

Inter-institutional professional learning communities: A method for ensuring a smooth transition from kindergarten to primary school

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1. Background and purpose of the research

The concept of transition in the context of education and care refers to the transition from one learning environment to another (e.g. from home to kindergarten, from kindergarten to school, from one class to another, etc.). Transitioning between these different environments usually brings positive expectations, but also stress and fear. What kind of feelings will prevail depends on the differences between one environment and another in both the social and physical context. The transition is easier, the smaller the differences between the "old", familiar and "new", unknown environment (Vonta, 1993). Positive experiences of the transition between levels of education can be a key factor for children's success in the future, while negative experiences can have long-term consequences that can lead to poorer school performance, especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Dumčius et al., 2014). Care for a more unified understanding of pedagogical approaches between different educational environments, with the aim of maintaining the continuity of the child's experience, can significantly improve the child's academic achievements and have a positive effect on his social-emotional development (Brooker, 2008). Based on this we can conclude that cooperation between institutions and involving parents in the transition process are considered key factors in ensuring a smoother transition (Dunlop and Fabian, 2007; Margetts and Kiening, 2013; Moss, 2013).

In order to ensure a smooth transition between the two educational levels, we must think about three continuities: developmental (cooperation between the home environment, kindergarten and primary school and external services, e.g. health, social); professional (continuity of professional staff, which in Slovenia we ensure through education of kindergarten and school professionals at the same pedagogical faculties, with certain common in-service trainings for both level professionals within the framework of further education and training) and pedagogical (vertical and horizontal coordination of the primary school program and the Kindergarten Curriculum, developmental goals, pedagogy and pedagogical approaches in both systems) (Vidmar, 2017).

The paper focuses on the provision of pedagogical continuity through establishing inter-institutional professional learning communities (IPLCs), which were developed by the researchers of the Educational Research Institute (hereafter ERI), the Centre for Quality in Education Step by Step (hereafter SbS Centre) as part of the InTrans project - Ensuring project Warm and Inclusive Transitions (Erasmus KA3¹). We designed the form and content of the

¹InTrans - Ensuring Warm and Inclusive Transitions (Erasmus KA3): ensuring a smooth and inclusive transition for all children and their families by training professionals, by opening a dialogue with educators of future teachers and by cooperating with policy makers. *Participating institutions*: Center for Innovations in the Early Years - Vernieuwing in de Basisvoorzieningen voor Jonge Kinderen (VBJK) - leading partners (Belgium), Ghent

training, the implementation of the training and support for managers in the implementation of IPLCs. This plan followed the definition of a professional learning community (hereafter PLC), which states that the PLC is a group of professionals who meet regularly and continuously with the aim of reflecting on their own practice, obtaining new information, engaging in professional discussions, deepening specific content and improving one's own pedagogical practice and the child's well-being (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2002). PLC meetings take place according to a predetermined structure, which provides opportunities for members to connect, reflect on their own practice, create a common understanding of quality within the selected content area and plan changes within their own practice (Brajković, 2019).

As such, PLC in the Slovenian area represents an innovative form of ensuring pedagogical continuity, which the researchers at ERI, SbS Centre, together with international partners have already described in the framework of the START project² (Van Laere et.al., 2019).

2. Description of the intervention

The researchers from ERI (SbS Centre) were in charge of providing support for facilitators of the IPLCs. As part of the project, we organized a training for nine pairs of IPLC facilitators from seven different backgrounds. Each pair connected one professional from the kindergarten and one from the associated elementary school, whereas the members of IPLCs were their colleagues - kindergarten teachers who work in groups of five or six-year-old children, and primary school teachers in the first triad. Each IPLC consisted of eight to twelve members. The invitation for joining the training for facilitators was sent to kindergartens and primary schools in the Step by Step Network for Changing Quality³ and widely.

The 5-day training (30 hours) took place once a month between October 2020 and March 2021 on the Zoom online platform. The content of the training related to the understanding of the transition process (understanding the three continuities); to management skills (the structure and implementation of IPLC, to the management of a group of adults and to the characteristics of adult learning); to developing a common understanding of the importance of providing a smooth transition (image of the child, characteristics of 6-year-olds, child-centred educational approaches, peer observations, partnership with parents and the creation of a stimulating learning environment) and reflection on one's own pedagogical practice (management of a

University - Center for Diversity and Learning and Department of Social Work and Social Pedagogy (Belgium), International Step by Step Association (Netherlands), University of Bologna (Italy), Tampere University (Finland), Union of Pedagogues Denmark (Denmark), Educational Research Institute - Center for Quality in Education Step by Step (Slovenia). Ministry for Education, Science and Sport (affiliated partner). The project duration: 1. 1. 2020-14. 1. 2023.

2START: A good start for all: ensuring transitions in the early years (September 2016-February 2019), Erasmus + KA2; more about the project: <http://start.pei.si/>

3The Step by Step Network for Changing Quality has been operating as part of the Step by Step Center for Quality in Education at the Educational Research Institute since 2000. The main goal of the Network is to offer support to managerial and professional staff of kindergartens and primary schools in their professional development and finding ways to educational process in their department or to make the institute even better. More information is available at <https://www.korakzakovom.si/>

professional portfolio). Each training was divided in two parts: in the first one we focused on reflection on the implementation of one PLC meeting, which was conducted by each pair of facilitators in their institutions. In the second part of the training we presented and discussed new topics related to ensuring smooth transition.

The content presented at trainings was always discussed at nine IPLC meetings, which were held by facilitators in the time between each day of the training. During the school year, it was planned to hold five IPLC meetings, but due to the Covid-19 pandemic, some facilitators held fewer of them, but none less than three. All IPLC meetings were held remotely, mostly on Zoom and MS Teams online platforms. In order to support facilitators in using the online platforms, we conducted additional training on the use of the Zoom online platform.

In April 2021, we firstly conducted a focus groups with training participants to receive their feedback on the process. Furthermore, we organized a meeting for the principals of all institutions involved in the project with the aim of ensuring sustainability of the introduced innovation (IPLC). We emphasized the importance of management support in maintaining the introduced changes and defined how they can provide support to their employees. We also passed on the information obtained during the focus groups with IPLC leaders to the principals. Managers also expressed their desire for further inter-institutional cooperation, which can be made possible by holding IPLC meetings, as they recognized the added value of this type of cooperation.

3. Methodology

With the aim of gaining a deeper insight into changes in practice and with an insight into further implementation of IPLC in selected environments, we conducted a focus group with IPLC facilitators after the completed training cycle. Due to the large number of participants, we divided the participants into three groups, in which there were four to six IPLC facilitators. The focus groups were conducted in March 2021 and the implementation took place in all three groups at the same time. 15 IPLC leaders, or seven different pairs of leaders from six different backgrounds, participated in the focus groups. There were seven kindergarten representatives (one teacher, five counsellors, one assistant principal) and eight school representatives (six teachers and two second professionals in the first grade – either a kindergarten or a school teacher).

The implementation of the focus groups was part of the wider monitoring of the IPLC pilot introduction process within the InTrans initiative. The main research questions were:

- How did cooperation in an IPLC influence the understanding of the importance of smooth transition among IPLC facilitators and their members? (RV1)
- Does the involvement in an IPLC affect the acquisition of specific knowledge and familiarization with good practices related to ensuring a smooth transition? (RV2)
- What is the perceived effect of inter-institutional cooperation on a personal level among IPLC leaders and professionals, who were members of IPLCs? (RV3)

- In what ways do IPLC managers recognize the value of connecting professionals from kindergartens and primary schools? (RV4)

The discussion consisted of four sections – in each of them we set the facilitators questions related to one of the above research questions. We recorded the conversation, prepared a transcript and based on that gained some useful data from the IPLC facilitators.

4. Results and findings

The findings are presented in relation to the research questions.

1. How did IPLC influence the understanding of the importance of smooth transition among IPLC facilitators and members? (RV1)

In their responses, IPLC facilitators reported that IPLCs have definitely brought more awareness about the transition and the importance of ensuring a smooth transition. Changes were noted also by managers, who also recognized different understanding at the level of IPLC members, kindergarten and primary school professionals. The facilitators pointed out that their colleagues began to talk more deeply about ensuring a smooth transition, they began to approach work more consciously and paid more attention to individual children. A few facilitators expressed that their own and the understanding of transition of their colleagues had expanded, as they realized that it is connected to several pedagogical areas, e.g. unified understanding of teaching strategies suitable for six-year-olds; unified learning environment; unified understanding of the importance of the partnership with parents.

2. Does involvement in an IPLC affect the acquisition of specific knowledge and familiarization with good practices related to ensuring a smooth transition? (RV2)

Working in pairs and leading the IPLC enabled the facilitators to become familiar with good transition practices and work in another institution (e.g. getting to know the curriculum in kindergarten and the curriculum in the first grade). IPLC facilitators and primary school professionals claimed to gain more knowledge about the characteristics of six-year-olds: how they learn; what they can do; how can they adjust the transition from kindergarten to school. From the collected data we can also conclude that being part of an IPLC affects the acquisition of specific knowledge and familiarization with good practices related to ensuring a smooth transition.

3. What is the perceived effect of inter-institutional cooperation on a personal level among IPLC facilitators and among members of IPLCs? (RV3)

The IPLC facilitators pointed out that the cooperation between school and kindergarten was more intense during the introduction of IPLCs than in previous years. Even if the cooperation between institutions had already taken place in the past, this kind of cooperation stimulated new ideas, knowledge and experience. It was also more structured and focused. Participation in an inter-institutional group of professionals was a novelty for most of them, but it was perceived as a welcome and positive change. Changes based on the inter-institutional cooperation were also recognized by the facilitators on their interpersonal level, as professionals from both

institutions talked more, they gained trust among each other and offered more support. Furthermore, they perceived gained respect for each other's professional work.

4. In what ways do IPLC managers recognize the value of connecting kindergarten and primary school professionals? (RV4)

The managers reported that it makes sense to continue with the implementation of the IPLCs mainly because, thanks to more intensive connections between professionals, children can make an easier transition from one environment to another. They also emphasized that the enhanced cooperation between kindergarten and primary school brings greater confidence of parents in the educational system.

5. Conclusion

This paper presents IPLCs as an innovative form of ensuring pedagogical continuity in the context of ensuring a smooth transition for children between kindergarten and primary school. IPLC as a form of inter-institutional cooperation of kindergarten and school professionals was supported in seven environments with nine pairs of IPLC facilitators, with whom we worked intensively, following the principles of the action research. Within the five-day training we provided new information and knowledge, reflection on the introduced changes, as well as planning further steps in the implementation of IPLCs. We gained information on the perceived differences in each environment through focus groups. The four research questions referred to the impact of IPLC on the understanding of the importance of a smooth transition, the acquisition of specific knowledge, familiarization with good practices, the perceived effect of inter-institutional cooperation on a personal level and recognizing the value of connecting kindergarten and primary school professionals.

The feedback from professionals, who were involved in this learning process, show that IPLCs have an influence on a higher awareness of the importance of ensuring a smooth transition; they ensure transfer of good practices between institutions and professionals; they result in a higher level of trust and respect for each other's work on the level of kindergarten and primary school professionals. Based on this we can conclude that IPLC proves to be an important work method for improving pedagogical continuity and thus smoothing the transition of children from kindergarten to primary school.

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