

From pre-school to school in Poland

Experience of the Comenius Foundation for Child Development

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Children in Poland begin their compulsory schooling at the beginning of the school year when they attain the age of 7. There is no compulsory pre-school education for children under 5, but local authorities have taken responsibility for running early childhood education programmes. However, faced with a difficult economic situation after the political changes of 1989, many local authorities closed them down without providing an alternative. The situation is especially serious in rural areas.

In the 2004–05 school year, only 35 percent of 3- to 5-year-olds attended pre-school (in rural areas the rate is 15 percent). In September 2004, a law was enacted requiring every 6-year-old child to complete one year pre-school preparatory class, either in a kindergarten or in a pre-school establishment based at a primary school. The ongoing debate is whether children aged 3 to 5 should also, by law, attend pre-school education (it is currently at parents' discretion).

To improve the situation, since 2003 the Comenius Foundation, with support from the Bernard van Leer Foundation, has been implementing the programme "Where there are no pre-schools" (WTANP) in cooperation with rural municipalities. The aim is to provide educational and child development activities for children in these areas. The programme helps establish educational centres for 3- to 6-year-olds in small towns and villages where there are no pre-schools. The centres are open several days a week, providing specific hours of educational activities. The curriculum focuses on children's self-esteem, self-reliance, curiosity and

social skills. Parents assist in running the centres and its activities.

After three years we asked for feedback from the teachers of the one-year pre-school preparatory class (for 6-year-olds) and the first class of primary school, on how the educational-centre children cope with a classroom situation. The results showed that the children were well prepared for learning at school, but that not all teachers were happy with these children. Some considered them troublemakers who interrupt the lesson. It turns out that these children are very curious, asking many questions. They also prefer working in groups and get easily bored during 'traditional' classes during which children have to listen and follow teachers' instructions. In addition, we received worrying feedback from some parents: children who had done well in the WTANP centres did not want to attend one-year pre-school preparatory class and some of them suffered from school neurosis (with symptoms such as stomach aches, vomiting and crying). The conclusion was that there was a problem of transition from pre-school to the 0 class to primary school, so we decided to focus on this.

Barriers to effective transition

In Poland, not enough significance is attached to the subject of transition. Even proper pedagogic terminology is lacking. Although each kindergarten is obliged to follow a programme to help children adapt to pre-school, it applies only to children who enter the kindergarten at age 3. These programmes are adequate for new pre-school groups but not

for individual children. In most cases, adaptation is treated as a formal requirement and is limited to one meeting with parents and one or two visits by the child to the kindergarten in June before the child starts school (September) and parent–teacher meetings at the beginning of the school year.

There are several barriers to the process of helping children to adapt to school:

- *low awareness of the significance of early childhood education*, resulting from ignorance of the importance of early childhood and its influence on the future education and life of children;
- *lack of national debate on children's education and development*. University courses in teacher training do not include international networking and thus are not sufficiently open to new methodologies and trends. A conservative approach to teacher training does not prepare future teachers and educators for cooperation with parents, an important element in the transition process;
- *lack of continuity between different levels of education*. Pre-school teachers and teachers of classes 1, 2 and 3 do not cooperate, but work separately. There are no mechanisms for them to develop educational and developmental strategies together;
- *lack of partnership between teachers and parents*. There are no mechanisms for parents to give their perspectives when developing educational programmes.

Practical solutions

In order to learn more on the subject of transitions, we collaborated with Dr Anna Kienig of the University of Białystok. Dr Kienig is one of the few academics in Poland specialising in transitions. We also joined the Special Interest Group on Transition, affiliated with the European Early Childhood Education Research Association (EECERA), which enabled us to see our Polish challenges from an international perspective and to collect information on the latest developments on the transition process.

We established a team of trainers and experts from the Comenius Foundation's partner organisations: the Adults for Children Association, the Astrid Lindgren Young Child Institute, and the Comenius Academy. The team developed a three-day training programme,

“Successful transition to school”, and prepared educational materials, targeted at pre-school teachers and educators (including those in WTANP educational centres) and teachers of the 0, 1, 2 and 3 classes.

The long-term goal of the programme is to build local coalitions for developing suitable conditions for the transition from pre-school to school. Short-term objectives include the development of teachers' knowledge and skills on the process of transition and adaptation; the development of cooperation between pre-schools and schools for successful transition and adaptation; and the preparation of teachers to develop programmes of transition in cooperation with parents.

The pilot training has been conducted in seven rural municipalities. One hundred and forty-nine educators and teachers working in the WTANP Educational Centres, pre-schools, 0 classes and primary classes 1, 2 and 3 participated in eight training sessions.

The pilot training showed there is a genuine need for such a programme, particularly for establishing cooperation between teachers from pre-school up to class 3. The teachers did not perceive the subject as cooperation between pre-school and school for the benefit of the children, but rather saw it as related to the process of adaptation and its associated difficulties. Typical for almost all training sessions was a tension between pre-school and primary school teachers, resulting from the common belief in Poland that the function of pre-school is to provide care for children, whereas ‘real’ education starts only at school. It took much of the trainers' time and effort to encourage participants to cooperate on developing joint programmes for creating a friendly environment for transition and adaptation.

The training revealed that the teachers significantly lack the skills necessary for cooperation with parents and are even reluctant to do this. It also disclosed a lack of knowledge among the teachers on the transition process. The questionnaire at the end of the programme included the following answers to the question: What was the most surprising thing during the workshops?

- what the child really feels about coming to school after attending pre-school;



The training helped teachers to become aware of the process of adaptation – what the child feels and imagines

- that the child encounters so many difficulties in the process of adaptation;
- that it is possible to use pre-school methods at school;
- that it is so difficult for the child to adapt to school after the 0 class.

There was also very positive feedback from the teachers who found the content relevant for their school/pre-school work and highly valued the educational materials. On the topic of what the participants gained from the workshops, teachers mentioned as most important:

- learning new ways of working with parents;
- becoming aware of the process of adaptation – what the child feels and imagines;
- knowledge about the adaptation process and the behaviour of child and parent during the transition period;
- understanding the differences and similarities between school and pre-school.

The result of the training is 13 transition programmes developed by the participants, all assuming cooperation between school and pre-school teachers and parents. Feedback from the

teachers is optimistic. They began to implement the transition programmes through consultation with parents who, asked for their opinions the first time, were surprised and shy, but soon proposed new transition activities for children.

The implementation of the transition programmes will be monitored. The “Successful transition to school” training is included in the teacher in-service programme of the Comenius Academy. We now plan to train the teachers working in the municipalities and implementing the WTANP programmes.

We have also started a new training module which will include a project approach to the transition process as well as the active participation of parents. As other countries are also interested in the issue of transition, we have invited the following organisations to be our partners on this training programme: the Early Years Organisation (NIPPA) in Great Britain; the Society for the Development and Creative Occupation of Children (EADAP) in Greece; Unia Materskich Centier in Slovakia; and Český výbor Světové organizace pro předškolní výchovu (OMEP) in the Czech Republic.