



## The transition to preschool: a problem or an opportunity for children? A sociological perspective in the context of a 'split system'

Gaëlle Amerijckx & Perrine C. Humblet

**To cite this article:** Gaëlle Amerijckx & Perrine C. Humblet (2015) The transition to preschool: a problem or an opportunity for children? A sociological perspective in the context of a 'split system', *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 23:1, 99-111, DOI: [10.1080/1350293X.2014.991098](https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2014.991098)

**To link to this article:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2014.991098>



Published online: 19 Jan 2015.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 266



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## The transition to preschool: a problem or an opportunity for children? A sociological perspective in the context of a ‘split system’

Gaëlle Amerijckx\* and Perrine C. Humblet

*CRISS - École de santé publique, Université libre de Bruxelles, Bruxelles, Belgium*

This article discusses the central issue of the transition to preschool. Individual semi-structured interviews with school professionals and parents in the Brussels region revealed that this issue is crucial for the well-being of young children, from both an educational and a social perspective. We discovered that the education system works under the assumption that nearly every child has attended daycare before entering preschool. This has serious implications since using these services, which help to prepare children for preschool, is socially differentiated. Children who have to cope with their first socialisation outside the family environment and their first encounter with the school environment at the same time face many problems. Not only does it define their first school experience; more importantly, it contributes to shape their entire experience of preschool, with potential long-term harmful effects. The article discusses the corresponding implications for the school system and puts forward recommendations.

**Keywords:** transition; child; preschool; socialisation; well-being; school culture

### Introduction

#### *Transitions*

*Transitions* are complex phenomena: they involve changes in situations that may vary in their nature, their intensity and even their scope. We will be referring here to *transitions* as:

[...] key events and/or processes occurring at specific periods or turning points during the life course. They are generally linked to changes in a person’s appearance, activity, status, roles and relationships, as well as associated changes in use of physical and social space, and/or changing contact with cultural beliefs, discourses and practices, especially where these are linked to changes of setting and in some cases dominant language. They often involve psychosocial and cultural adjustments with cognitive, social and emotional dimensions, depending on the nature and causes of the transition, the vulnerability or resilience of those affected and the degrees of changes and continuity of experiences involved. (Vogler et al. 2008, 1)

We will be solely considering *vertical transitions* (Vogler et al. 2008) in the school system in terms of beginning preschool. The latter is a crucial transition for young children: not only is it often one of the few transitions they have experienced, it is also a

---

\*Corresponding author. Email: [gaelle.amerijckx@ulb.ac.be](mailto:gaelle.amerijckx@ulb.ac.be)

milestone in terms of their educational experience since it is their first encounter with the school system. It is furthermore suggested that first experiences of transition may influence the future experiences of transition (Dunlop 2003). The social dimension of this experience must also be considered (Dunn 1994; Thorpe et al. 2012). However the issue of this transition to preschool is poorly documented in comparison to the transition from preschool to primary school (Ahtola et al. 2011; Rous et al. 2010; LoCasale-Crouch et al. 2008; Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta 2000).

### ***Early childhood education and care in Belgium***

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in Belgium is split between the Welfare (0–3 years) and the Education (3–6 years) Ministries.

Under the age of three, children have access to various childcare services, most of which are collective services. Childcare services are mainly public and semi-public and they charge fees based on families' incomes. In terms of attendance, the coverage rate in Brussels was 42.4% in 2010 for children under the age of two and a half (author's calculation based on regional data: ONE 2010; Kind en Gezin 2010).

At that age, children can enter the school system through preschool. In addition to this criterion, schools expect children to be toilet-trained. Children are then assigned to a specific class (*M0*) before the three-year preschool cycle (*M1-3*). Although schools are required to organise at least three *M0* admission periods during the school year (September, January and April), some go further and allow ongoing admission throughout the year. Each school has its own regulations so children are sometimes gathered in mixed-aged groups, usually comprising two consecutive levels. Group sizes vary widely between classes and schools.

Compulsory education begins at the age of six, so the use of preschool relies solely on parental choice. The service is free of charge and almost all children aged between three and five attend it. In Brussels, 96.9% of children aged between two and a half and five attended preschool in 2007–2008 (Humblet 2011). Though these figures do not reveal children's attendance throughout the week, they indicate the importance of preschool for families, who often see it as preparation for primary school.

There are two types of preschool professionals in the French-speaking school system: *teachers*, who have completed three years of higher-education and are in charge of the classroom, and *nursery assistants*, who have received vocational training and are, depending on resources available, appointed to *M0* classes to assist teachers.

### ***The Brussels context***

Brussels is a unique region given the heterogeneity of its population and the complexity of its institutional framework, which is a product of historical and political agreements. Indeed, four distinct levels of decision-making (federal, regional, local and community) apply to the territory, all of which have specific, though sometimes overlapping, competences and for the latter level there are two distinct linguistic communities. For political reasons, language censuses are prohibited, but it is estimated that roughly half of the people who live in Brussels do not have French or Flemish as their mother tongue. In terms of the education system, 78.5% of children were attending French-speaking preschools in 2009–2010, with 21.5% attending Dutch-speaking preschools (IBSA 2012). As far as migration flows are concerned, half of all newborns have a mother

who is not Belgian; 18.3% are from the UE27, 11.4% from the Maghreb, 6.1% from Sub-Saharan Africa and 6.7% from other countries (Minsart et al. 2011).

### **General framework and aims of the study**

Our study aims to outline well-being issues for children aged from two to eight who live in the Brussels region.

Our theoretical framework relies on a socio-ecological approach of children's situations, with a special focus on institutions. Child well-being is considered with regards to Bronfenbrenner's four system levels (1979), with emphasis on micro- and meso-systems. In light of his revised model (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006), well-being is studied in terms of *proximal processes*, which '... are posited as the primary mechanisms producing human development' (795) and which are affected by the characteristics of the *Person*, the *Context* and the *Time*.

As for the notion of *child well-being* itself, though there is no consensus on a definition, there is consensus on its *multidimensional* nature and the need to focus on the positive aspects of well-being, not just on the negative aspects (Pollard and Lee 2002). In line with our general framework, both of these characteristics were used as the basis for the research. Meanwhile, a more consistent theoretical approach to the notion was developed (Amerijckx and Humblet 2014).

## **Methodology**

### **General data collection and sample characteristics**

Starting with children's main microsystems, their home and school environments, data were collected from two groups of respondents: parents and school professionals, through semi-structured individual interviews. Both groups were treated as experts based on the experience gained in their daily contact with children.

The main topics of investigation among the parents were: the composition of the household and its financial and housing situation; the neighbourhood; the family's social contacts and activities; and the child's childcare pathway, health and general well-being. With the professionals, the following topics were discussed in relation to child well-being: the classroom and school environments; the contacts with parents, the neighbourhood and peers; and afterschool activities.

This structure aimed to begin with children's immediate environment (microsystems) and follow on from there. Given the theoretical framework, the topics were examined in a continuum of time and space. The parents were thus invited to retrace the events since their child's birth, whereas the professionals were asked about their year-round practices.

The notion of *child well-being* was also briefly examined with both groups, and we therefore wanted to learn more about the interviewees' own perspective.

Data were collected in four areas of the Brussels region, based on three criteria: the proportion of children in the population; the population's average level of income; and the availability of green areas (Table 1). Each area corresponds to an administrative grouping (IBSA 2007).

In each area, French-speaking households with at least one child aged between two- and eight-years-old were eligible for the interviews; the parents were contacted in two different ways. The first method implied a random selection of households, based on a

Table 1. Criteria of areas selection.

	Density of Children	Level of Income	Availability of green areas
Area 1	High	Low	Intermediate
Area 2	High	Low	Low
Area 3	Intermediate	Intermediate	High
Area 4	Intermediate	High	High

population list obtained from the local council. In addition to mailing, the homes were visited in order to increase the response rate. The second method involved systematic and direct contact with parents attending a child health consultation for children under the age of six. For both methods, a future meeting was arranged to allow the researcher to see the families in their home environments and to ensure optimum conditions for the interviews.

The professionals were contacted through their schools. Within each of the four areas, French-speaking education institutions were contacted by mail and then by phone and asked to participate in the study. On the basis of schools' agreement, the professionals were then contacted individually in the school. The interviews were scheduled to suit professionals and were all conducted on site.

The entire sample includes 50 interviews with parents and 33 interviews with school professionals (Table 2). They were carried out between May 2010 and October 2011. All of the recorded interviews (77) were transcribed; for the others – six interviews with parents – an extensive written account was drawn up.

### *Qualitative analysis*

Analyses followed an *inductive approach*, based on the *Grounded Theory*. In this regard, the transition to preschool emerged as an essential aspect of well-being: not only did it relate to multiple factors, actors and environments, it also had implications over time.

Let us note that although mainly the professionals discussed transition, this does not imply that the parents were indifferent to it, rather, it is an issue that primarily concerns schools and their professionals, as the main mediators in that environment so they are more aware of it. Another explanation could be that parents have little role in the school process. As a consequence, the parents' responses related mainly to events in the children's day-to-day lives. Here we will combine the individual (through parents'

Table 2. Description of the samples.

	Professionals		Families Parents
	Preschool	Primary school	
Area 1	8	11	13
Area 2	5	1	12
Area 3	5	2	13
Area 4	0	1	12
TOTAL	18	15	50

Table 3. Sample of preschool professionals.

	Sex	Age range	Years experience	Preschool levels		
				M0-1	M1-2	M2-3
Area 1	F	23–40	2–16	3	0	5
Area 2	F	27–48	5–27	2	2	1
Area 3	F	31–49	1–27	3	0	2
TOTAL	17F	23–49	1–27	8	2	8

perspective) and the institutional (through professionals' perspective) approaches to this social phenomenon (Van Campenhout 2010).

Accordingly, the reference sample of professionals comprises 18 preschool professionals, *teachers* or *nursery assistants* (Table 3), in addition to a school's secretary who is in charge of contacts with families, especially initial contact.

## Results

### *The expected institutional milestones*

Our key finding relates to the implicit expectations that the school system formulates in terms of children's *readiness* for preschool, as regards their level of development, socialisation and autonomy. This is striking because the attendance is optional and the admission officially depends solely on a child's age. The education system works under the basic assumption that nearly every child has attended childcare services. Be it true or false, this assumption has many implications, as we will see, and it may explain some of the orientations regarding curricula, teachers training or even child-staff ratios.

### *Childcare services as a first experience of socialisation outside of the family environment*

Childcare services constitute children's *first opportunity of socialisation outside the family environment*. This experience will present many challenges for children, although we will only discuss those that relate to the transition to preschool.

From the interviews with the professionals, we identified three types of issues specifically encountered by children going to childcare services, which, if overcome successfully, help them to build up a *capital* of resources useful through and beyond the transition to preschool. We listed them as: (1) *institutional issues*; (2) *relational issues*; and (3) *individual issues*.

Childcare services function in a specific manner, based on legal regulations and their own identities and characteristics. In that context, the professionals noted that it is the first time that children would *experience* a series of *rules* and a *timetable* drawn up specifically for a community, and this therefore differ from the family's set-up, which has much greater emphasis on individual needs and characteristics and is thus much more flexible.

Well, I think that a child that arrives in a place where his habits are turned upside down, it generates anxiety for sure for the child. That I believe. ... And so it's true that a child who

comes from a day-nursery, well, is accustomed to a certain rigor, to a certain structure ... that maybe a child who's brought up home wouldn't have as. ... I'd say a structure as hard as the one from a day-nursery, where you live in a community. (School's Secretary)

The relational issues concerned the core challenge of *peers' socialisation*, according to the professionals. Since the child–staff ratio in childcare services cannot match the ratio at home, children have to deal with various types of interaction, specifically with their peers, without constant adult mediation. They will thus have the opportunity to engage in prior contact, at their own pace and according to their own capabilities, with other children of their own age.

Children will also face specific challenges at an individual level. Indeed, as the professionals pointed out, the environment encourages them to develop their *autonomy*. Similarly, they are forced towards multi-recipients contacts, which will require them to learn the *institution's language*. Overall, these conditions will fuel their *awakening* on a social level.

[...] but it's true that you really see the difference between [with] children who have been to a day-nursery, that [they] are a little bit more awake either in terms of language [or] in the way of doing things or expressing themselves. We really see the difference. (M0-1 Nursery Assistant)

Together, these aspects highlight the expectations that preschools have of the children entering their classrooms. Far from disregarding the input of parents, we feel that the comments by the professionals underline the situations that childcare services, as specific communities, help to create for children.

#### *Preschool as a first encounter with the school environment*

When entering preschool, children will *encounter the school environment for the first time*. Like all institutions, preschools have their own way of operating, their own agendas and their own values system. Children will thus have to discover, understand and integrate all of those aspects in their daily lives at school. In this regard, the professionals emphasised two specific issues.

On an institutional level, this *first encounter* with the school environment is crucial. Consequently, the teachers' ability to make *timetables* and *rules* intelligible for children is central since these are immediate and obvious constraints for children used to more freedom, as the professionals noted.

So, what I do at the beginning of the year, I take two full months to do it, is to explain well to them the locations in classrooms. I explain them well how the classroom works, how to take games, that ... we tidy up. That it is their space and that this as well ... it has to stay tidy and nice, so they would respect the place where they are. It makes them independent as well, but it also makes them more confident when they enter the classroom. (M2 Teacher)

*Peers' socialisation* was again highlighted as a crucial issue for children in preschool, in order in this case for developing friendships. Larger group means more children to interact with and this affects children differently. For those reasons, groups of mixed ages were sometimes presented as an asset: older children help younger ones to cope with these tense situations by initiating prior contact or by acting as 'protectors' against other children.

Yes, it [school] brings a lot, you know. It brings all the child's opening up, all the learning. [How?] Well, first he's going to make friends, he's ... it's mostly about that in preschool, you know. Because they're not really used to having mates and friends, and so they're going to start having a little clan, their own group, their little ... well, it's pretty funny to watch. (M1 Teacher)

On a relational level, the professionals also emphasised the *common values* that form the basis of all interactions within the school environment; values that the children are encouraged to apply in all interactions, regardless of where they are.

We work a lot on cooperation among children, it's important because there are always some who have it easy for certain things. And so they've got to help [each other], because sometimes it'll be the other way around. And so those are values that are important, that school can more easily instill, because with parents it'll be more theoretical. And here it's in the everyday routine. (M2-3 Teacher)

On an individual level, children are pushed towards greater *autonomy*, both on purpose and by necessity. As school's characteristics, such as layouts or child-staff ratios, will affect the children's level of independence.

Autonomy. ... Autonomy ... that they get firstly from school, of course. [How?] Well for instance, you should know that here in preschool, from early on, they have psychomotor classes. But first to be able to go to psychomotor classes, they have to be able to take off and put back on their shoes themselves. Inevitably they become autonomous. (School's Secretary)

Moreover, preschool curricula introduce the terms 'learning' and '*skills*' and, as professionals pointed out, the children are encouraged, throughout the day by means of various activities to: behave (physically and socially), communicate (mainly verbally), and express themselves (especially through art). Finally, the nature of the professionals' training and educational goals means that they inevitably put less emphasis on the *nurturing aspects*. They said that this is an important issue for children used to regular physical contact.

Yes, I wanted to say that for the intermediate class [M0], affection is very very important. Because there are some teachers that pass over affection, that handle the little ones as they could handle the biggest ones. And, I don't think that's fine. I think that affection really has an enormous importance, and we see it. There are some very impressive results, I think. I am a real 'mother hen' and ... the children quickly felt good. (M0 Teacher)

According to the professionals, children who have been to childcare and experienced the community life of an educational institution are better equipped to deal with these various challenges. However, as the next section will show, the proportion of children who have been to childcare services is far from 100%. Therefore the preschool experience will, in many ways, be highly challenging for a lot of children.

### ***The discrepancies with reality***

#### *Families' actual relation towards childcare services*

Out of the 50 families interviewed in our study, 28 reported the use of childcare services for their children (Table 4). This figure certainly contradicts the idea that nearly every child under the age of two and a half goes to childcare services before preschool.



Table 4. Status of use of ECEC services by area's level of income.

	Users  Non-users	Level of income
Area 1	2 11	Low
Area 2	8 4	Low
Area 3	7 6	Intermediate
Area 4	11 1	High
TOTAL	28 22	

The areas' wealth indicator (Table 3) shows a direct relation between childcare use and the area's level of wealth (10/25 = low; 7/13 = intermediate; 11/12 = high). Although this trend does not hold any statistical value, it reflects an otherwise confirmed socio-economically differentiated use of childcare services among the population (Meulders et al. 2009). Given that parents' work status is a criterion of prior access to childcare services, the potential effect on attendance rates can be deduced. In our sample, although some parents' work status had changed over time, all the mothers of children who did not attend childcare services were unemployed at the time and took care of their children themselves.

As for the potential needs of those non-user families, the parents' response was invariably: 'Why would I send my child to a service when I am at home and not working?' For these parents, childcare services clearly serve the *economic function* (Vandenbroeck 2006). In contrast, the families who use childcare services generally underlined the additional *social* and *educational functions* of these services (Vandenbroeck 2006), when discussing the benefits for their children.

#### *The sociology of families who do not use childcare services*

This unequal use is reinforced by another factor: non-user families were mostly non-native speakers (Table 5). Indeed, the majority (16/18) had recently immigrated to Belgium and some of the parents were still in the process of learning French. For those families, preschool was often their children's first opportunity for contact with native speakers and thus with French.

Following on from this, those 18 mothers (first-wave immigrants) who had been the children's prior carer had no experience themselves of the local educational system and were thus unfamiliar with it. How, then, could they convey relevant information to their child about the experience of preschool as a social and educational body? And how could they prepare or help their child for preschool?

#### *Preschool for children unfamiliar with childcare services*

For children who did not attend childcare services, preschool will be their *first experience of socialisation outside the family environment*. Although older, the experience

Table 5. Mothers' characteristics among non-user families of ECEC services.

	First-wave immigrants	Belgian by birth	Total
Native French speakers	2	4	6
Non-native French speakers	16	0	16
TOTAL	18	4	22

will still be challenging for these children since preschool, as we have seen, is not designed to offer children's their first experience of socialisation outside the family environment. Moreover, they have to address those issues while simultaneously addressing the issues specific to their *first encounter with the school environment*. According to the professionals, those children will have to cope with a tremendous amount at once.

At the end of the year, they're already a group where we've learned pre-skills, mathematics, awakening, etc. For the others [not been to ECEC], there are some with, since September, who we are still learning to put on the coat. ... They don't know! There's a big hollow from that perspective. But when they get out of Intermediate class [M0], they are ready to go to first year [M1], so they are able to go to the bathroom alone, they don't wear dippers anymore, they know how to eat and all. (M0 Teacher)

If that is not enough, the family's lack of knowledge, or even ignorance, the school culture (including its language) and its expectations will put those children at further disadvantage. As previously discussed, there is a social segmentation in the distribution of families not using childcare services. Consequently, the children from those families will arrive unprepared and ill-equipped to cope with most of preschool challenges, as the professionals concluded.

You should not forget as well that we have children who are not prepared to come to school. So they go to bed on the 30, 31st of August without knowing that the next morning they're going to be catapulted, because that's really that in class, and they don't know at all what they're going to do here. (M0-1 Teacher)

Finally, the professionals identified specific relational issues for some children who are raised at home. Many of them underlined the intensity of some mother-child bonds, which invariably lead these dyads to endure a painful separation. More precisely, they talk about 'crying routines' from mothers when their child goes to school. They also stressed the consequent negative effects on children's mood and attitude while in school.

They have to separate from their child, they're frightened and of course the child follows that. That's the problem, it's that ... if the mother cries about school, it means that it isn't good, and in the child's head it spins. That's why we invite them every morning in class, why we do trips with [them], so they see too, they know the classroom, they see the classroom. (M0 Teacher)

We are unable to put these views into context since none of the families we interviewed reported any such difficulties. Any difficulties they did mention all referred to an extremely limited period of time after the start of preschool and only concerned the children. However, we feel that *families' global social networks* (equating to family and social networks) may be of interest here, since they can serve, among many things, as a mediator of *maternal relationship*. When considering both types of networks, it appeared that most of the families who did not use childcare services had a reduced *general social network*, affected primarily by a small *social network* since the size of the *family network* was rather evenly spread across the group.

### ***Well-being prospects***

The issues previously raised relate more generally to *child well-being* in the school environment. In that context, the professionals identified three core aspects: *self-esteem*, *confidence* and *self-expression*. The ECEC system will by and large provide

a favorable arena for the *construction* and *consolidation* of that well-being *capital*. As we understood it, this will both act as a tool for children's everyday interactions in the school environment and as a basis for their future learning and the development of their full academic potential. As such, socialisation in its broadest sense will be needed first and foremost, since it will determine children's well-being and their capacity to integrate new knowledge.

First, there is self-esteem, the knowledge of oneself, the knowledge of others. I think that well-being runs through that channel, and through all its branches. Being well is to be clean, to be healthy of mind, that's really it. I think that if one doesn't go through that acceptance phase of the human and the acceptance of others, he won't ever be well [ ... ] It's really self-esteem, to realise that one can do things, that one knows things, that we're small but we're allowed to say 'no' to certain things [ ... ] With my professional eye here, it's accepting them as they are and enhance their value. If they are well in their head and their heart, they'll be fine to learn afterwards. (M0 Teacher)

## Discussion

This article does not wish to address issues against families who raise their children at home, or to advocate mandatory day-nursery attendance before preschool's entry. We have sought to demonstrate that there is an entanglement of sociological circumstances in Brussels that lead to a socially differentiated experience of preschool for children.

This situation results from the combination of three factors: the fact that childcare services help to prepare children for preschool, the socially differentiated use of childcare services among the population, and the unstated expectations of the school system regarding children's *readiness* for preschool.

As we demonstrated, this situation generates tremendous inequalities when it comes to children's experience of preschool, with potentially long-term effects. As far as academic achievement is concerned, research has shown that language knowledge and family history are decisive (Huchant and Guillaume 2011; Lamotte and Barthel 2009). In this study, the professionals had identified both of these factors among families who did not use childcare services. On the basis of their testimony, too, we have also highlighted in details the key issues relating to socialisation.

Faced with these many challenges, most of the professionals we interviewed had questioned their practices and developed new ones; in some cases, they had lowered their expectations regarding children's 'performance'. However, these well-intentioned practices are far from ideal or adequate, as the situation demonstrates. These issues need to be urgently addressed and we look at three of the key features below.

First, the Ministry of Education should initiate a debate with the various stakeholders on the significance of preschool *readiness*. Readiness actually rests upon a socio-historical construct of childhood and of the child's expected level of development when entering preschool (Vogler et al. 2008). This construct ought to be challenged, especially since the population is increasingly diverse. Indeed, the reality of children growing up in Brussels is increasingly complex, and though changes occur slowly in institutions, schools can no longer ignore the implications of such societal changes regarding their functioning and the appropriateness of their expectations of children starting preschool. In the line of socio-ecological frameworks, the definition of *readiness* should include the characteristics of children's environment, since the latter affects children's ability to adapt to the situation (LoCasale-Crouch et al. 2008). Consequently, policies must be conceived with regards to the context (Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta 2000).

In light of the above, ‘positive, effective and mutual communication’ between school staff and families is crucial when children enter preschool (Jacques and Deslandes 2002) and should be further developed. In a context of high socio-cultural diversity, it is essential for school professionals to ensure that all the system’s expectations of the children and their families – referring to the culture of the institution (Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta 2000) – are explicit and intelligible to every family from the outset. This means that communication should begin before children start preschool, it should continue throughout the school experience, and it should allow both formal and informal types of exchanges. However, such communication takes time, skill and organisation. Various transition practices highlight this aspect in successful transitions (Ahtola et al. 2011; Dunlop 2003; Hanson et al. 2000); most of these practices are prior to admission and concern the entry in primary school: staff preparatory meetings (in order to pass on information), parents meetings, organised visits of the school (for the child, the staff or the parents), individual meetings with parents, and various devices to support parents’ active participation in children’s experience (Ahtola et al. 2011; Hanson et al. 2000, LoCasale-Crouch et al. 2008; Pianta et al. 1999; Repetto and Correa 1996; Rous et al. 2010). Even though most of these practices are encouraged when transferring from one service to another, we cannot fail to see how much more vital they are when the service is actually the first one that families experience.

Last but not least, staff training should be revised in order to better equip professionals for socio-cultural dialogue and multi-agent communication.

In all of these matters, schools could certainly benefit from the experience of childcare services, since they generally acknowledge the importance of taking into account children’s characteristics, family history and home environment in order to ensure their well-being. More generally, this refers to the issue of continuity in which transition to preschool is seen as part of the wider process of the child’s development (Bronfenbrenner 1979). The artificial distinction between care and education is a common criticism of ECEC split systems, wherein schools tend to focus solely on the educational aspects of children’s development (Meulders et al. 2009). In this regard, the presence of a ‘*key person* or *guide*’ (Hanson et al. 2000) within each school, who would be in charge of coordinating communication, could somewhat ease the transition for children, whether or not they previously attended childcare services.

## Conclusion

Transitions are an event, but they also are a process (Hanson et al. 2000). Concerning preschool, the experience will not only affect children when they first start, it will also, in many cases, affect them more profoundly and in the long term. It is only by acknowledging that the variety of children’s situations, their social background and their family history are factors of their adjustment in the school environment that we will help to ensure the well-being of every child. This issue and the need for effective transition practices regarding preschool should therefore be generally addressed both in the scientific and the political spheres without delay.

## Funding

This work was supported by the Institut bruxellois pour la recherche et l’innovation (InnovIris), in Belgium [PRFB 2011-126].

## References

- Ahtola, A., G. Slinskas, P.-L. Poikonen, M. Kontoniemi, P. Niemi, and J.-E. Nurmi. 2011. "Transition to Formal Schooling: Do Transition Practices Matter for Academic Performance?." *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 26 (3): 295–302.
- Amerijckx, G., and P.C. Humblet. 2014. Child Wellbeing: What Does it Mean?. *Children and Society* 28:404–415.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. 1979. *The Ecology of Human Development*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Bronfenbrenner, U., and P. A. Morris. 2006. "The Bioecological Model of Human Development." In *Handbook of Child Psychology, Volume 1: Theoretical Models of Human Development*, edited by W. Damon and R.M. Lerner, 793–828. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Dunlop, A.-W. 2003. "Bridging Children's Early Education Transitions through Teacher Collaboration." Paper presented at the New Zealand Association for Research in Education and Australian Association for Research in Education Joint Conference, November 29 - December 3, in Auckland, Australia.
- Dunn, J. 1994. "Understanding Others and the Social World: Current Issues in Developmental Research and Their Relation to Preschool Experience and Practices." *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology* 15 (4): 571–583.
- Minsart, A.-F., V. Van Leeuw, S. Van de Putte, M. De Spiegelaere, and Y. Englert. 2011. *Données périnatales en région bruxelloise - Année 2009*. Bruxelles: CEPiP.
- Hanson, M. J., P. J. Beckman, E. Horn, J. Marquart, S. R. Sandall, D. Greig, and E. Brennan. 2000. "Entering Preschool: Family and Professional Experiences in This Transition Process." *Journal of early Intervention* 23 (4): 279–293.
- Huchant, E., and J.-F. Guillaume. 2011. *Rapport final: Les transitions problématiques dans l'enfance et la jeunesse: état des connaissances et identification des enjeux de politiques publiques*. Bruxelles: OEJAJ.
- Humblet, P. C. 2011. "Croissance démographique bruxelloise et inégalité d'accès à l'école maternelle." *Brussels Studies* 51. Brussels Studies. <http://www.brusselsstudies.be>.
- IBSA (Institut Bruxellois de Statistique et d'analyse). 2012. Population scolaire. IBSA. [www.ibsa.irisnet.be](http://www.ibsa.irisnet.be)
- IBSA (Institut Bruxellois de Statistique et d'analyse). 2007. Monitoring des quartiers. IBSA. <http://www.monitoringdesquartiers.irisnet.be/content/quartiers/>
- Jacques, M., and R. Deslandes. 2002. "Transition à la maternelle et relations école-famille." In *Comprendre la famille. Actes du sixième symposium québécois de recherche sur la famille*, edited by C. Lacharité and G. Pronovost, 247–260. Sainte-Foy: Presses Universitaires du Québec.
- Kind en Gezin. 2010. *Jaarverslag Kinderopvang 2010*. Brussel: Kind en Gezin.
- Lamotte, D., and S. Barthel. 2009. *Regards croisés sur l'enseignement maternel. Au départ d'une réflexion sur l'apprentissage de la langue de l'enseignement à l'école maternelle, un enjeu d'équité et d'accrochage scolaire*. Dossier d'instruction. Bruxelles: Conseil de l'Éducation et de la Formation de la Communauté française.
- LoCasale-Crouch, J., A. J. Mashburn, J. T. Downer, and R. C. Pianta. 2008. "Pre-Kindergarten Teachers' Use of Transition Practices and Children's Adjustment to Kindergarten." *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 23 (1): 124–39.
- Meulders, D., P. C. Humblet, L. Maron, and G. Amerijckx. 2009. *Politiques publiques pour promouvoir l'emploi des parents et l'inclusion sociale*. Gand: Academia Press.
- Office de la Naissance et de l'Enfance (ONE). 2010. *Rapport annuel 2010*. Bruxelles: ONE.
- Pianta, R. C., M. J. Cox, L. Taylor, and D. Early. 1999. "Kindergarten Teachers' Practices Related to the Transition to School: Results of a National Survey." *Elementary School Journal* 100 (1): 71–86.
- Pollard, E. L., and P. D. Lee. 2003. "Child Well-Being: A Systematic Review of the Literature." *Social Indicators Research* 61 (1): 59–78.
- Repetto, J. B., and V. I. Correa. 1996. "Expanding Views on Transition." *Exceptional Children* 62 (6): 551–563.
- Rimm-Kaufman, S. E., and R. C. Pianta. 2000. "An Ecological Perspective on the Transition to Kindergarten: A Theoretical Framework to Guide Empirical Research." *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology* 21 (5): 491–511.

- Rous, B., R. Hallam, K. McCormick, and M. Cox. 2010. "Practices that Support the Transition to Public Preschool Programs: Results from a National Survey." *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 25 (1): 17–32.
- Thorpe, K., S. Statton, R. Morgan, S. Danby, and C. Tayler. 2012. "Testing the Vision: Preschool Settings as Places for Meeting, Bonding and Bridging." *Children and Society* 26 (4): 328–340.
- Van Campenhoudt, L. 2010. "Pouvoir et réseau social: une matrice théorique." In *Travail, Inégalités et responsabilité*, edited by G. Herman, E. Leonard, and P. Roman, 5–41. Louvain-La-Neuve: Presses Universitaires de Louvain.
- Vandenbroeck, M. 2006. *Globalisation and privatisation: the impact on childcare policy and practice*. The Hague: Bernard Van Leer Foundation.
- Vogler, P., G. Crivello and M. Woodhead. 2008. *Early childhood transitions research: A review of concepts, theory, and practice*. Working Paper n°48. The Hague: Bernard Van Leer Foundation.