

How to Support Early Educational Transitions of Children? – An Overview of University Science Project’s Activities from Croatia

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Abstract: First transition children go through from family to the nursery or kindergarten and/or from preschool to elementary school is the most significant period in the lives of children, but at the same time the most challenging ones. Although they are actually learning situations and provide children with opportunities to develop new roles and coping strategies for adapting and dealing with a new environment/rules/people; children, parents, and teachers also very often perceive them as stressful. In order to explore the sources of transition-related stress and the protective factors during children's transitions, it is important to examine significant determinants of children's educational transitions postulated within the contemporary Ecological-dynamic model of transition. This is the main goal of the research project „Children's well-being in transition periods: The empirical validation of the Ecological-Dynamic model“, which has been running since 2018 and is supported by the University of Rijeka, Croatia. In addition to presenting this theoretical model, this paper will include an overview of some research studies conducted within the project, key findings, and future directions in the area of teacher-child relationships, attachment development during transitions, socio-emotional well-being during transitions, transition objects, transition of different children, and different transition practices. In addition, this review aims to highlight some important issues related to transitions in childhood and provide the guidelines for improving transition practices and future research.

Keywords: *children; early educational transition; project research activities; support; teachers' competencies*

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1. Introduction

Within their contemporary ecological-dynamic transition model, Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta (2000) postulated a primary definition of transition as a rather intensive process of modification within which a child moves from one identity to another and he or she is influenced by numerous agents. In other words, transition could be defined "...as the process of change that is experienced when children (and their families) move from one setting to another ... to when the child is more fully established as a member of the new setting. It is usually a time of intense and accelerated development demands that are socially regulated" (Fabian & Dunlop, 2002, p. 3). Children's first transitions are related to the transition from family house to nursery or preschool institution, and from preschool to elementary school. They are central to children's well-being and at the same time the most significant stages in children's lives, but also the most challenging (Tatalović Vorkapić, 2019a; 2019b; 2019c; 2020; 2021a; Tatalović Vorkapić & LoCasale-Crouch, 2021). However, the question remains: should they be so demanding? Like many others, they represent learning situations that offer children great opportunities to develop new roles and coping strategies for adjustment and dealing with new situations. According to modern findings in the field of developmental psychopathology, transitional and adaptive situations are among the environmental risk factors for children's development. However, should they be among the risk factors for children's development? It is extremely important to identify all the features of potential risks in the child's environment during transition and to provide such support to the environment (near and far) that has the potential to develop from a risk factor to a protective factor for the child's development. In the absence of independent and systematic programs for competent parenting in Croatia, much of the responsibility lies with the educational system and the creation of quality practices on the one hand and programs to support parents on the other. Moreover, the question of the role of educational institutions during transition and adjustment remains unanswered. Due to all these highlighted aspects of transitions as a process, the transitions are very often perceived as stressful by children, parents and teachers (Tatalović Vorkapić & Katić, 2019a; 2019b; Tatalović Vorkapić & Pauletić, 2021; Visković & Višnjić-Jevtić, 2019). Thus, these various findings represent the main arguments for research on transitions in childhood, with the aim of analysing all factors that are closely related to quality transitions.

In the transition phase, it was determined that children's well-being is strongly influenced by various environments through which child goes and

overlapping interactions he or she is affected (Tatalović Vorkapić, 2019a; 2019b; 2019c; 2020). Because there is a great amount of equally important elements that present the base of the quality of childhood transition, the complexity of transition as a process is highlighted (Tatalović Vorkapić, 2021a; 2021b; Tatalović Vorkapić & LoCasale-Crouch, 2021). A major advantage of the ecological-dynamic model of transition (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000) is that it ensures recognition and emphasis on all of these factors and their relationships within the specific place and time. For this reason, this model is holistic, multilevel, multicomponent, and universal. With the aim of its empirical validation and the analysis of important determinants of first childhood transitions (especially those from family house to nursery, and from preschool to elementary school), the scientific project: "Children's well-being in transition periods: The empirical validation of Ecological-Dynamic model" (project number: uniri-drustv-18-11) was initiated four years ago. With the goal of empirically validating this model, the research design included the use of multiple scales on representative samples of early childhood and preschool children, their parents/caregivers, and their teachers. The theoretical background of the ecological and dynamic model of transitions (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000), addresses children's transitions putting into the focus two main categories of factors which are very important for the quality of childhood transitions: a) intra-personal factors: parents' personality, sensitivity, and parenting style, children's temperament and other characteristics, and educators' personality, skills, attitudes; and b) inter-personal factors: the relationship between the child and the educator or educator and kindergarten (attachment patterns and style, course and outcome of adjustment, relationship with the educator, transition practices, etc.).

Although this model contains several very important principles for understanding the complexity of transitions in early childhood and highlights the importance of the child-environment relationship and important determinants of the quality of transitions and children's adjustment, this model does not explain the nature of these relationships or how to ensure them in the institutional context. Thus, all of these factors are equally important, and it is crucial to consider them all in order to understand children's needs during transitions in a given culture and time (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003), which is highlighted in preschool care and education (Ministry of Science, Education and Sport of Croatia, 2014). Although in the Croatian national context the previously highlighted factors are important and relevant for the optimal development and well-being of preschool children, the National curriculum for Preschool care and education (Ministry of Science, Education and Sport of Croatia, 2014) does not define clear guidelines for

organizing effective transition practices. There is an obvious lack of clear national scientific and practical guidelines for ensuring quality in the first childhood transitions and adjustment in the educational context, which are also the main incentives and reasons for addressing this issue. Therefore, it is quite clear why we recognize different practices during children's transition and adjustment in pedagogical work today (Mihić, 2016; Mihić et al., 2011; Tatalović Vorkapić et al., 2015; Tatalović Vorkapić, 2019a; 2019b; 2019c, 2020; Tatalović Vorkapić & Katić, 2019a, 2019b, 2020; Visković & Višnjić-Jevtić, 2019).

Therefore, the main objectives of this project can be seen in the basic and applied psychological and educational sciences, as it is expected to investigate all the main determinants of the quality of children's transitions in childhood, their relationships and effects on transitions, and to establish clear practice guidelines for satisfactory transitions and adjustments within educational systems. Therefore, in addition to the quantitative method, a qualitative research method was used to collect all necessary data on transitions in childhood. It was also planned to collect data from self-assessments and teacher and parent evaluations of various child behaviour and characteristics. It was expected that data would be collected from all perspectives directly and indirectly from children, parents, and teachers. In this way, the project has a potential to make two major contributions. First one is related with doing a short-term task by running validation of presented theoretical model which will result in guidelines for practitioners to ensure adequate transitions of early and preschool aged children. The other one presents the long-term task, since ensuring successful childhood transitions children learn efficient coping strategies in a new environment what serves as a great prevention of various mental health difficulties same as good promotion of psychological well-being during whole life. The project has since conducted numerous empirical research studies, resulting in three books and forty scholarly articles. In addition, the project has held two professional conferences and six workshops for educators, elementary school teachers, psychologists, and pedagogues. This paper presents some key findings from various research studies conducted as part of the project. The studies conducted under the project are related to: a) teacher-child relationship; b) attachment styles and transition; c) socio-emotional well-being and transition; d) transition objects; e) transition of children with special needs; f) transition practices from different countries around the world. Prior to conducting the research, the project director obtained approval from the Ethics Committee of the University of Rijeka. In addition, all participating kindergarten directors, educators, and parents gave verbal and/or written consent to participate in

the project's research studies, guaranteeing anonymity and confidentiality of data collection.

2. Research on the teacher-child relationship during childhood transition

Achieving a comprehensive experience of a child's well-being in kindergarten depends on a number of different factors (Korthagen, 2004), among the most important of which are the educators' methodological competencies during transition and adjustment, and the opportunities to acquire them. Every educator works with the intention of achieving the maximum well-being of the child in all aspects of his/her development in his/her work. The child's well-being is ensured through his/her involvement in the daily educational program based on specific psychological, pedagogical and didactic approaches. At the same time, it is of utmost significance to think about children's well-being specifically related with socio-emotional developmental domain, because (s)he is mostly affected by the transition and adjustment situation (Tatalović Vorkapić, 2020, 2021a). Therefore, taking into account the context of the kindergarten, educators have the task of accepting and understanding each child, learning about his or her individual needs and interests, and finding appropriate pedagogical and psychological methods to ensure the realization of his or her socio-emotional and general well-being. Although all transitions elements are equally important as postulated by Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta (2000) within their theoretical model, the relationship with the child leaves a significant impression on the child's life (Tatalović Vorkapić, 2021b). A quality relationship between the child, parents, and educators is a prerequisite for his or her appropriate growth and development in the educational context. She or he builds the first and most important relationship with his family, and on this basis, other paths for his development are created. Close and loving relationships lead to secure attachment (Verschuere & Koomen, 2012). By being in nursery or kindergarten, the child enters a new social environment where he or she has direct contact with new people (adults and peers), which serves as a training ground for learning how to establish and maintain relationships with others. This new practice field is challenging for the child, and in a transition and adjustment situation, it becomes even more difficult (Mihčić, 2010). Therefore, it is very important to realize that the provision of social support and emotional security is only possible when a close and quality interaction is developed between the educator and the child. Therefore, this research was focused on exploring the quality of transition from family house to institution for early and preschool care and education and also, how this quality is

connected with relation between early childhood educators and children. Fifteen kindergarten teachers participated in the study and were given the task of assessing their relationship with the children in their groups (the sample consisted of 236 children) and task of performing the evaluation of transition quality in the preschool institution. With the aim of assessing the progression of transition and adjustment, preschool teachers performed rating on three items and with the aim of evaluating their relation with children, they made evaluations on 15 items from STRS (Pianta, 2001). Both rating have been done using Likert's scale with five points. The results obtained demonstrated the expected high degree of closeness and low degree of conflict assessed by the educators in their relationship with the children. In addition, mild degrees of certain problems during processes of transition and adjustment, enlarged degrees of satisfaction with transition and adjustment, ad enlarged degrees of contentment with cooperation with parents were established. Correlation analyses revealed that significantly higher levels of problems during transition and adjustment were related to lower degrees of contentment during transition and adjustment. A greater number of problems that appear along with the transition and adjustment was significantly related to children of younger age and lower satisfaction during transition and settling in. Finally, educators were found to assess significantly more conflicts with boys and younger children compared to girls and older children. Fewer conflicts with children were strongly related to greater satisfaction with children's transition and adjustment in kindergarten. On the other hand, significantly higher closeness to children is related to higher quality of cooperation with parents.

3. Research on attachment styles and childhood transition

Emotional safeness is a prerequisite for the appropriate development of physical and mental health, which a child receives through secure family ties (Šmojver-Ažić, 2020). Such a relationship is called a secure attachment. Children who have developed a secure attachment feel competent and confident enough to explore the world because they know that the person who cares about them is always with them. Such children have developed greater possibilities of concentration, can focus longer on a desired activity (Grossman et al., 1999) and have positive development (Collwell & Lindsey, 2003). On the other hand, there are children who are very anxious and agitated because they do not know if their attachment figure acknowledges their needs and their main focus is whether or not she is available to them (Petani, 2011). Study has revealed that a good, positive, and close relation between educators and children leads to higher levels of self-regulation and emotional development, better peer relationships, better motivation to learn, higher

attention, better problem solving, and better self-esteem in children (Pianta & Cox, 1999). Thus, the relationship between children and adults in an educational context has significant implications for children's cognitive, emotional, and social competencies at all levels of education. On the other hand, if this relationship is negative and inconsistent, it leads to poorer learning outcomes and negative behaviour patterns in the educational context. In early childhood, it is of a great significance for the child to develop a feeling of closeness and safety, and the family, which provides an incentive for the child to develop knowledge, skills, and habits, primarily develops such a sense. In a new environment, separation from the main caregiver can cause negative feelings in the child. Therefore, it is very important to scientifically study the relationship between the quality of transitions and attachment style in children entering kindergarten. Based on this point, the main objective of this study was to investigate preschool children's attachment styles based on preschool teachers' assessments and to examine their relationship with the course and quality of transition (Čuljak Prelec, 2020). Collaboration was established with three preschool education centres in Rijeka, Croatia. As a result, fourteen preschool teachers agreed to participate in this study and assess attachment styles and quality of transition in the sample of 151 children (72 of them were girls) with an average age of $M=2.51$ years (1-3.5 years). The Attachment Styles Scale (Tatalović Vorkapić, Čargonja-Pregelj & Mihić, 2015) was used to measure attachment behaviour in children. To measure the quality of transition, four items were used, related to satisfaction with cooperation with parents during transition, the extent of difficulties during transition and adjustment, satisfaction during and quality of transition, and difficulties in working with the child. For both variables, the rating was made on a Likert scale from 1 to 5 by educators. Moderately high levels of secure attachment patterns (support and closeness) and moderate levels of avoidance, rejection, and cold distance were found, which was expected. Moderately high quality of early and preschool children's transition and adjustment was determined. Specifically, moderately high quality of collaboration with children's parents and satisfaction with transition, moderate levels of adjustment difficulty, and low levels of work difficulty were established. Correlation analysis revealed a significant positive correlation between quality of transition and secure attachment. In addition, a significant negative correlation was found between avoidance behaviour and quality of transition. In other words, higher levels of transition quality (i.e., higher satisfaction with the transition process, better cooperation with parents, fewer transition difficulties, and easier work with children) were significantly related to higher levels of support and lower levels of avoidant attachment behaviours in children as assessed by educators.

Considering that the sample used in this study was rather small and not random, it is recommended to rerun similar research with a higher level of methodological quality so that safe generalizable conclusions can be drawn. In this case, it could be clearly established that attachment styles in children are related to the quality of transition, which should be the focus when considering the practical implications of this research.

4. Research on socio-emotional well-being and resilience in relation to childhood transition

The study of children's socio-emotional well-being and resilience during the transition from family to the institution for an early and preschool care and education (Tatalović Vorkapić, 2021c) was presented as a poster at the international conference held in Zagreb, Croatia. Given this significant impact of quality of transition in childhood, it is crucial to examine children's socio-emotional well-being and resilience during the transitional processes which appear after children enrol educational programs in kindergartens in relation to quality of transition and adjustment, which was the objective in this research. Having in mind this, these variables were examined from the perspective of the kindergarten teachers and the parents. The sample of 236 children (94 of them were girls) with a mean age of 5 years were assessed using the Positive Development and Resilience in Kindergarten Scale - PERIK (Mayr & Ulich, 2009; adapted by Tatalović Vorkapić & Lončarić, 2014). Socio-emotional well-being and resilience of preschool children was assessed by 15 educators working in their pedagogical groups in kindergarten and by 191 parents (148 mothers). Socio-emotional well-being and resilience were operationalized using the theoretical framework developed by Mayr and Ulich (2009), which consists of six socio-emotional domains: social skills, self-regulation, stress management, assertivity, focusing on task or activity, and enjoyment of exploration. In this context, PERIK also has six subscales designed to measure these domains. The quality of the transition from home to kindergarten was measured by three variables: estimated degree of difficulty during the adjustment, degree of satisfaction with the adjustment, and estimated cooperation with parents or caregivers during the transition process. All assessments were made on a Likert scale of 1-5 and had satisfactory levels of reliability. After obtaining the necessary permissions to conduct the research, the research procedure included cooperation with educators and parents, who began to fill in the applied scales. As expected, the determined values for the dimensions of socio-emotional well-being and resilience of preschool children were in a moderate to slightly elevated range, as the possible range of estimates was 1-5, which confirmed the results of previous

research. In addition, the scores obtained for quality of transition indicated moderate difficulties during transition and adjustment, and increased satisfaction with both the adjustment itself and the quality of collaboration between educators and parents from both perspectives, given the possible range of estimates of 1-5. Finally, as expected, all PERIK dimensions are significantly positively related in both parents' and educators' assessments. Some differences were found when comparing the parents' and educators' assessments. With regard to the parents' assessments, it can be stated that the lower the difficulties in the transition, the higher the satisfaction with the transition and the higher the quality of the cooperation with the educators. Moreover, the higher quality of cooperation with educators is associated with greater satisfaction with the transition. In addition, satisfaction with transition is significantly positively related to overall (all six dimensions) socio-emotional well-being and child resilience based on parental ratings. Significantly fewer transition difficulties were found among children with higher levels of social skills and emotional stability. The quality of collaboration with educators was also rated higher among children who enjoyed exploration more, were more assertive, and exhibited greater task orientation. The analysis of the educators' assessments shows that the lower the transition difficulties, the higher the satisfaction with the transition. Satisfaction with transition is partially significantly positively related to children's socio-emotional well-being and resilience, i.e., four dimensions: self-regulation, enjoyment in exploration, social skills, and stress management. In addition, higher quality of collaboration with parents was found among those children who scored high on all six PERIK dimensions, i.e., who had high overall socio-emotional well-being and resilience. Interestingly, the educators' assessments revealed significant associations between age and gender and some of the domains of socio-emotional well-being and resilience. For example, they estimated girls to be significantly more emotionally stable than boys, which was confirmed in a previous study (Tatalović Vorkapić & Lončarić, 2014). In terms of age, they estimated that older children had significantly less difficulty during transition and that they had significantly higher levels of all PERIK dimensions with the exception of enjoyment of exploration. To summarize, the relevant correlational analyses revealed significantly high levels of socioemotional well-being and resilience among those children who showed fewer difficulties during the adjustment; who were found to have high levels of satisfaction and cooperation with caregivers/parents during the transition and adjustment. Although it should be noted that these correlations were stronger among parents' assessments. The analysis of specific dimensions of children's socio-emotional well-being and resilience provides important scientific and practical

implications in this area that could serve as guidelines for improving practice, especially during childhood transition periods.

5. Research on transitional objects

This study on transitional objects (Tatalović Vorkapić, 2021d) is very important to be briefly presented here, as there is a significant shortage of related research worldwide. Transitional objects present a significant part of childhood transitions and they are defined as follows: "An object, typically a soft toy, chosen by an infant or child. Irreplaceable, the object is imbued with the child's feelings for and experience of his or her primary caretaker. The child uses the transitional object to aid the transition from primary dependence to independence" (Grossman et al., 1999; Wilson & Robinson 2002, p. 861). Thus, during the separation from the primary caregiver and the stay in a new environment, the child faces a certain level of discomfort and negative feelings that can be alleviated and comforted by the use of transitional objects. It provides a high level of security and comfort in these difficult situations. However, its function is not only to provide comfort, but also to allow the child to develop autonomy and independence, reducing the possibility of conflict with the environment. Most often, these transitional objects are balmy, tender toys (mostly teddy bears or blankets) or some other tender items which have known sense of smell for a child. Therefore, the key goal of this research was to investigate pre- and in-service educators' perceptions of their experiences with childhood transition and transitional objects. A non-random sample of N=287 pre-service (N=150) and in-service early childhood educators (N=137) (a total of four men), whose average age was 30 years of age, ranged from 18-64 years. In view of the research objective, a short questionnaire was developed and used, which took about 15 minutes to complete. It consisted of six questions: a) questions about socio-demographic data: age, gender, and length of service; b) and three open-ended questions describing their childhood transition experiences and transition objects, as well as the emotions respondents had derived from consolation provided by a favourite toy, i.e., transition object. In this study, a retrospective method was used to collect data on participants' childhood transition experiences. Qualitative data analysis led to the definition of 9 response categories: 1) the majority of participants had memories of transitions and transitional objects that emerged from family members' or parents' narratives, and transition experiences were described as mostly positive; 2) adjustment in nursery/kindergarten/school was mostly easy; 3) the first transition in childhood is the transition from home to kindergarten; 4) support during transition was provided by: parents, educators, family members; 5) 65

respondents indicated that they had transition objects; 6) feelings experienced during transition were mostly described as positive, then mixed, and finally as negative; 7) memories of educators were mostly positive and were described by the following qualities: kindness, friendliness, patience, and compassion of teachers; 8) memories of relationships with parents during transition were mostly described as positive and supportive; 9) participants indicated touch as the most important sense they expected to associate with transition objects. As expected, the majority of participants (N=54) reported having soft toys (teddy bear, rabbit, monkey, clown, etc.) as transition objects, or blankets or pillows for comfort (N=33). In addition, a small number reported having dolls as transition objects (N=13), pacifiers and bottles (N=6), and something else (e.g., ball, bag, etc., N=7). In conclusion, it is important to emphasize the importance of continuing this type of study, as the results have great significance for practice guidelines. Especially in light of the epidemiological intervention due to the Covid 19 pandemic, where children were not allowed to take their transition items to kindergarten, which caused a higher level of discomfort for children going through the transition period.

6. Research on transition of diverse children

As has already been emphasized, childhood transitions represent a rather difficult period in children's lives. However, when some specific characteristics of children, such as their diversity, are added to the already difficult situations, the situation becomes even more challenging. Although the contemporary Rimm-Kaufman's and Pianta's (2000) theoretical model of transition describes all significant elements of transition and their mutual relations trying to understand and explain transition trajectories, diverse characteristics of children are not considered in this model. Regarding this, the basic target of this case study was to explore the course and quality of the transition from home to kindergarten of a preschool-aged child with autism spectrum disorder and the significant transition determinants associated with it (Tatalović Vorkapić et al., 2022). It was hypothesized that variables such as: a) active interactions between child, his or her family, peers, kindergarten and the local community; b) good collaboration between children's parents, preschool educators, psychologists and pedagogues; c) distinct pedagogical approach and methods for work with specific difficulties of a child; d) familiarity with specific routines of child's family; and e) child's surrounding which is adequately stimulating for a child; are those ones which have strong positive effect on the quality of child's transition. Therefore, in this study case, two main research methods were used: a) observation of the behaviour of a child (6 years, male) with autism spectrum disorder in the kindergarten group;

b) and running an interview with child's mother, preschool teacher who worked with a child and his educational rehabilitator. Determined results revealed that the quality of transition was mostly affected by interpersonal factors such as: a) boy's caregivers' relations with his teachers; b) collaboration between caregivers and educational rehabilitator; c) and cooperation between educational rehabilitator and boy's preschool teacher. Furthermore, this study case revealed that some specific life situations play an important role in the quality of boy's transition from family to kindergarten. In this particular case, it was influenced by a pet's death and by moving and settling in a new place. Thus, these factors could be described as risk factors for the quality of the transition. In addition, this study has demonstrated that boy's diversity, pedagogical approach of preschool teacher and educational rehabilitator and simulative potential of his surrounding are significant determinants of his transition. Another factor seems to be very important, namely the number of children in the educational group. A smaller number of children leads to a better quality of transition of diverse children. Also, this study clearly revealed that practice of transition organization should have in mind the arrival time of a child with certain difficulties and the lasting in the inclusive kindergarten group with other kids. Since children with autism spectrum disorders are particularly concerned with routine, it was concluded that it would be efficient if boy come always at the same time, agreed according to educational group activities so to avoid any kind of possible frustration. So, the recommendation was for boy to come at early hours in morning or at late hours at the afternoon due to his high sensory sensitivity, because at those times there was a lowest level of noise and activities in the group and the smallest number of children. Final conclusion was based on the summary results from interviews. Boy has successfully adjusted in kindergarten during first year of enrolment since at that time there were twice as much children in that group than in the second year of enrolment. To summarize, the findings identified could serve as a solid foundation for planning future research studies and developing specific practical implications for inclusive education groups in relation to kindergarten transition practices.

7. Research on transition practices from different countries worldwide

Most countries have national basic documents, such as the National Curriculum for EPCE in Croatia (2014), which emphasizes the flexibility of the institution in creating optimal conditions for children's development in order to achieve their well-being. On the other hand, in many countries, as in Croatia, there are no clear policies and procedures in organizations, and transition practices differ significantly in both kindergartens and elementary

schools (Tatalović Vorkapić, 2020; Tatalović Vorkapić & LoCasale-Crouch, 2021). Early et al. (2001) run a research with 3,595 U.S. educators and they have determined quite diverse practices in organizing transition and adjustment in schools. In addition, studies have identified most frequent transition practices, and they were focused on the whole educational group of children and after children's enrolment at kindergarten (Early et al., 2001; Pianta et al., 1999). Specifically, 65% of kindergarten practices during transition are related to activities such as consigning a leaflet about the transition to the parent and child and giving a letter to the enrolled child, both after start of educational period, and organizing an open house for children, parents and other family members after enrolment. A smaller percentage of activities (59%) involved the same activities with additional activity of registration for school or district enrolment, which targeted the entire kindergarten group but occurred before the enrolment to kindergarten. In addition, 44% of kindergarten transition work occurred after enrolment and focused on individual interactions with a specific child or family; these included visits, conversations, or phone calls to the child's family after enrolment and relieving contact between parents of children in the same kindergarten group. Regarding coordination with preschool programs and the community, 36% of the activities were carried out. They included: availability of records about previous experiences or the child's psycho-physical condition; visits of school children to preschools and related programs in township; casual communication with early childhood educators on useful information about children; preschool children's visitations to elementary schools; formal encounters between teachers from kindergartens, preschools and elementary schools; and meetings aimed at developing coordination between preschool and elementary school curricula. Finally, 29% of the transition actions took place before children's enrolment with the focus on a certain child, i.e. at individual level. These activities included: home visits prior to enrolment; conversations with the child's parents prior to enrolment; phone calls with the child; facilitating contacts between parents of children in the same group prior to enrolment; and non-formal contacts between the children's educators. Similar to these practices, early childhood educators and elementary school teachers described their transition work in Iceland and Australia, emphasizing collaboration between kindergarten and primary school teachers or activities that take place before and after school enrolment (Einarsdóttir et al., 2008).

When conducting the study of transition practices in Slovenia, it was found that it is common to introduce all newly enrolled children at the same time at the beginning of the educational period, i.e. in September (Grozde et

al., 2021). However, in some preschools, enrolment is not organized only during September but it is prolonged throughout the whole year, if possible after maternity leave. In addition, the results have shown that the transition concepts and adjustment of children in kindergarten differ between different kindergartens. Slightly more than half of the preschools that participated in this study enrol children in September, and during that month parents may remain in the group for support. However, some early childhood educators continue to support parents to stay with their child in the group until the child is fully settled in the preschool, not just during September. The preschool teachers and preschool counsellors interviewed reported satisfaction with the adjustment in their preschools, estimating that duration of transitions in most groups of newcomers is about a week. A week is a very short time, so it is very difficult for preschool teachers to give individual attention to each child and parent. In contrast, educators from preschool settings where only a few children are admitted and introduced at a time, believe that such an adjustment is less stressful and that there is a greater opportunity to give more intensive and individualized attention to each child and their parents. As a result, they have shared their positive experience about their commination with each child and parent, since they felt they had more time individual conversations with them. On the other side, this results with the fact that each child had a more time in meeting new children and people and surrounding and to gradually separate from his or her caregivers. Therefore, the main conclusion of this research was to make a careful analysis of the present working conditions during the transitions, taking into account: the number of children enrolled; the number of educators in the group; the possibility of enrolling newcomers at different times (not all children at once) and throughout the year (not only in September); the flexibility in terms of the possibilities of parents or caregivers staying in the group during the transition.

Mihić's (2016) analysis of transition practices represents several collaborative studies conducted with kindergartens in Novi Sad, Serbia. Close observations of existing transition practices in kindergartens revealed that one of the most recommended activities before children start kindergarten are home visits by kindergarten teachers to children who will soon start kindergarten. In addition, children are strongly recommended to attend kindergarten and spend a lot of time with their parents in kindergarten before they are enrolled in kindergarten. The main purpose of these two activities is to create an environment for children that is familiar rather than new or unfamiliar, which consequently reduces the level of uncertainty and stress among children and parents during actual enrolment in kindergarten. In addition, it is important to create quality relationships with and around the

child as a key event during the transition. Key elements of the model: involving parents in planning and implementing the transition; developing the educator-child relationship; and developing the educator-family relationship during the transition. This model, called "Kindergarten as a Secure Base," proposes a gradual adaptation in which changes are introduced based on observation of children's and families' experiences in kindergarten. Observation is conducted by the family and the kindergarten teacher and is based on records about the child. The records are equally reports of the experiences of a child and parents, growing involvement in kindergarten activities, and relationships with peers and adults, as well as a way for parents and educators to focus on supporting the child's involvement and well-being. Observing a child and the support he or she receives from caregivers during the adjustment period identifies key features of the child's early care experiences. Also, this identifies the beliefs he or she has developed about the world and adults around him or her, as well as how he or she interacts, such as relationship patterns, emotional and behavioural patterns, and self-regulation skills. In this way, one obtains very early guidelines for strengthening the educator's sensitivity as one of the most important conditions for building a quality relationship with the child, but also guidelines for planning collaboration with the family and supporting the development of better child care at home. Finally, the model proposes that this should be taken into account in the design of initial education for early childhood educators.

Considering that the environment, more precisely the educational system, significantly determines the (in)successful transition and adjustment of each child, thus shaping the experiences made by each child's family through the way it is organized, it is extremely important to question the existing practices and the possibility of improving them. It is not uncommon for children's transitions and adjustments to be marked by stress triggered by various factors, and it is important to make them aware of this by creating practice guidelines to facilitate this challenging phase, which has strong short- and long-term effects on children's overall development. Therefore, the main objective of this first national study (Tatalović Vorkapić & Pauletić, 2020a) was to investigate educators' perceptions about the organization of transition and adjustment of children in kindergartens in Primorje-Gorski Kotar County through a survey. Overall, N=160 kindergarten teachers working in 12 kindergartens participated in this quantitative research. Participation was voluntary and data collection was anonymous and confidential. With the research objective in mind, a survey was created and applied to investigate the educators' attitudes towards the process and the organization of the adjustment. It was found that all kindergartens implement a certain form and

organization of adjustment of children in kindergarten, but kindergartens also differ in the type of practice they implement. The greatest areas of agreement are the use of an individualized approach to working with children during transitions, flexibility and gradualism in terms of time spent in the kindergarten, the presence of parents in educational group, and collaboration between parents and educators. These are key principles confirmed by modern research. However, there is no consensus on how to organize and implement these principles. Educators working in kindergartens reported that the adjustment takes an average of one month in nurseries and the same amount of time in kindergartens. Finally, the lack of professional support for educators during the transition and adjustment of children in nursery and kindergarten was highlighted.

In addition, the qualitative analysis of the collected data on educators' perceptions regarding the organization of children's adjustment in kindergartens in Primorje-Gorski Kotar County from the above-mentioned study was conducted (Tatalović Vorkapić & Pauletić, 2020b). In the absence of similar studies in our country, by applying a quantitative and qualitative approach to the collection and analysis of the results obtained, it is possible to gain a more complete insight into the organization of adjustment in kindergartens from the perspective of early childhood educators. Thus, in general, the qualitative analysis revealed that both similar and different practices exist in the adjustment of children in kindergartens. There is a developed collaboration with parents, but the instructions and organization of this collaboration vary. A distinct lack of objective indicators of successful adjustment was found, which is one of the most important guidelines for future research. It was found that educators' adjustment preparations vary and that their own role during adjustment is perceived differently. The results of this research clearly point to difficulties in practice related to working conditions: lack of pedagogues and psychologists, too many children enrolled, and too few educators working with children during the adjustment process. There is also a need for improvement in the area of methodical competencies of educators in the implementation of transition activities suitable for the adjustment period, which have several functions: the foundations of pedagogical work, the promotion of the full psychophysical development of children, the creation of new relationships, the acquisition of skills and the application of strategies for dealing with challenging situations, such as a transition with short- and long-term effects and an optimal adjustment in the new environment that achieves a high level of well-being for each child. Based on the research conducted, it is critical to provide professional support to educators in this part of educational practice and to implement examples of

best practices once established. Although a significant number of educators did not respond to the open-ended questions included in the qualitative analysis and the ability to generalize was limited, the findings proved to be highly significant and provide an important foundation for future research and practice improvement.

As this paper makes clear, described empirical research have revealed that many miscellaneous factors determine the quality of transitions and adjustment in kindergarten and school. However, according to the Rimm-Kaufman's & Pianta's transition model (2000), the characteristics of educators and the transition practices they use are among the most important factors. Thus, in the national studies (Tatalović Vorkapić & Katić, 2019a; 2019b), the main aim was to investigate educators' perceptions of the transition process, their transition practices in working with children and families, the difficulties they faced in their work, how they acquire their transition skills, and what should be changed in their study programs. In the first study (Tatalović Vorkapić & Katić, 2019a), the qualitative focused group method was used with six kindergarten teachers with different professional backgrounds, experience, and years of work (from 3 months to 35 years of kindergarten work). This research was run at the Faculty of Teacher Education in Rijeka. After written informed consent from the participants and qualitative analysis of the audio-visual recordings of the interviews with the focus group, three main themes were defined using thematic analysis: Determinants of transition/adjustment, risk factors, and directions for enhancing the success of transition/adjustment. All six educators agreed on defining transition and adjustment in kindergarten as a process with high dynamics, novelty, and challenges. Regarding the most important factors for transition and adjustment to kindergarten, all participants reported on some specific factors which are crucial for the quality of children's transition and adjustment to kindergarten: Characteristics of the children (e.g., their age), characteristics of the parents and family (e.g., their relationship with the child), properties of the kindergarten teachers (e.g., their personality), and working conditions (e.g., the high turnover among kindergarten teachers, especially in nurseries). They reported the following risk factors during transition and adjustment: children's risk properties (e.g., their previous experiences in new situations which were negative); parents' risk factors (e.g., their personality); educators' risk properties (e.g. inadequate communication that is indifferent and distant and similar type of relations with children and parents; work organization in the nursery (e.g., ineffective collaboration between educator and psychologist and/or educator in the same nursery). Finally, participants provided a set of guidelines to improve the quality of transition and adjustment: professional

support for educators regarding lack of transition skills; better collaboration and teamwork between two educators in the same group of children and collaboration with the psychologist and preschool teacher in the kindergarten; the opportunity to participate at group meetings during transition and reflections with other educators; and certain general guidelines for best practices during transition and settling in. Even though early childhood educators stated about their various positive and negative work experiences during transitions, they all emphasized that they strongly need to be professionally supported. They suggested to have the possibility to acquire transition competencies within their initial education as a part of their study programs or within lifelong learning programs.

Since early childhood educators play an important role as "significant others", both in terms of the successful transition and adjustment of children and in the collaboration with parents, it is crucial to ensure the acquisition of the needed transition competencies during the initial training of educators. Having this in mind the objective of this second research (Tatalović Vorkapić & Katić, 2019b) was to perform the analysis of present Croatian study programs for teacher education using qualitative research methodology with the purpose to provide an objective data regarding the opportunities for acquiring needed competencies for quality work with children and parents during periods of transition and adjustment. All higher education study programs for early childhood and preschool care and education of the publicly available information system of higher education institutions in Croatia were included in the analysis. As expected, it is determined that there are no explicit and straight connected study programs designed for gaining the competencies for working with children and parents during the transition and adjustment phase. Since there are very small number of courses that minimally address this issue, the question arises whether the required transition competencies are sufficient. The paper discusses the possibilities of modifying existing courses in teaching methods that would enable students to acquire the necessary competencies, as well as suggestions for the introduction of lifelong learning programs.

8. Conclusion

Based on the presented studies, conducted within a scientific project at the Faculty of Teacher Education, University of Rijeka, it can be concluded that the basic theoretical framework of the Ecological and dynamic model of transition (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000) was confirmed. Based on educators' and parents' assessments, it was found that most childhood transitions are positive and satisfying for children's and parents' well-being.

Significant correlates were found to be children's relationship with educators, children's attachment styles (based on their early relationship with primary caregivers), children's socio-emotional well-being and resilience, use of transition objects, specific needs and characteristics in planning and organizing transition for diverse children, and finally, characteristics of different educational systems and cultural backgrounds of countries worldwide, as transition practices vary greatly. Although research has shown that most children show good transition and adjustment in nursery/kindergarten, practices vary widely, educators' and parents' perceptions are different, educators have different experiences and lack skills that should be improved through modified study and lifelong learning programs and examples of good practices. Nonetheless, some clear conclusions can be drawn for transition practices, starting with identifying the child's strengths, how he or she learns, with whom he or she learns and develops new identities, what strategies he or she uses to deal with difficulties, and what his or her needs and interests are. It is important to cultivate the principle of gradualism when it comes to spending time in kindergarten after enrolment and supporting the development of a good educator-child relationship. Initial conversations and meetings with the child's family members must identify who the competent caregivers are for each child, i.e., the person who comes to kindergarten with the child. It should be possible to link old and new experiences in a familiar environment (e.g., home visits prior to enrolment; meetings with educators so that the child has the opportunity to meet the educators and teachers in the family prior to enrolment). It is also recommended to combine old and new experiences in an unfamiliar environment in kindergarten (e.g., visits and stays of children with families in kindergarten and school before enrolment). It is very important to build a partnership with parents/caregivers and support modern parenting. It is advisable to create such enrolment opportunities that are not limited in time (e.g., throughout the pedagogical year, not just in September). With regard to professional support for educators, it should be ensured that cooperation between educators of different educational levels is established, that a method for work during transition is developed, that objective indicators for monitoring the quality of transition are developed, and that high-quality study programs and programs for lifelong education of educators are offered with regard to the acquisition of high-quality transition competencies.

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