

**CROSS EUROPEAN PROJECT TO DEVELOP A MODEL OF SUPPORT
FOR TRANSITIONS FROM PRE SCHOOL TO PRIMARY SCHOOL
WITH PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT**

Executive Summary of O3 Consolidated Focus Group Report

PSPS PROJECT (2021-1-IE01-KA201-066024)

Prepared by MCA



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Introduction

O3 of PSPS project is a consolidated report analysis of the outcomes of focus groups carried out in five partner countries, namely Bulgaria, UK, Ireland, Cyprus, and Serbia. The focus was on understanding the needs and priorities of parents and children during the transition from pre-school to primary school, with a particular emphasis on vulnerable and seldom-heard groups. A total of 12 focus groups with around 60 parents and 13 individual interviews were conducted. The report presents a concise and insightful picture of the challenges faced by parents and children from various social strata. There were no extreme differences in the needs and wants of parents and children regarding the transition process across countries. However, differences were found in terms of available state financial support, schools' capabilities to accommodate children's disabilities, and the quality of specialized staff as well as the support families receive during the transition process.

Below, is a comprehensive summary of all questions discussed during the parents focus groups.

1. Impact disadvantage/vulnerability on early education:

Parents of children with disabilities in Bulgaria expressed concerns about the lack of specialized staff and resources, which hinders the quality of education. Parents from economically disadvantaged backgrounds faced financial barriers to accessing quality education. In Cyprus, parents reported adjustment difficulties for their children, including unease with school premises, academic challenges, and difficulty adjusting to school routine. Parents in Ireland recognized community-based preschools as understanding the particular needs of families better than schools, but expressed concerns about delays in accessing therapeutic help for children with disabilities. In Serbia, the main disadvantages were language and social skills barriers, while the British partner did not involve participants in questions regarding their disadvantaged situation and transition to primary school.

2. Inclusion measures offered to children and parents so far (type of funding – state sponsored, child service, etc):

Bulgaria provides state allowance for parents raising a child with a disability, but no specific funding for educational purposes. Cyprus offers assistance to children with difficulty adjusting to school life. Ireland has universal and targeted supports for inclusive education, but not all parents are aware of them. Serbia offers free meals for economically disadvantaged children through a local NGO. The UK offers free early entitlement funding for two-year-olds and income support from universal credit.

3. Assistance of a specialist in the process of transition

Most of the countries lack specialized support for parents and children during the transition period. In Bulgaria, parents of children with disabilities face great difficulties in ensuring the necessary accommodations for their children. In Ireland, AIM workers, preschool practitioners, and occupational therapists are involved in supporting the transition, while in Cyprus, the head teacher provides assistance. In Serbia, a Roma Teacher's Assistant is appointed by the state to help with the transition, but they cannot provide adequate help due to the large number of children they are responsible for. In the UK, support is provided by mentors, SENCOs, and nursery staff.

4. Preparation of the child for the process of transition to the primary school (within the family / within the education setting)

Bulgarian parents of neurotypical children had discussions and visited the school to prepare for transition. Parents of children with ASD made attempts to mimic the new routine. Parents of children with disabilities received little help from the school. Parents from economically disadvantaged backgrounds verbally prepared their children for school and visited the school premises. Parents from ethnic minorities lacked resources and information from the school. Cypriot parents discussed what to expect and children visited the primary school. Irish parents praised the role of preschool and positive reinforcement. Serbian parents could not afford nursery or kindergarten but mandatory preschool programme helped. UK nursery organized a cooking project to aid transitions.

5. What are some common challenges that families face when transitioning their child to primary school in the countries mentioned in the previous question?

In Bulgaria, parents of children with disabilities faced a challenging transition process due to a lack of help from the school, with the institution mainly requesting proof of evaluation of the child's condition by a healthcare professional. Parents report that they had to respond to many questions asked by the school administration upon enrolling their child, and most of those questions regarded the child's condition, with very little emphasis on what their needs would potentially be.

In Cyprus, parents report that one of the common challenges faced when transitioning their child to primary school is explaining the differences between kindergarten and primary school, including the increased size of the building, the greater number of children, and the focus on daily lessons and studying. Parents also mentioned that some children may experience anxiety about the new environment, and may need additional support in adjusting to the new routine.

In Ireland, one of the common challenges that families faced was ensuring that the child has a positive attitude toward school. Parents report that they prepared their children for the transition by speaking positively about what the child will learn at school and reinforcing the idea at home that school is 'good.' For the family of a foster child with complex physical and intellectual disabilities, challenges included ensuring that all necessary equipment was in place before the child moved services and ensuring continuity between preschool, school, and early intervention services.

Families in Serbia, particularly those who are illiterate, face a significant challenge in preparing their children for the transition to primary school. While younger, these children could have been enrolled in nursery and/or kindergarten programs, but parents could not afford it since such services are not free of charge in Serbia.

In the UK, one common challenge that families faced was helping the child adjust to the new routine and environment. Some parents report that their children experience anxiety or worry about the new school, which can impact their ability to adjust to the new setting. To address this, nurseries and schools may use specific strategies and activities to help children feel more comfortable with the transition, such as a cooking project organized by the nursery and offered to all the parents.

6. Recommendations to the specialists working in the field of early childcare and education:

Parents from Bulgaria, Cyprus, Ireland, Serbia, and the UK have made various recommendations to specialists in the field of early childcare and education to support children's transitions from kindergarten to primary school. Recommendations include more frequent individual meetings with parents, emphasis on children's talents and interests, supporting the full inclusion of all children, finding ways to make the difference between kindergarten and primary school less intense, formalized transition support materials, consistency in staffing/personnel, passing information between services (kindergarten to primary school), and more interaction between specialists, nurseries, and schools

7. Major obstacles faced by children in the process of transition:

Parents across Bulgaria, Cyprus, Ireland, Serbia, and the UK identified a range of obstacles their children face during the transition to primary school. These obstacles included emotional unpreparedness, lack of social skills, language barriers, Covid restrictions, unfamiliar school routines, fear of the unknown, lack of support, and inadequate communication between nurseries, families, and schools. Children with disabilities or from economically disadvantaged backgrounds were found to be particularly vulnerable during the transition process. The size of school buildings and the number of people present were cited as additional obstacles in Cyprus, while in Ireland, the lack of a standardized approach to transitions and cultural differences contributed to a less successful transition process. Overall, parents were concerned about their children's ability to adapt to new environments and situations, and the impact that a difficult transition could have on their child's academic and emotional development.

8. Children's expectations around their transition:

In Bulgaria, children's expectations about their transition to pre-school are similar regardless of their ability or background. They expect to have fun, learn new things, make friends, and receive positive feedback from their teachers. However, parents of children with disabilities worry about their child's ability to fit in and keep up with the pace of learning. Children from ethnic minorities or economically disadvantaged backgrounds have similar expectations to other children.

9. Shared good/bad experiences regarding the transition process, the challenging situations and what triggers the successful transition:

The parents of neurotypical children in Bulgaria found transition activities organized by the kindergarten to be helpful, while parents of children with disabilities emphasized the importance of keeping a close connection with the primary teacher and gathering necessary documentation. In Cyprus, parents were pleased with the help provided by teachers but had negative experiences with their children being upset and nervous on the first day of school. Covid was a prevalent theme in Ireland, with creative solutions found to counteract the challenges caused by restrictions and lockdown. Parents in the UK reported that children who started school in 2021 are doing well, but it would have been better if they had been able to physically go into the school before starting the new school year.

10. Gaps identified in the transition practices, which need to be filled:

Parents in Bulgaria, Cyprus, Ireland, Serbia, and the UK have identified various gaps in the transition practices from pre- to primary school. These gaps include the lack of joint policies and guidelines, insufficient support for children with disabilities, limited exchange of information between kindergartens and schools, and inadequate resources and support for vulnerable families. Parents also suggest more practice and exposure to primary school lessons before transitioning, better communication between preschools and parents, and equal opportunities for every child to have a positive transition experience.

11. Parents' description of meaningful/good transition from preschool to primary school:

Bulgarian parents emphasized ongoing emotional and academic support for children, while parents facilitate independence through activities. Parents of children with disabilities and ASD stressed the importance of resources, accommodations, and support. Cyprus parents emphasized practical experience, preparation, and familiarity with the school building and duties. Irish parents prioritized information sharing, communication, and trust with practitioners and teachers. Serbian Roma parents sought state support for their children's language and social development, as well as personalized support from a Roma Teachers Assistant. UK parents expressed a desire for the best for their children but were uncertain about what that looks like or what to ask for.

12. Best ways identified by parents for supporting children in the transition period:

In Bulgaria, parents suggested establishing cooperation between preschool and school, discussions and mental preparation for children with disabilities, funding and inclusion for children with ASD, and transparent communication for economically disadvantaged families. In Cyprus, parents recommended getting to know the primary school through practice and play. In Ireland, better communication between services and a standardized approach were desired, while in Serbia, teachers' assistants, maintaining established groups, learning through play, after-school learning and activities, and free school meals and textbooks were suggested. In the UK, parents suggested using positive language, engaging in transition events, sharing photos, and talking about school at home.

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