

ARE THERE ANY DIFFERENCES IN TRANSITION PRACTICES AMONG PRESCHOOLS IN SLOVENIA?

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Abstract

The transition of children from home to preschool (in Slovenia, preschools accept children from 1 to 6 years of age) is one of the first turning points in a child's life. After months spent in a safe shelter at home, the child must get used to a completely new environment, new people and adapt to previously unknown situations. It is vital what kind of approach and communication with children and their parents is provided by the preschool and the teachers. In some of the Slovenian preschools it is common practice that all new arrivals are introduced to class at the same time, at the beginning of the school year. However, in some preschools, enrolment is organized over a more extended period, if possible, after maternity leave.

Our research was done as a part of the international project *Children's well-being in transition periods: The empirical validation of the ecological-dynamic model*. The study aims to analyse children's adaptation to preschools from their teachers' view and compare two different transition approaches to preschool mentioned above. A descriptive method as well as a qualitative and quantitative research approach have been used. As a technique we used the on-line questionnaire for preschool teachers (261 teachers from all Slovenian regions). To get a more in-depth insight, we also conducted interviews with two teachers and two counsellors from two different preschools.

The results show that the transition approaches and adaptation of children to preschool differ between preschools and between preschool teachers. A little over a half of preschools included in this research accept all newcomers in September - but some preschool teachers still encourage parents to stay in the group with their child long enough. The interviewed preschool teachers and the preschool counsellors are mostly satisfied with this adaptation process, which rarely lasts longer than a week. We believe that in such circumstances the teachers hardly have enough time to individually devote themselves to each child and the parents.

On the other hand, the teachers from preschools in which only a few children at a time are introduced to class, think that this kind of adaptation is less stressful. They feel they have more time to communicate with each child and their parents. Such a transition approach gives the child enough time to get to know the new people and the environment and be able to gradually separate from his or her parents.

Regardless, according to the surveyed and the interviewed preschool teachers and counsellors, parents are mostly satisfied with the preschool adaptation process. We believe that this satisfaction is primarily the result of preschool teachers' own effort to create a positive climate in class in which children feel secure.

Keywords: preschool, transitional practices, introduction process, gradual introduction to preschool, adaptation to preschool, cooperation with parents.

1 INTRODUCTION

In the Republic of Slovenia, we have a relatively high-quality unitary system of early education for all preschool-aged children from the end of maternity leave (one year) until they enter compulsory school. Preschool education in Slovenia is divided into two age groups: the first group includes classes for children aged one to three, while the second includes children from the age of three and up to school-age. Mixed or age-combined classes are also possible. As early as 1979, we received the first national program of education in preschools ([1]). After the independence of Slovenia, formerly one of the republics of Yugoslavia, we carried out a radical (paradigmatic) change in the educational system, which included new legislation and a curriculum for preschool education ([2]). The wide network of preschools

in Slovenia ensures a fairly high participation rate: 82.7% of all preschool-aged children are enrolled; the share of the youngest is also very high, i.e. children up to 3 years of age (67.5%) ([3]).

The introduction to preschool for most children means the first real separation from their parents. It is the entry into an institution where they encounter organized care and education for the first time ([4], [5], [6], [7], [8], [9], [10], [11]). When entering preschool, a child's world changes dramatically, as he or she must replace a safe home environment with a foreign one and master complex social interactions involving peers, educators, and other adults ([12]). The child must suddenly give up the constant presence of his parents and emotionally accept the necessity of short-term separation; he must establish a bond with the teachers who will replace his parents for a part of the day; he must get used to a change in his daily routine and to a whole group of children in which he is only one of many – thus having to learn how to cooperate with the other kids. From a psychological point of view, it is best for a child to get used to this change in his life gradually and with the help of his ([13]). Based on this, the ([2]) enshrines the right of parents to gradually introduce their children to preschool, which is (also) due to the fact that the decision on the introduction approach before the adoption of the national curriculum, was left exclusively to the preschool teacher.

Before joining preschool, it is important that the parents provide their child with realistic information about what is going to change in his or her life. It is also very important that parents have as much information as possible about the chosen preschool, because only then can they truly trust the institution and be sure that their child will be well taken care of there. A child who feels parental distrust, often rejects preschool ([14]) and the process of introduction and adaptation are thus hindered ([15]).

The preschool teacher on the other hand, must know and consider the importance of identification mechanisms in early childhood. Younger children (up to about the age of three) have mostly not yet realized the process of separation from the primary object (the mother) ([16]), which is why the transition to preschool can cause emotional problems, especially if the change happens overnight.

Since the legislation and the Curriculum for Preschools ([2]) do not specify the method of introduction - which according to Snoj ([17]), would also be uncalled for, due to the necessity of individual treatment of a child - the inclusion and introduction of children differ quite dramatically in Slovenian preschools, according to sources ([18], [149], [20], [21]). In some preschools, introduction is only being recommended to parents, while in others it is so to speak mandatory ([22]). However, preschools also differ in means of how long parents are allowed to gradually introduce their children, what is the case in Croatia too ([7]). After the enrolment, more or less all of Slovenian preschools prepare joint meetings for parents of newcomers, at which they present their program, explain how the introduction will take place and answer parents' questions. Some preschools later invite parents to a meeting with the child's future teacher as well. There, parents can provide the teacher with all necessary information about their child, visit the preschool and discuss possible dilemmas that they may have regarding the introduction process ([13]). This is of great importance, because this way parents feel that their child will be well accepted in preschool and see that teachers are willing to take their time to listen and talk to them about their wishes or possible worries regarding their child ([23]).

In the first days of introduction, the child comes to preschool with one of his parents, where he first gets to know his teacher, the playroom and his peers. The time of his stay in the preschool group gradually lengthens, while at the same time the parent spends less and less time in class with them. This gradual introduction makes it possible for the child, his teacher and the parent to get to know each other better, which in turn makes it easier for the child to adapt to a new, unknown environment. The advantage of gradual introduction is that the child in this way slowly gains trust for the preschool and his teacher; it also enables the child and his parent to connect in a new way ([24]). This is important from the perspective of the theory of attachment, which proves that a one-year-old child can already be attached to several people - both other family members as well as his preschool teacher ([25]). Rather than the amount of time spent together, it is of great importance how this person communicates with the child, how he or she understands his verbal and non-verbal messages and whether this person responds sensitively to his needs ([26]).

The teacher's role in the introductory period is undoubtedly demanding, as he or she needs to get used to the new children as well. At the same time, she has to communicate with the children's parents effectively and regulate the relations between everyone present in the group. Fridrih ([27]) says that it can be very difficult and inconvenient for some teachers to have critically evaluating parents in the class all morning. Golčer ([28]) agrees that parents' expectations of the teacher can be high. Some parents expect them to be like a second mother to their child, to take care of his or her

development and to successfully solve all educational problems. All of this, however, should not be a reason to avoid gradual introduction. Experts ([17]) find, that some preschools and teachers are still trying to shorten the amount of time parents spend with their child at preschool. It is emphasized that the introduction in Slovenian preschools still shows the outdated practice of institutional education: "all in the same way and all at the same time" ([17]).

One of the important differences between Slovene preschools is whether all new children are introduced to the class at once - at the beginning of the school year, or whether new children are introduced one by one throughout the year, after the end of maternity leave. Exploring how this difference affects teachers and the success of gradual introduction to preschool, was one of the motives for our research. Our research was done as a part of the international project *Children's well-being in transition periods: The empirical validation of the ecological-dynamic model*, that is running on Croatia ([7]). The study aims to analyse children's adaptation to preschool from the view of their teacher and compare the two different transition approaches mentioned above. In this paper we will present part of the results of this research, focusing on the differences in introduction practices between preschools, namely between preschools that introduce all newcomers at once and those that accept them one by one throughout the school year.

2 METHODOLOGY

A descriptive method, as well as a qualitative and quantitative research approach have been used. As a technique, we first used an on-line questionnaire for preschool teachers. The questionnaire contained 42 statements, for each of which respondents had to rate their level of agreement with the given statement on a rating scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), and three multiple choice questions. 261 preschool teachers from preschools of all Slovenian regions submitted the questionnaires. All respondents were women. Most, almost half (48.2%) of the respondents had worked for less than 10 years and less than a quarter (23.8%) for 21 to 40 years. Just under half of the respondents were from urban areas (45.1%), and the rest from suburban areas (25.7%) and rural areas (29.2%). To verify the reliability of the entire measurement instrument (survey questionnaire), we performed a reliability analysis with Cronbach's Alpha coefficient. It amounted to 0.822 for 42 claims.

To get a more in-depth insight, we also conducted interviews in two preschools. The selection criterion was that the preschools differ in terms of when they accept new children. Preschool A accepts new children throughout the entire school year, preschool B only at the beginning of the school year. We interviewed one teacher and one of the preschools' counsellors from each of the two preschools. We used a semi-structured non-standardized interview, for which we formulated only the main questions based on the results obtained with the questionnaire - especially those, where we wanted to get more specific and in-depth answers.

Data obtained from the survey questionnaires were processed at the level of descriptive and inferential statistics. In addition, with the help of inferential statistics, more precisely with the T-test for independent samples, we checked whether there are statistically significant differences between the measured dependent variables (claims) and the independent variables (preschool, environment, length of employment and whether all newcomers are introduced at once). Data from interviews were processed using a qualitative method.

3 RESULTS & DISCUSSION

First, we wanted to know whether preschools introduce all newcomers at the beginning of the school year or throughout the year. Respondents' answers to this question are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Time of introduction to preschool.

	<i>f</i>	<i>f (%)</i>
We accept and introduce all newcomers at the beginning of the school year (September).	12	4,7
Mostly newcomers are introduced at the beginning of the school year - if there is room left in the preschool groups, also during the year.	135	52,3
We accept and introduce newcomers throughout the school year.	111	43,0
Total	258	100,0

According to the responses obtained from the surveys, we see that more than a half (57%) of the teachers are employed in preschools where newcomers are introduced mostly at the beginning of the school year. In some cases, children are introduced during the year - if space remains in the preschool groups. We see that although parents have the right to gradual introduction of their children to preschool, in more than half of Slovenian preschools the introduction of children happens simultaneously, in September. As we will illustrate below, this can be problematic, since the adaptation period cannot be effective if there are too many parents and new children present in the preschool groups at once.

This is also shown by the difference between preschool A and preschool B. The counsellor and teacher in preschool B, where all the newcomers are introduced in September, described the course of introduction of the youngest children. The parents of the children are asked to stay only for a short period of time in the first few days. The group is divided in half, upon agreement with the parents. One half gets introduced in the morning from 8 am to 10 am, while the other half later from 10 am to 12 am. The next day they switch. On the third day all children are in preschool from breakfast to lunch without their parents, and on the fourth and fifth day also for nap time and after lunch. Some children do not have problems staying at preschool and may be without their parents from day one – they also do not try to keep them. However, teachers usually have an agreement with the parents to call them in case of any issues or emotional distress of the child, so they can come pick them up sooner, if needed. Nevertheless, the counsellor and the teacher from preschool B say that the introduction of their newcomers is gradual and that they encourage parents to take it slow. At the same time, they do not wish to extend this period for too long, as saying goodbye could thereafter be even harder. But according to Varjačič – Rajko ([13]) this is not the case – at most, the opposite is true. What matters most here is how much the child is securely attached to the parents, how much he trusts them, what his temperament is and what experience of separation from his parents he already has. The author states that the child needs time to partially separate from the parents and bond with the teacher. If the introduction is too short, we can overlook his need for a gradual transfer of attachment – from his parents to the teacher. According to what is described in preschool B, they practice short-term introduction, which according to Varjačič - Rajko ([13]) is most suitable for children who have a lot of experience with other children and are socially skilled; who easily accept other adults and are able to bond with them; who have older siblings; who are living in stable conditions; are securely attached and are over three years of age. We believe that there are only few such children, so encouraging short-term introduction for all children is not a good way for them to get used to preschool without any significant distress.

A different way of introduction is shown in preschool A, where children are introduced gradually. Usually, parents introduce 6 to 8 of the youngest children (1 - 2 years old) in September. Parents at this preschool are encouraged to make a gradual introduction adapted to the needs of each individual child - they are informed about this process at the introductory meeting. The teacher at this preschool believes that gradual introduction is necessary, as she gets to know the child, his or her habits and needs during this period. In addition, she finds it important for parents to get acquainted with the work and daily routine at the preschool. In the presence of their parents, where children feel safer, they can get used to a new place, new people, rules etc. Parents on the other hand have time to gain trust for the teacher, knowing that their child will be well taken care of, even when they are not around. Before introduction - during the individual interview, the teacher explains that parents should take at least a week to introduce their child to the preschool group; if necessary and if they have the opportunity – even longer. She believes that the length of introduction depends solely on the child, but that it should last at least 4 to 5 days, while the counsellor of the same preschool says that the introduction should last for as long as the child needs. In our interview the teacher explained, that parents stay with their child for one to two hours in the first two days. They may even leave earlier if the child becomes tired or starts crying. On the third day, they come for breakfast and if the child is ready, the parents say goodbye for half an hour. Then they come back for the child and go home. On the fourth day, they have breakfast together in the presence of the parents, then the parents leave the children alone throughout the morning and return at lunch time. They are with the child to eat lunch and then they leave to go home together. On the fifth day, they try with nap time. After that, the parents leave after breakfast. If a child starts crying inconsolably when the parents first leave him alone, the teacher will call them on the phone to come pick him up.

Below we present the answers to selected statements from the questionnaire. We wanted to know about the thoughts and experiences of the surveyed teachers, regarding introduction to preschool.

Table 2. Teachers' answers,

	<i>N</i>	\bar{x}	σ	4 + 5 (<i>f</i> %)
In the preschool where I work, we have a certain way of introducing children to preschool.	261	3,79	1,208	72%
Before entering preschool, parents receive basic information and advice on how to facilitate the child's transition.	261	4,82	0,469	98%
We have clear instructions on how long the parents of a newcomer should be present in the preschool class.	260	3,37	1,404	55%
Parents in our preschool are mostly satisfied with the quality of introduction to preschool.	259	4,60	0,578	96%
Sometimes my expectations regarding introduction differ from those of the parents.	259	4,07	0,828	80%
Most children have no major problems with the introduction to preschool.	259	3,84	0,953	74%
I think I have enough knowledge about the needs of children at the time of introduction to preschool.	260	4,48	0,672	93%

According to the legislation and the Curriculum for preschools ([2]), the decision on how the introduction to the preschool group shall take place, is an autonomous decision of the teacher, but almost three quarters of the surveyed teachers (72%) agree or strongly agree that they have a certain method of introducing the children to preschool. With this variable, there are statistically significant differences in terms of agreement with the selected statement ($p < 0.05$) depending on the preschool where the teachers are employed. Teachers employed in preschools, where as a rule all newcomers are accepted at the beginning of the school year (see Table 1), statistically significantly more agree that they *have a certain way of introducing children to preschool*, than those who work in preschools which accept children throughout the school year.

More than a half of the respondents (55%) say (agree or strongly agree with the statement) that teachers have *clear instructions on how long the parents of a newcomer should be present in the preschool group*, i.e. how long the introduction period with parents present in the preschool class should last for. We believe that such uniformity within the preschool is problematic, as it does not allow teachers and parents to adapt to the individual needs of children. Demšar ([24]) also recommends that parents stay with their child for at least a few days, considering the individual needs of the children in terms of time required for a successful introduction. Unfortunately, we did not ask the teachers if they wanted clearer instructions, but from the answers of both interviewees from preschool B and based on informal communication of one of the authors of this article with colleagues, we conclude that many teachers would want more detailed instructions from the preschool management – possibly to avoid responsibility for their own autonomous decision-making.

As the results of the interviews show, preschools A and B differ in means of a predetermined manner and clear instructions regarding introduction of new children to preschool. The counsellor and teacher from preschool A both said that they do not have a specific method of introduction, because they leave this to the autonomous decision of each teacher. There is however a protocol that they usually follow. The introductory interview at the time of enrolment is followed by a meeting with the parents, organized by the preschool management. Then follows a conversation with the preschool teacher and finally the gradual introduction of the child to the preschool group, together with his or her parents. The counsellor and teacher from preschool B on the other hand said, that their preschool has a certain method of introduction, which is the same for all newly admitted children. The teacher of this preschool says that most parents want to get through the introduction period as quickly and as easily as possible. At the same time, of course, we wonder whether "getting through this period as quickly as possible" is really the wish of the parents, or more the wish of the teachers, who do not want parents to stay in preschool for too long and thus "hinder their work". It is however true, that some parents find it difficult to take time off from work; therefore, it may be best if they could introduce their child to preschool towards the end of maternity leave, i.e. at some point during the year.

The explanation of the interviewed teacher from preschool B also highlights the problem of clear guidelines regarding introduction. She says that the instructions in their preschool are clear enough and that the parents stay in the preschool groups with their child for long enough. If the teacher finds

that the parents do not want or do not know when to leave the group, she kindly asks them to. We believe that it sometimes happens, that parents are unable to separate from their child and thus overstay their welcome, so to speak. But on the other hand, based on the already mentioned fact that in this preschool the introduction of a child with the parents lasts for only up to three days, we strongly doubt that all children can adjust this quickly. It is also believed that some teachers are reluctant to see parents present in the group for several days, and instead of asking them for help and participation in the educational process, they can hardly wait for them to leave the classroom ([17]).

The above-described differences in the method of introduction between preschools A and B show that in preschool A the teachers and counsellors adapt more individually to the different needs of children. If the parent spends more time with his child in the preschool group during introduction, the teacher also has more opportunities to exchange information on how the child is progressing during this time. Information from parents who observe the child and his behaviour at home, is especially welcome here.

What is also important in the introductory period, is the first contact and the development of a partnership between parents and the preschool ([29]). This was also observed by the surveyed teachers, who in the vast majority (93%) say, that *before entering preschool, parents receive basic information and advice on how to facilitate the child's transition*. According to the survey's results, we conclude that although sometimes *the teachers' expectations regarding the introduction differ from the parents' expectations* (80% of respondents agree or strongly agree with this statement), which is completely expected, parents are *mostly satisfied with the quality of introduction* (93% of the respondents agree or strongly agree with this statement). Three-quarters of the respondents (74%) also agree or strongly agree that *most children have no major problems with the introduction to preschool*. Of course, for a more objective answer to these questions, parents of newcomers should also be asked. Unfortunately, we did not include them in this research.

The results also show that most teachers (93%) agree or strongly agree with the statement that they have *enough knowledge about the needs of children at the time of introduction to preschool*. However, this variable showed statistically significant differences ($p < 0.05$), both in terms of environment, i.e. place of employment and length of employment. Teachers employed in urban preschools are statistically significantly more likely to consider that they have sufficient knowledge about the needs of children at the time of introduction to preschool, than those who work in a suburban preschool. Teachers who have been on the job for a shorter period (up to 20 years) are statistically significantly more likely to believe that they have less knowledge about the needs of children at the time of introduction, than those with more seniority (21 to 40 years).

4 CONCLUSIONS

One of the key findings of our research is that by accepting and introducing all children to preschool at once, there are not enough opportunities for individual treatment of each child, nor a gradual and long enough adaptation process. This approach is simply a way in which introduction is enabled in principle, but leaves a rather bitter aftertaste, since the time spent in the crowded preschool group is noticeably short ([17]). In contrast, the method of gradual introduction, in which the preschool introduces newcomers throughout the school year, differs in terms of time taken for the introduction and adaptation, as well as in terms of greater consideration of individual characteristics and needs of each child. One of the authors of this article, a preschool teacher by profession, has the experience of introducing children throughout the school year. At the beginning of the school year (September), she introduced a maximum of 6 children to the preschool group, and for the rest of the year approximately two or three per month when their mothers' maternity leave ended. She notes that the method of introducing children throughout the year can be very strenuous, sometimes even for children, especially those who are less susceptible to changes and new people. However, she is convinced, as also the research presented shows, that for everyone - children, parents and teachers, this method is much better than the method of accepting and introducing all newcomers at once.

The criticism of the research presented is that many statements in the questionnaire did not provide clear answers to the research questions, as the level of agreement was remarkably high - there is a high possibility that respondents chose the answers that they thought were more "correct" and we did not find out how they actually act in practice. Claims that are too general are also a problem, e.g., that *parents in our preschool are mostly satisfied with the quality of introduction to preschool*. Such statement does not offer a substantive answer to the differences between parents and possible dissatisfaction. We got much clearer answers from the interviews, but unfortunately there were not

enough interviewees to be able to generalize the findings. Nonetheless, we conclude that the introduction of children in Slovenian preschools is not yet of the quality recommended by experts.

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