processes (Dunlop and Fabian 2006), more recent research has acknowledged their partial limitation for supporting inclusive transitions in contexts characterised by complex socio-cultural and power dynamics (Petriwskyj 2014). For this reason, critical (Petriwskyj 2014), post-structuralist (Lehrer et al. *forthcoming*) and social pedagogy (Vandenbroeck, De Stercke and Gobeyn 2013) perspectives are increasingly being used as alternative theoretical frames for interrogating transition practice in contemporary super-diverse societies[2], in order to identify ways in which children, families and communities are marginalised and to highlight more inclusive strategies.

Peleman, Van Avermaet and Vandenbroeck (2019) examined the often difficult and stressful experiences of children from migrant backgrounds in the transition to preschool in the Flemish community of Belgium. As preschool institutions work under the basic assumption that nearly every child has attended childcare and speak Dutch language, the professionals operating in these settings are expecting children to master independently the interactions with peers and to be familiar with the 'implicit curriculum' under which preschool institutions operate (timetable, rules and values). However, as most migrant and low-income families are not attending childcare (Vandenbroeck and Lazzari 2014), they lack knowledge about the (pre)school culture and its expectations and therefore are put at a disadvantage by the educational practice implemented by professionals in such settings.

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[2] As defined by Vertovec (2007), super-diversity is characterised by 'a dynamic interplay of variables among an increased number of small and scattered, multiple-origin, transnationally connected, socio-economically differentiated and legally stratified' populations (Vertovec, 2007, p. 1024). This is the case in many European cities and large towns where the (various)minorities constitute the majority of the population.

The study from Kalkman and Clark (2017) – exploring newcomer migrant children's transitional experiences when moving from an introductory group for children with a refugee background into a mainstream day-care group in Norway – focused on children's 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 socio-cultural context, with specific reference to children's meaning-making processes. Picchio and Mayer (2019) investigated the experience of children from migrant background during their first entry into Italian ECEC 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 professionals in improving their practice and fostering children's wellbeing, participation 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. eliciting meanings and expectations, facilitating the creation of shared understandings providing a common ground for peer-interactions).

The findings of studies exploring parents' lived experiences of transitions highlight that – while establishing reciprocal and trusting relationship between parents and teachers is 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. The challenges connected to establishing trusting relationship between parents and professionals seems to be particularly salient when children and families from vulnerable groups are involved. Several studies involving migrant parents (Van Laere et al. 2018; Van Laere and Vandenbroeck 2017) as well as socio-economically disadvantaged families (Rothe et al. 2014; Arndt et al. 2013) revealed that – in spite of a rhetoric of educational partnership – the more formalised and learning-oriented the educational settings become (ie: from daycare to preschool, from

preschool to primary school) the less parents' expertise is valued against that of professionals. In such context of unequal power dynamics, parents' concerns – related to the social, emotional and physical support available to their children during transitions as well as to their actual belonging and participation in the classroom – are often left unheard, undermining the creation of trusting relationship between families and professionals from the outset. Vonta et al. (2013) highlighted that in the case of Roma 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. However, when outreaching initiatives are implemented by ECEC and CSE professionals in Roma settlements, these significantly contribute to gain the trust of families, especially if teachers plan their activities based on the interests of Roma families.

Overall, findings from European literature[3] converge in affirming that inclusive transitions cannot be achieved by focusing solely on children: rather, it is necessary to adopt a family-centred approach that gives voice to parents within a more equal and reciprocal dialogue with professionals. In this perspective, the importance of envisaging participatory strategies for fostering relationships of trust between parents and professionals starting from an attitude that respects the characteristics and differences among families has been highlighted. Creating a school climate that is open to – and intentionally welcomes – the contributions from each individual parent become essential in order to make transitions more inclusive.

The present study

Although international research is consistent in affirming that – in contexts of diversity – smooth transitions are inclusive transitions (OECD 2017), in the everyday reality of ECEC and school settings many critical issues are raised. In most cases the fact that early childhood educators, preschool and

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[3] It should be noted that for the scope of this article only those studies focusing on educational transitions in contexts of diversity and social inequalities were analysed. For a more comprehensive overview of the studies analysed in the Literature Review produced within the START project the reader might refer to supplemental materials: http://doi.org/10.6092/unibo/amsacta/6210

primary school teachers operate within separate institutional frameworks implies that pedagogical approaches and educational practices enacted during transitions continue to be characterized by discontinuity and fragmentation. Moreover, regardless of the different socio-cultural contexts and educational systems where the START project was conducted, all participant organisations were confronted with the challenge of creating equal educational opportunities for all children during transitions in situations where increasingly diverse abilities and backgrounds where simultaneously present[4]. Considering traditional expectations of school readiness 'inconsistent with current definitions of inclusion that are framed by appreciation of the diversity of children's abilities and backgrounds as a reality and a resource' (Petriwskyj 2014, 201), transitions within the START project were constructed as a collaborative endeavour of supported change.

Inclusiveness of transition practice was therefore pursued by involving in participatory action-research professionals, children and families as agents of change. The research and development activities carried out within the project sought to engage all relevant stakeholders in the process of co-constructing pedagogical approaches and strategies so that children's and families' concerns during transitions could be addressed more responsively. In order to rethink transition practices from an inclusive perspective, particular attention was paid to the lived experiences and perceptions of children and families from migrant backgrounds, facing poverty or marginalization.

Participatory action-research and development as a catalyzer of change

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[4] The majority of children attending the preschool involved in the Belgian pilot did not speak Dutch as a home language (approximately 80 %) and belong to low-income families. In the English case, the proportion of children with English as an additional language accounted for over half of the primary school population (52%) and up to 70% of children enrolled in the reception classes where the pilot was carried out: in addition, a number of Traveller children were attending on a less regular basis. The pre- and primary schools involved in the Italian pilot were characterised by a rising number of children from migrant background whose home language was not Italian (approximately 25% of children attending such settings). In the Slovenian case, high level of non-participation of Roma children in the educational system were observed especially in preschool: whereas 10% of children attending the primary school involved in the pilot were of Roma origin, only one child was enrolled in preschool at the beginning of the project. For a more detailed account of the numbers of subject involved at each site, on their recruitment and on the level of their involvement over time the reader might refer to the Case Studies provided as supplemental materials: https://amsacta.unibo.it/view/projects/START.html

The methodological approach adopted for carrying out the study is *Ricerca-Form-Azione* (Balduzzi and Lazzari 2018). This specific action-research approach – developed over the last decade by a group of Italian academics[5] – strives to connect research (*ricerca*) with ongoing professional development (*formazione in servizio*) by engaging practitioners and teachers in the experimentation of innovative educational practices (*azione*). Its main feature is precisely the involvement of teachers and practitioners as co-researchers – working side by side with academic researchers – in shared processes of critical reflection aimed at generating transformative change starting from situational analysis, data collection and interpretation leading to joint planning, documentation and evaluation of experimental initiatives . Given the participatory nature of the research process, a particular emphasis was placed on ethical issues for ensuring that the actions undertaken within the project would be respectful of the intentionality of participants and contribute to enhance their agency (Whalley et al. 2007).

In the first phase, children were observed in their interactions with teachers and peers (Corsaro and Molinari 2008) or interviewed by adopting age-appropriate strategies (Pascal and Bertram 2009; Einarsdottir et al. 2009) and parents were interviewed individually or in groups (Bove 2009). Once these initial datasets were collected[6], situational analysis was carried out at each country location by engaging professionals in collective learning processes to reflect upon the different standpoints in the light of the themes emerged from the literature . Researchers' role was to ask critical questions facilitating practitioners' and teachers' discussions on the concerns raised by children and parents over transitions and eventually support the process of deconstructing taken-for-granted assumptions.

In the second phase, experimental initiatives and practices to be piloted at each country location were jointly planned by availing of peer-to-peer learning opportunities provided within the international training week taking place at Pen Green Research Base in Corby (England). The training

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[5] A more detailed account of the specificity of this approach can be found on the website of the Centre for Educational Research on Teachers' Professionalism: https://centri.unibo.it/crespi/en/centre

[6] As the data collected in each case study were generated by using the same methods (observations, interviews, focus groups) but availing of different tools (observation protocols, question routes,…): for a more detailed account the reader might refer to supplemental materials (Case Studies and Training Toolbox): https://amsacta.unibo.it/view/projects/START.html

week focused on providing ECEC and CSE professionals with insights and tools on how to establish welcoming and familiarization practice in (pre)school institutions through parental engagement. The researchers promoted the exchange of ideas within and among national country-groups on how the inspiring practice observed during the training week (visits to Pen Green Centre and primary schools network) could be used as basis for re-thinking the anticipation process of going to (pre)school from the perspective of children and families in local transition projects.

Following this phase, recurring meetings in local learning networks involving childcare workers, preschool and primary school teachers, coordinators and researchers were organised in order to make decisions, implement and fostering ongoing reflection on the innovative transition practices being piloted at each country location. Ongoing pedagogical support to inter-professional teams is in fact increasingly recognised as a crucial method for developing new knowledge and practice in working with inclusion (Bove et al. 2018; Peeters and Sharmahd 2014).

In the last stage, a second transnational training week was carried out in Tisina (Slovenia). Ideas were shared among professionals on how to foster inclusive transition practice in ECEC institutions and primary schools, with the intention of ensuring the sustainability of piloted initiatives over the long-term. Once pilot initiatives were concluded, a second set of data was collected through pedagogical documentation, video-interviews and focus-groups with parents and professionals. The analysis of such datasets fed into the critical evaluation of local transition projects, documenting their impact on the experiences of children and families as well as on the broader educational community.

Discussion of findings

Through participatory action-research, the voices of children and parents in transitions were sought and analysed in the four pilots with the purpose of centring practitioners' and teachers' critical reflection on what matters to them in transitions. The first section explores the main issues emerged from the analysis of children's and parents' perspectives, on the basis of which new transitional practices were co-constructed with professionals. The second section illustrates how to foster

inclusive transitions in super-diverse communities by focusing on the key success-factors of the experimentations implemented in the pilots.

Experiences of children and families before the pilots

Children in first grade were given the opportunity to express their views on their experience in preschool VS primary school through visual and narrative methods (comments on drawings). The meanings emerging from children's drawings and accompanying narratives were used 'to assist teachers in examining the believes and values underlying their pedagogical practice' (Einarsottir et al. 2009, 220). By observing and analysing children's drawings, it became clear how aspects of time (integrated vs shorter/ fragmented experience) and space (flexible vs rigid organisation) drastically changed over institutional transitions. Moving on to a new environment also signifies an implicit change in rules and expectations. This becomes apparent in children's drawings, reporting visually a sense of loss of control over the learning environment: the older children become, the more they need to get used to adult-directed activities instead of children-initiated learning through play.

"I was playing with my friends"   *"We are listening to the teacher"*

Figure 1. Child's reflection on the differences between preschool and primary school (Fatima, 6 years old)

In line with findings from previous studies (Brooker 2008; Brostrom 2003), the analysis of ethnographic observations indicates how children experience a fundamental change in identity over transitions from one setting to another. Whereas in the previous environment (being it daycare or preschool) children are perceived by practitioners as competent and autonomous, in the next phase (being it pre- or primary school) they are often perceived by teachers as incompetent novices who are hindered by their own caring needs (e.g. not yet toilet trained, crying, seeking comfort and reassurance from adults) or unable to self-regulate. Data from ethnographic observations pointed out that, during transition into a new group of peers, children need to redefine their roles. In many cases, especially societally vulnerable children find it difficult to settle in the new environment and manifest their bewilderment through crying and screaming, using patterns of constant running around and using physicality to fit in. In other cases, they might be spending a considerable time observing interactions between children and adults or participating in symbolic play as bystanders.

The data collected through parents' interviews pointed out how peer relationships are changing for their children during transitions. Being aware of this challenge, parents expressed the hope that their child would be able to connect and find new friends. It should be noted that – irrespective of the context and of the ECEC/school systems – many questions on emotional and physical care and safety of children in the new environment were addressed by parents in transitions. Especially when families are more at risk of societal exclusion these caring questions seem to also represent a political need to belong and be included in the (pre)school and broader society (Tobin, Arzubiaga and Adair 2013).

> 'I was worried, how my daughter will be accepted. She was the only one to be enrolled just before school and I was concerned how she would blend in the group of children, who are already well-connected. She was in preschool for two months, starting in September but then I withdrew her out in December. I did not have enough trust in the practitioner and therefore did not tell her about my doubts. My child started crying already in the changing room when she heard the practitioners' voice and she did not want to enter the playroom. She is now in school and has no difficulties. I do not know, perhaps I would now enrol my child in preschool earlier. But it was so painful to see her cry at home saying that nobody wants to play with her. Though I need to point out that her being Roma was not the reason for that. She was just new in the group and others already had a strong bond.' (Parent, Slovenia)

It is remarkable how the questions on care are related to the overwhelming need of parents to talk and exchange information about the transition of their child with professionals from childcare, pre-school or primary school.

> 'Well I don't know whether he has eaten in primary school, I don't know whether he has had a good day, bad day, don't know what kind of mood he is going to be in, don't know anything! The preschool was more relaxed, more friendly and welcoming. Now, you have to stand in the playground, you have to stand outside. The children come out one by one, go straight to the parents and then you leave so you don't even get to talk to a teacher or find out anything. I felt like I could tell the preschool staff anything…now I don't feel like I can say anything. The only place you can go into is the office of the Headteacher, which always seems to be locked, or you go through the office and sit in the corridor.' (Parent, UK - England)

Fostering inclusive transitions in super-diverse societies: how can this be done?

Accessibility and outreaching

By encouraging cross-cultural and inter-professional learning and exchange, the practitioners and teachers involved in the project deeply reflected on the crucial question whether 'families are hard to reach' or 'services are difficult to access'. Taking into account that families from migrant background and living in poverty often have smaller informal networks as well as less access to information about ECEC/school enrolment procedures (Vandenbroeck and Lazzari 2014), participants learned to actively listen to parents in order to gain a deeper insight into the barriers they might be experiencing. In the Flemish Community of Belgium, the transition from childcare to preschool education gradually received more attention from policy makers, ECEC professionals and stakeholders. Although this is to be applauded, the flip side of the same coin is that transition projects were set-up only for children and families who already attended childcare. This is a problematic tendency as it unintentionally favours more affluent families, since childcare is fairly inaccessible for families living in poverty, migrant families and single parents in contrast to preschool education that is free for all. Becoming aware of this field of tension, the Belgian pilot started creating a community-based network for children and families who were not attending childcare before entering preschool. The childcare centre organised monthly informal meetings for families in the neighbourhood in order to support

them in the education of their children and, more specifically, during the transition to preschool. Staff of the preschool were occasionally present to discuss this important step with parents and to reduce the stress and uncertainty this might cause. The local poverty advocacy group – involved as part of the network – started to pay more attention to the questions and concerns parents raised with regard to the transition to preschool and now parents are provided with a better support in the processes of searching for a good preschool, enrolling and admission.

Language and cultural barriers might also prevent socially disadvantaged families from fulfilling the bureaucratic procedures necessary to enrol their children in ECEC institutions. A striking example are Roma communities, where lack of trust toward authorities and public services, combined with discrimination and hostility encountered in educational environments, tend to undermine children's participation in ECEC (Klaus and Marsh 2014). For this reason, the Slovenian and English pilots invested in greater outreach activities in order to build trust and open a dialogue on what matters to Roma and Traveller families themselves. In Slovenia, despite intense efforts to include Roma children into preschool before the project, only a few were actually enrolled and their attendance was characterised by discontinuity. Therefore, it was very important for professionals to understand the fears of parents that are connected to prejudice, stereotypes and discrimination which they faced in their lives. Outreach activities were developed and implemented by ECEC professionals in a Roma settlement. Professionals presented the everyday work and life of preschool and made a bond with parents and children. The main goal of such activities was to build parents' trust in the institution and teachers, which would consequently influence their decisions of enrolling children in preschool (Komac 2010).

To proactively tackle both material and non-material barriers that many families face in participation to ECEC, the participants of the Slovenian pilot connected with significant people from the Roma community (bridging figures) and with professionals working with Roma community in other sectors (local authorities, social and health services). This was also the case in the English pilot, where the Pen Green centre and local primary schools collaborated to set-up continuous outreach for

Traveller communities. One of the needs was transport from the Travellers' site to school and this had been arranged while children had been attending the ECEC centre. After persistent lobbying from the school and Pen Green, the local authority eventually agreed to provide transport to school for a couple of children by accepting that this was a 'special case' and needed to be an exception in its usual policy.

Developing relationships of trust as basis for reciprocity in parent-professional partnership

In fostering inclusive transitions in super-diverse societies, it is fundamental that the way ECEC and primary school institutions are run make sense to excluded parents and local communities. ECEC centres/schools that develop a democratic and participative policymaking capacity are found to be the most effective in engaging with disadvantaged communities (Vandenbroeck and Lazzari 2014). This implies that ECEC services' pedagogical values, beliefs and practices should be made explicit and constantly negotiated with families (Mantovani and Bove 2016). In all pilots, great efforts were made to set up the conditions fostering relationships of trust and reciprocity in parent-professional partnership. This required openness on the side of ECEC and school organisations to encounter parents positively as educational partners whose expertise is valued and whose aspirations for their children are recognised, respected and considered important. The interviews and focus groups with parents conducted in the pilots as part of the initial needs-analysis – as well as previous experience that especially childcare institutions had on this matter – were important resources to stimulate the debate and increase openness amongst the participants.

The Pen Green centre, for example, already incorporated a range of methods to engage parents and build trusting relationships in order to support a reciprocal approach and to provide the opportunity to get to know each parent/carer in-depth (Whalley et al., 2007). The approach adopted by Pen Green focuses on face to face personal engagement through 'daily dialogue' and 'parents' exchanges' as these provide the opportunity to reduce barriers to communication with the staff and allow parents to share their stories, thus enabling a broader perspective which is central to the

understanding of each child. Throughout the transnational training and meetings held during the project, it progressively became clearer to preschool and primary school professionals how parents would like teachers themselves to be the most important 'go to persons' from the institution, the person they communicate with daily. This led to fundamental new practices in which parents for the first time were allowed in the school and the classroom of their child. For example, the preschool involved in the Belgian pilot started with daily welcoming of parents into the class of the youngest children (2.5-3 years old). Before the project, parents had to wait outside the school behind two gates and rarely had an opportunity to talk to the teachers of their children. This practice gradually evolved into ensuring that all parents can enter the preschool classes even when children are older. This change in the mind-set of the preschool created opportunities for parents and teachers to meet each other, get to know each other and start building relationships of trust.

All ECEC centres and schools involved the pilots developed flexible familiarisation and welcoming practice for new children and families in institutional transition periods, but also for newcomer children entering school at a later stage due to migration or other reasons. This gives the opportunity for the teacher to ask the parents their perspective on who their child is and how he/she likes to be comforted in order to get a deeper understanding of the child and enact more responsive practices.

Parents of the most vulnerable children who were the focus of the English pilot reported that weekly drop-in sessions with reception class teachers – implemented as part of the local transition project – were very appreciated as they felt valued and listened to. Moreover, teacher being available at the end of the day to mingle with parents has supported them to feel confident in approaching the teacher and asking about their child's day. Parents perceived this as a more positive experience as opposed to only speaking to them when something was wrong. The increase of informal opportunities for parents and teachers to further develop their relationships resulted in increased two-way communication with regards to children.

In the Italian pilot, parents of newcomer children were asked to describe their son or daughter by using artefacts such as pictures, videos or narratives. As pointed out by parents in the final

interviews, this strategy turned out to be very powerful in easing transitions for both themselves and their children. Parents reported that they were more involved and active in their children's school life, as they felt listened to, welcomed and reassured. Moreover, after this experience, teachers acknowledged that usually when they talk to parents their attention is centred on children's learning, while when parents talk to teachers, they are more concerned in their child's socio-emotional wellbeing. In this sense, by *'listening instead of talking'* a change occurred in the communication flow between teachers and parents. Teachers started do adopt a more emphatic communication approach with parents and this gradually led them to reconsidering – and eventually overcoming – the conceptual split between 'education' and 'care' in their everyday practice. Therefore, the actions undertaken contributed significantly to creating a climate of trust that certainly positively favoured children's first approach to the new environment.

Pedagogical continuity as way to foster more responsive practice in contexts of diversity

Whereas initially institutional splits were perceived as the main problem hindering smooth transitions, over the course of the project such institutional splits actually became an opportunity for the practitioners and teachers involved to challenge the taken for granted assumptions and to intentionally re-think their practice in the light of a shared pedagogical vision. Through collaborative learning and professional exchanges among childcare workers, pre-school teachers and primary school teachers coming from four different countries, traditional child and family images were de-constructed and pedagogical practices were reinvented in line with children's and families' concerns.

In the Italian pilot, three reception days were set up for first graders at the beginning of the school year, allowing parents to enter the classroom with their children in order to share with them the beginning of the morning and have a daily exchange with the teachers.

'Both my wife and I have been involved in accompanying M. at school. […] Being a child who tends to be a bit 'hidden' at the beginning, we were a little worried that having no friend [*from*

preschool] could have been a bit of a problem. Instead with this '*inserimento*'[7]…these games we did for half an hour together with the other parents and the children and the teachers on the first day….probably they unblocked this situation and he faced it very well…We had no negative impact whatsoever; on the contrary, the child goes to school very willingly since the first day and we are very happy with this.' (Parent, Italy)

Similarly, in the English pilot a transition week was carried out before the summer break in order to allow reception class children to familiarise with the new environment and with their future teacher in Grade One. Data from parents' questionnaires showed that such innovation was very valuable for their children and suggested that the practice should be repeated over the next years. Furthermore, the comparison with baseline data collected before the summer in relation to children's personal, social and emotional development showed that more investment in the transition process has contributed towards children's settling in more positively and better achievements in these domains. Interestingly, three children whose families were not able to engage in the transition process did not reach the same level of progress.

In the Italian pilot, pedagogical continuity was also pursued by revising everyday educational practice implemented over the first months of children's primary school attendance in the light of what they had experienced in preschool. Such changes included a more similar articulation of space, time and routines as well as taking up some didactic methodologies used in preschool in order to encourage a gradual familiarization of children with the new environment. In line with findings from previous studies, it was found that 'a stable organisation of the physical environment, time and activities providing children with a clear, recognisable and predictable framework of reference helped them to understand the succession of events and the meaning of activities' (Picchio and Mayer 2019, 292) therefore increasing their sense of agency in the new setting: this was particularly true for the children who did not fluently speak the dominant language. In addition, teachers paying attention to

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[7] As described by Bove (2001), *inserimento* is the term used in Italian to define the process and practice related to children's gradual settling-in in *nido* (daycare centre) and – to a lesser extent – in *scuola dell'infanzia* (preschool). In the Italian pilot, the welcoming practices traditionally adopted in ECEC were recontextualised and re-signified in the context of primary school.

the creation of the class group and the establishment of a positive relational climate through playful activities proved to be crucial for fostering children's sense of belonging and encouraging their engagement in learning over the longer term (O'Rourke et al. 2017).

In sum

As result of the above-mentioned initiatives , the number of children living in complex circumstances who regularly attended ECEC and primary school increased as the educational work carried out within such institutions became more meaningful to them. By investing in a warmer and more inclusive transition across home, childcare, preschool and primary school, the different stakeholders noticed how the atmosphere in such settings became more comfortable, friendly and approachable. They identified less stress for children, parents and professionals before, during and after the transition. As trust among all the actors involved in transitions increased, a feeling of belonging to an educational community (Sharmahd 2013) gradually permeated the whole neighbourhood.

> 'When I talk to parents now, it is remarkable how much they have a certain kind of ownership in this transition process. For families living in poverty and with migrant background the relation with the school is in general quite difficult: the school asks money and they perceive the school as the institution that controls and disciplines them. Now parents talk about the preschool like it is really also their school. (Professional poverty advocacy group, Belgium)

5. Conclusions

The analysis of the data collected across the four countries pilots carried out as part of the project revealed that certain key-success factors for fostering inclusive transitions in super-diverse societies could be identified.

First, awareness needs to be generated among ECEC and CSE professionals about the challenges that children and families might be confronted with when approaching a formal educational setting for the first time. For children, moving on to a new environment this signifies an implicit change in rules and expectations, which in turn has an impact on their self-confidence and identity: this is particularly true for those children who do not speak the dominant language and whose

previous experiences are very distant from those conveyed by the educational practice implemented in the new setting. For their parents, being conscious of these challenges, the main concerns about transitions are related to emotional and physical care and safety of children in the new environment. It was remarkable to notice how such concerns about care are expressed through the overwhelming need of parents to talk and exchange information about the transition of their child with professionals: especially when families are more at risk of social exclusion, these questions seem to represent also a political need to belong and be included in the (pre)school community as well as in the broader society.

Secondly, it becomes necessary to support – through ongoing training and pedagogical guidance – ECEC and CSE professionals in deconstructing institutionalised practice and develop a shared pedagogical vision starting from the concerns expressed by children and parents with whom they work on a daily basis. Our findings show that, in order to foster inclusive transitions in super-diverse societies, the way (pre)school institutions are run should make sense to those groups which tend more often to be excluded. . Great efforts were made in each pilot to develop relationships of trust and to foster reciprocity in parent-professional partnership. Flexible familiarisation and welcoming practice were established for newcomer children and families during institutional transition periods, but also for those entering school at a later stage due to migration or other reasons. The increase of informal opportunities for parents and teachers to further develop their relationships resulted in increased two-way communication with regards to the children.

Finally, the findings of our study reveal that children's sense of belonging in the new environment can be nurtured not only by welcoming their families into the setting, but also by creating a caring relational climate where children identity(es) and cultural belonging(s) are valued and peer relationships intentionally sustained. Moreover, children's sense of agency in the new educational environment can be enhanced by acknowledging their previously acquired competences and providing a clearly recognisable organisation of space, time and activities whereby they can be in control of their learning even if they are not fluent in the dominant language spoken within the setting.

Overall, START project's findings indicate that inclusive transitions can be achieved by taking small steps toward a systemic change in which relationships, trust and community engagement are considered key levers. This is possible by:

•   constantly engaging with children and families to keep focused on the issues that matter to them in transitions;

•   constantly supporting and connecting practitioners from different settings and countries in dealing with the challenges that such a transformative process implies;

•   investing in recursive interaction between research and experimentation as well as among theory, policy and practice.

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