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## Transition of children from kindergarten to elementary school – experiences of preschool teachers from Bosnia and Herzegovina

**Abstract:** Starting school is deemed a very challenging period of transition for children, parents, educators and teachers. Their active support and mutual cooperation are thus considered crucial for positive outcomes. This paper analyses the transition process of children from kindergarten to elementary school from the perspective of preschool educators in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). Qualitative research was carried out through semi-structured interviews with 18 preschool teachers, whose experiences of working with children contributed to understanding the process of transitioning from kindergarten to elementary school alongside the existing challenges. The research results indicate the use of the least efficient transition activities and the absence of collaboration and the sharing of information between kindergartens and schools, and they also highlight the needs of teachers regarding educational support and professional cooperation with elementary school teachers. Accordingly, the paper gives recommendations for the improvement and sustainability of the system of transitioning children from kindergarten to elementary school.

**Keywords:** transition, transition activities, kindergarten, elementary school, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH)

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## Introduction

The transition from kindergarten to elementary school is considered a big change in the lives of parents and children. The literature defines this in different ways, but almost all the definitions can be subsumed under several categories – *state*, *event* and *process*. Analysing the trend of the conceptualization of the term *educational transition* in the last thirty-or-so years, Petriwskyj et al. (2005, p. 15) point out its complexity, defining it as a complex phenomenon without a universally accepted definition. At the same time, they indicate a gradual shift from the traditional understanding that focused on children's readiness, which was determined as a set of normative characteristics expressed in a binary form clustered under the states of »ready« or »not ready« for school. Contrary to that, the transition from kindergarten to school is nowadays considered a more comprehensive construction (Petriwskyj et al. 2005; Petriwskyj and Grieshaber 2011) that includes a more diverse spectrum of participants over time and that takes place in different contexts and in different ways. As Petriwskyj et al. (2005, p. 10) describe, transitioning is a multi-layered process because it involves different participants but also a multi-year process because it can take up to two or three years.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD 2017) points out that transitioning is a process in which it is necessary to ensure three types of continuity: professional, developmental and pedagogical. Professional continuity implies that experts in preschool institutions and elementary schools continuously prepare themselves for transition activities by means of initial education followed by continuous professional development. In addition, professional continuity is framed by structural characteristics, such as the working environment, salary and benefits, as well as the equalization of differences in the standard of the education and teaching profession. Pedagogical continuity implies the harmonization of the preschool and elementary school curricula (with the focus being on the child), teaching approaches and methods, as well as the collaborative design of transitioning practices, all of which are aimed at ensuring the smooth transition of children from kindergarten to elementary school. Developmental continuity implies continuous collaboration and flows of information between the different environments and groups to which children belong.

Fabian (2007, p. 6) defines transition as the process of moving from one environment to another, or from one phase of education to another, and this process refers to the period between the first visit and the complete transition to the new environment. Ackesjo (2013, p. 3) states that the transition from kindergarten to elementary school is not a linear but rather a circular or spiral process that includes the last period children spend in kindergarten, the summer break and the first period of children starting school. On the other hand, Visković and Višnjić Jevtić (2019, p. 132) believe that transitioning refers to the process that begins with the first information received about the new environment and ends with children's full-time immersion in it. Lillejord et al. (2017, p. 22) describe how the transition to school involves moving from one context to another, which includes not only physical movement from one institution to another but also changes in social relations and expectations and the process of social adjustment. All the above-mentioned interpretations of transitioning are basically based on ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner 1979), which conceptualizes the multiple relationships between an individual and the environment in which it is developing.

Bronfenbrenner (1979, p. 103) generally defined transition as an ecological transition that occurs whenever a person changes environment and/or role. His central idea about the mutual adaptation of the organism and the environment is reflected in the understanding of transition as a joint function of biological changes and changed circumstances in the environment. It follows that a transition can only be understood as an interactive process where the outcome is created by the effect of personal and environmental characteristics. Bronfenbrenner (1979, p. 27) claims that every ecological transition is both a consequence and a driver of the development process. This means that such transitions not only represent the crossing of ecological boundaries but also contain the potential for shifting boundaries on their own developmental continuum. For example, a child who moves from a kindergarten to a school environment reaches a certain level of physical, cognitive and socioemotional maturity as a result of previous interactions with the environment, but at the same time, the interaction with the new school environment will be the driver of their further development process.

In terms of the above, a report by the OECD (2006) recognizes both the opportunities and challenges of a transition, emphasizing that the transition period is an incentive for growth and development, but that if it happens too suddenly and without support, it carries the risk of regression and failure. Therefore, Peters (2014, p. 106) explains that almost every child is at risk of having a bad or less successful transition if their individual characteristics are incompatible with the characteristics of the environment they are encountering. Consequently, there is a consensus in the literature (Fabian and Dunlop 2007; Lillejord et al. 2017; Peters 2014; Petriwskyj et al. 2005) that the transition period can be both positive and negative, and there is a tendency to understand it more as a process, whose outcome depends on the interaction of various factors. Accordingly, Petriwskyj et al. (2005) suggest a trend towards a more complex understanding of transition, emphasizing the continuity of children's experiences, partnership between all the participants and the coherence of the system over a longer period of time.

While interpreting the ecological transition, Bronfenbrenner (1979, p. 211) emphasized the importance of interactions that take place within the environment and between environments, as well as the role of key persons connecting these environments. According to his hypothesis, the development potential of the mesosystem will be enhanced if the child does not enter the new environment alone, but rather with a person who was part of their initial environment. This person, as a mediator, has a catalytic power that can facilitate and advance the transition process, which depends on the nature of the dyad the child will be part of in the new environment. The extent of this catalytic power of the mediator depends on the relationship the mediator has with the developing child, as well as on the nature of the dyad established in the new environment (whether the mediator will only be an observer or will take an active role). In addition, Bronfenbrenner (1979, p. 217) states that the transitioning child will be at an advantage if they receive information and advice and acquire experience relevant to the upcoming transition and that they will also benefit from a continuous exchange of information between the environments.

Therefore, Bronfenbrenner (1979, p. 211) indicates that a successful transition does not imply a lonely child crossing the borders between environments (a »weakly linked child«), but rather how individuals from the initial environment should play a significant role in terms of helping the child in transition achieve a stronger connection with the new environment (»dual linked« or »multiply linked«). Following Bronfenbrenner's ideas, many authors (Ackesjo 2013; Dockett and Perry 2021; Fabian and Dunlop 2007; Peters 2014) later confirmed the idea that supporting roles and their cross-border cooperation are crucial for the successful transition of a child.<sup>1</sup> As Edwards (2011) emphasizes, in order to be able to collaborate with other professionals and have the readiness to learn within a certain, bordered space, professionals must also think and act outside their own practices.

### *Transitional activities and the cross-border cooperation of kindergartens and schools ensure continuity in a child's upbringing and education*

Fabian (2007, p. 7) describes how transitioning means leaving one's »comfort zone« and encountering the unknown (culture, people, roles, rules, identity). At the same time, it represents leaving or abandoning the social group in which a child has already built their identity and status and entering a new environment. The transition is considered incomplete until a positive outcome is achieved – a sense of belonging to the new environment (Dockett and Perry 2004) and a

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<sup>1</sup> The initial education of both preschool teachers and classroom teachers is carried out at the Faculty of Pedagogy of the University of Sarajevo. It is organized according to Model 4 (240 ECTS) + 1 (60 ECTS) and specific curricula, within which there are several common subjects studied by students of both departments. This research points out the importance of transitional pedagogy, which future preschool educators and classroom teachers could study as a common subject at the Faculty of Pedagogy of the University of Sarajevo. During this process, they would be empowered to perform collaboration and cross-border cooperation.

sense of well-being (Fabian 2007). That is, using Bourdieu's vocabulary, until the child feels »at home« or like a »fish swimming in the water«. Namely, according to Bourdieu (1992, p. 127), social reality exists twice, inside and outside the person, and when it encounters the social world of which it is a product, the person feels at home, like a »fish in water«, »does not feel the weight of the water and takes the world around itself for granted«. On the other hand, when a child finds themselves in a new (unfamiliar) environment, changes occur that can make them feel like a »fish out of the water« (Reay 2004; Fabian and Dunlop 2007). Therefore, it follows that during the process of transitioning, it is necessary to provide support for the child and interconnect the key environments – the one which the child is leaving and the one the child is entering. In this regard, Niesel and Griebel (2007) discuss creating a strong mesosystem, which will connect three key microsystems: the child and their family, preschool and elementary school.

Analysing various empirical studies in the field of children's transitions from kindergarten to elementary school, Lillejord et al. (2017, p. 53) provide an overview (*Table 1*) of key transition activities, which combine three key microsystems and classify them into three categories: (1) familiarizing children with school and school staff, (2) the distribution of information and (3) collaboration. Each of these categories implies cooperation between the school and the kindergarten and parental cooperation with both the kindergarten and the school.

<b>FAMILIARIZING CHILDREN WITH THE SCHOOL AND STAFF</b>	<b>DIRECTLY INVOLVED ACTORS</b>	<b>INDIRECTLY INVOLVED ACTORS</b>
Primary school pupils visit kindergartens and talk about their school day	Children	Kindergarten teachers School teachers
Kindergartens visit the school	Children	Kindergarten teachers School teachers
School teachers visit kindergartens and children who are about to start school	Children School teachers	Kindergarten teachers
Kindergarten teachers talk with the children about the transition from kindergarten to school, addressing expectations and answering questions about attending school	Children Kindergarten teachers	School teachers
Simulating a school day/school activities in kindergartens	Children Kindergarten teachers	School teachers
Initiating specific programmes for the oldest children in kindergartens regarding the transition to school	Children Kindergarten teachers	School teachers
Kindergarten children and students attend common activities prior to starting school	Children	Kindergarten teachers School teachers

Establishing friendship relations between children across kindergartens who are about to attend the same school	Children	Kindergarten teachers
»Buddy Programme« between pupils and children who are about to attend the school	Children	Kindergarten teachers School teachers
The child, the parents and the first-grade teacher meet prior to starting school	Children Parents School teachers	Kindergarten teachers
Welcome programmes at schools	Children School teachers	
<b>DISTRIBUTION OF INFORMATION</b>		
The kindergartens give information to schools. The kindergartens give children's individual subject plans or portfolios to the school teacher	Kindergarten teachers	Children
Parents give information to the kindergartens	Parents Kindergarten teachers	Children
Parents give information to the school	Parents School teachers	Children
The kindergartens organize orientation meetings for parents in connection with starting school	Parents Kindergarten teachers	Children
<b>COLLABORATION</b>		
Kindergarten and school teachers formulate and revise both the kindergarten/preschool and first-grade curricula together	Kindergarten teachers School teachers	Children
Developing individual subject plans	Parents Kindergarten teachers	Children
Kindergarten and school teachers plan lessons or teach together	Kindergarten teachers School teachers	Children
Kindergarten teachers, school teachers and special needs teachers engage in discussions about children who are about to start school	Kindergarten teachers School teachers	Children
Shared teaching hours for kindergarten children and first-grade pupils	Children	Kindergarten teacher School teachers

Table 1: Transition activities (Lillejord et al. 2017, p. 53)

In order for transition activities to fulfil their purpose, they should be continuous and include thorough professional cooperation between preschool educators and classroom teachers. This means that occasional and one-time transition activities, such as a one-time kindergarten visit to a school, without pre-designed and developed cooperation between preschool educators and elementary school

teachers will not have a significant impact on a child's transition process. Edwards (2010, p. 36) draws attention to the places where practices intersect as an important area of mutual cooperation (for example, between a kindergarten and a school). This border area stands out as a place of merging resources and joint learning that enables better mutual understanding and the construction of new common practice. In connection with the above, Moss (2008, p. 13) presents his vision of a »meeting place«, where educators work together in order to shed light on the encounter between the two differing traditions and cultures of kindergartens and elementary schools. The meeting place is conceived as a location for professional meetings and the mutual understanding of the »border areas« in the educational environment.

Today, there is global interest in improving the system of transitioning children from kindergarten to elementary school; however, little is known about the practices of individual countries – that is, in what ways they implement and manage the process of transition. In order to fill this information gap, the OECD (2017) looked at transition policies and practices in 30 OECD countries. It suggests that countries have put in place a wide range of strategies, policies and practices to ensure continuity in such transitions. When it comes to Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), there is a complete lack of information on how the transitioning of children from kindergarten to elementary school takes place. There is no information about cross-border cooperation between kindergartens and elementary schools and what challenges preschool educators face. Accordingly, this paper attempts to analyse this transition from the perspective of preschool teachers in BiH. Therefore, the following research questions were proposed: What transition activities are undertaken and in what ways do kindergartens cooperate with a child's family and the elementary school? What professional challenges do preschool teachers face? What suggestions do they have for the improvement of the system of transitioning from kindergarten to elementary school? What needs do preschool educators have as a form of support in the process of realizing the successful transition of children from kindergarten to elementary school?

## **Methodology**

### *Research approach*

For this research, the phenomenological approach was used, which is based on the analysis and interpretation of phenomena through the real experiences of the respondents. The main goals of phenomenological research are to search for reality in the statements of individuals regarding their experiences and feelings and to deepen the description of the phenomenon in question (Yüksel and Yildirim 2015, p. 2). An interpretive hermeneutic methodology was used, which is based on the understanding and interpretation of life experiences. In this research, preschool educators were asked to articulate their experiences and roles in the process of children's transition from kindergarten to elementary school, and the researcher tried to understand them and conceptualize a complete picture of the studied phenomenon.

## Sample

The research sample was defined through a four-phase approach to selecting a qualitative sample, as provided by Robinson (2014, p. 26): (1) defining the composition of the sample, (2) defining the sample size, (3) determining the sampling strategy and (4) determining the practical sampling method. Therefore, the *composition of the sample*, made up of preschool teachers, was determined according to the following criteria: (1) teachers that have experience working with preschool children in the year before starting elementary school (because that period is considered the most intense transition phase) and (2) teachers that are willing to voluntarily participate in the interviews. The exclusion criteria were as follows: (1) trainee educators and (2) educators from private kindergartens. A total of 18 preschool teachers participated in the research, where the *sample size* was not predetermined, but the research was completed and finished when »theoretical saturation« was reached (Strauss and Corbin 1998). The preschool teachers were between 32 and 53 years of age with between 7 and 28 years of work experience. All of them were female, and in terms of the level of education, 17 educators had completed 4 years of study and 1 educator had completed 5 years of study. According to the *sampling strategy*, a purposive and quota sample was used because the research was intended to fulfil the quota of »one teacher – one kindergarten« in order to cover as many different practices as possible. With regard to the *method of sampling in practice*, two approaches were combined: face-to-face advertising and the »snowball« method.

## Collecting data

The data were collected through semi-structured interviews with preschool teachers in the period that is relevant to the subject of the research, which is April–May (when it is assumed that the transition activities are the most intense). The protocol for the semi-structured interviews was created by the researcher based on recent literature (Lillejord et al. 2017; OECD 2017, 2020; Visković 2018; Visković and Višnjić Jevtić 2019). It consisted of four basic open-ended questions (What activities do you carry out in order to make the transition of children from kindergarten to elementary school more successful? What professional challenges do you encounter along the way? What suggestions do you have for improving the system of transitioning children from kindergarten to elementary school? What kind of support do you need to ensure the successful transition of children from kindergarten to elementary school?) with sub-questions that initiated a conversation about the subject of the research. In the initial phase, the interview protocol was discussed with two preschool teachers with many years of experience in working with children during the transition process, and it was then modified by taking into consideration their suggestions.

### *Procedure*

The interviews with preschool teachers were conducted individually, live or via Zoom video calls. Each interview lasted an average of 35 to 45 minutes. The interviewees participated voluntarily and were familiarized in advance with the topic of the interview. Anonymity in the process of data processing and presentation was guaranteed. In order to ensure the confidentiality of the data in the presentation of the research results, the participants were assigned codes (teacher 1, teacher 2, etc.).

### *Analysing the data*

For this research, qualitative data analysis was applied according to the steps described by Creswell (2019, p. 172): (1) the transcription of the audio materials and sorting of the data, (2) the reading of all the data in order to get a general sense of the information and reflect on its overall meaning, (3) detailed analysis through the coding process – generating codes and themes and (4) the interpretation of the meaning of the data. At the same time, the analysis did not only take place in a linear sequence of steps, but iteration was also applied in different phases of the process. The qualitative validity arises precisely from this approach because the accuracy of the data and interpretation was checked cyclically and simultaneously on several occasions during the analysis process. Each interview transcript was read several times to check that it did not contain errors, the data were repeatedly compared with the codes, and a clear boundary was established between the interviewees' statements and their own interpretations. The qualitative reliability of the research is achieved by the logical consistency of the research results and their agreement with the results of previous research.

### **Research results**

The results of the research are organized within four thematic units that were created on the basis of the questions the preschool teachers were asked during the interviews: *transitional activities as a function of a child's transition from kindergarten to elementary school; professional challenges of preschool teachers in the process of transitioning children from kindergarten to elementary school; possibilities of improving the process of transitioning children from kindergarten to elementary school; and preschool educators' need for support in the process of realizing the successful transition of children from kindergarten to elementary school.* The results are presented in tabular form, with defined categories and the quantification of the codes. For each code, the most memorable quotes from the interviews with the preschool teachers are listed for illustration purposes.

*Transitional activities as a function of a child's transition from kindergarten to elementary school*

Activities carried out as a part of the transition of children from kindergarten to elementary school, according to the responses of preschool teachers, can be tabulated in relation to a kindergarten as a microsystem and different parts of the mesosystem, *kindergarten–school–(family indirectly)* or *kindergarten–family–(elementary school indirectly)*, or an individual assessment of the psychophysical status of children in kindergarten, which should unite all three microsystems, *kindergarten–family–elementary school*, through the exchange of information (Table 2). The results indicate that the focus of transition activities is on the microsystem level – in kindergarten – with a very weak representation of activities at the mesosystem level. In kindergarten, priority is usually given to talking with children about elementary school and participation in graduation ceremonies, and emphasis is placed on the norm of »readiness for school«. Concerning the *kindergarten–school* mesosystem, the most common activity is a one-time visit to a school for kindergarten children. As a rule, such visits are only organized once before the end of the pedagogical year. These visits mainly consist of children being familiarized with the school space and gaining a general impression of the school timetable and school rules, while there is no joint networking between children or long-term cooperation. In terms of the *kindergarten–family* mesosystem, the most common activity is teacher–parent meetings, which also points to reducing cooperation with parents to a formal meeting before the end of the year and the exchange of information instead of collaboration. The individual assessment of the psychophysical status of children in kindergarten exists, but it is not part of children's transition in a way that strengthens the mesosystem (*kindergarten–family–elementary school*) or ensures the distribution of information.

Category	Code	Example
<b>Activities with children at the kindergarten level as a microsystem</b>	Talking with children about elementary school and their expectations (n = 18)	<p>»Traditionally, the month of May, according to thematic planning, is dedicated to the more intensive preparation of children for starting school, so through topics we prepare them for leaving kindergarten. For example, through the topic Traffic, we talk about safety on the way to school from home.« (Teacher 15)</p> <p>»We talk about school activities and events, that they will have a new teacher and classmates, and we talk about how many kids will be in the class ...« (Teacher 6)</p> <p>»During our talks, the emphasis is on their emotions, on the fears they may have, what they are afraid of ...« (Teacher 1)</p>
	Kindergarten graduation (n = 18)	<p>»The closing, graduation ceremony is the most important event for us. It is a symbolic farewell to the kindergarten lifestyle. We make a retrospective of the educational group that focuses on everything we have learned and done in kindergarten.« (Teacher 9)</p>
	Accent on the norm of »readiness for school« (n = 14)	<p>»Basically every day, we do activities with them that prepare them to go to school, from learning about basic concepts about their environment to acquiring initial mathematical concepts, initial reading and writing. We work on concentration, independence ... « (Teacher 14)</p> <p>»We do phonetic analysis, which is the most important lesson they need to master, where children know how to arrange letters into words, which will then make it easier for them to learn how to read at school.« (Teacher 13)</p>

<p><b>Transitional activities relating to the mesosystem: kindergarten-school</b></p>	<p>One-time visit to the school for preschool children (n = 16)</p> <p>One-time visit of school children and/or school teachers to the kindergarten (n = 3)</p> <p>Kindergarten children visiting school shows (n = 1)</p> <p>Cooperation of the kindergarten with the school pedagogue (n = 1)</p>	<p>»Children visit for a little bit to get acquainted with the concept and to see what it is like to sit in the class for 45 minutes, to have their own desk ...« (Teacher 10)</p> <p>»... That entrance into the building, the stairways, entering the classroom, the large desks and chairs ... all that is very surprising to them, because everything in the kindergarten is small and miniature. They take us to see their school yard ...« (Teacher 5)</p> <p>»... They look at school bags, how the classrooms are set up, what the teacher is like ...« (Teacher 4)</p> <p>»That is not a long visit to the school – they walk through the hallway, go to a classroom and look at it and what is happening inside it. They normally spend 45 minutes there and then leave the classroom, and that is all. « (Teacher 17)</p> <p>»Very often, teachers visit us with children from the 1<sup>st</sup> grade who used to attend our kindergarten. There are two elementary schools near our kindergarten, and it is very interesting for our children when their friends who used to go to the kindergarten come and visit them and talk with our kindergarteners about their experiences.« (Teacher 12)</p> <p>»We have an elementary school near our kindergarten, and we organize trips to the school, but school children also visit us. We especially look forward to Roma children visiting because there are quite a lot of them at that school. In this way, we teach our children about accepting different children. We prepare a play for them and host them.« (Teacher 11)</p> <p>»I have worked for 26 years in over 15 kindergartens, and personally, I have never seen a school teacher visit a kindergarten or have heard about it from my colleagues.« (Teacher 15)</p> <p>»We took our oldest group to a school play on the occasion of School Day ...«(Teacher 17)</p> <p>»When I worked for the mandatory preschool programme, which was implemented in school classrooms, we had visits from a school pedagogue who would come to meet all the children and, on a couple of occasions, would stay during the class and play with us, so the children's visit and testing before entering the school would go more smoothly and be more relaxed.« (Teacher 18)</p>
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<p><b>Transitional activities related to the kindergarten-family mesosystem</b></p>	<p>Regular parent-teacher meetings (n = 16)</p> <p>Individual informative meetings (conversations) (n = 10)</p> <p>Workshops for parents for easier transitioning to school (n = 4)</p> <p>Guest elementary teachers at parents' meetings (n = 2)</p>	<p>»The last parents' meeting is at the end of April or the beginning of May, and then we plan topics related to preparing children for school.« (Teacher 7)</p> <p>»There always parents in the group who do not have experience with school children, and we always pay attention to them through individual discussions.« (Teacher 15)</p> <p>»We especially talk to concerned parents; for example, parents of restless and hyperactive children are afraid of how they will adapt to school.« (Teacher 8)</p> <p>»Parents hesitate whether to enrol their child in school or to wait another year. In these cases, we give them our opinions and recommendations.« (Teacher 6)</p> <p>»I think that parents worry more about how their children will find their way around the school. This is why we organize workshops for parents where we ask key questions: What do parents expect from the school? Do they have any fears or concerns?« (Teacher 2)</p> <p>»We invite teachers from the school to parents' meetings and ask them to share their experiences and what the children should expect when they come to the school, because the school teachers know best.« (Teacher 3)</p> <p>»Parents ask about the formal part of starting school, such as what documents and other things they need to enrol their children at the school, so we usually invite elementary school teachers who can give them much more information than my colleague and I.« (Teacher 12)</p>
<p><b>Individual assessment of the psychophysical status of children in kindergarten: kindergarten-family-school</b></p>	<p>Development checklists (n = 18)</p> <p>Portfolio with artwork (n = 13)</p> <p>Cover letter (n = 2)</p> <p>Development maps (n = 1)</p>	<p>»We fill out development checklists for each child, initially in October and finally in May. These files remain in our records, unfortunately. However, it would be great if the child took these with them to school for the teacher to read about the child's development and where it progressed well and where it stagnated.« (Teacher 15)</p> <p>»At the end of kindergarten, each child receives their portfolio. It mainly contains artwork. I used to have this great form where I would enter my observations about the child, but over time, it got lost somewhere ... Other responsibilities took over ...« (Teacher 2)</p> <p>»To the portfolio, we add our own cover letter with a review and observations about the child in our role as kindergarten teacher. This needs attention and commitment a few months in advance.« (Teacher 4)</p> <p>»We create development maps based on our continuous observations. It takes time, believe me. We give them to the parents and recommend that they pass them on to the teacher, I don't know if they do that.« (Teacher 12)</p>

Table 2: Activities that are carried out as part of the transition from kindergarten to elementary school

*Professional challenges of preschool teachers in the process of transitioning children from kindergarten to elementary school*

The challenges pointed out by kindergarten teachers can be classified into several categories, which are presented in *Table 3*. Most often, kindergarten teachers cite challenges in the area of communication and collaboration with the school, bearing in mind that kindergartens and schools are not linked within the system and that cooperation between kindergarten teachers and school teachers is lacking. This is followed by challenges with regard to the professional development of educators, where the lack of education is highlighted, or it is stated that education is not adequately organized. There are organizational barriers, the most common of which relates to the location of the school. The distance of the school plays a role in the organization of school visits, while on the other hand, the fact that not all the children will be enrolled at the same school calls into question the sense of organizing a visit to only one school. According to the responses of the kindergarten teachers, cooperation with the school is further burdened by the size of the group, coordination with the school schedule, the lack of time, etc. When it comes to challenges in terms of communication and collaboration between the kindergarten and the family, it is most often questions of unrealistic expectations of parents and weak responses of parents to meetings and invitations that are highlighted.

Category	Code	Example
<b>Organizational barriers</b>	Location mismatch between the kindergarten and school (n = 4)	<i>»We did not visit the school and teachers this time because the children are mostly going to different schools. And believe me, there were tears when the children found out that they would not be going to the same schools ... On the other hand, parents ask for advice about how to explain to their children that not all of them will go to the same school. They went in different directions because of their places of residence, so I did not want to visit only one school, and we could not visit different ones.« (Teacher 18)</i>
	Number and composition of children in the group (n = 3)	<i>»The large number of children in the group is very limiting, where the permitted 32 is a lot, and 24 is optimal. When you have a smaller number of children, it is easier to organize everything; it is easier for the teacher to monitor and observe and create a development map.« (Teacher 2)</i> <i>»Mixed groups, half of the children are transitioning, and half are staying in kindergarten.« (Teacher 3)</i>
	Distance from the school (n = 3)	<i>»The school is too far away, and there is too much traffic and too many children with only two teachers – all these things play a role. When we go somewhere with the children, we have to provide everything and think carefully about how and when we should go because of the traffic, sun, weather ...« (Teacher 6)</i>
	Lack of time (n = 2)	<i>»We have other activities that we do as well, and we do not have that much time to organize school visits on numerous occasions.« (Teacher 5)</i>
	Coordination with the school schedule (n = 2)	<i>»The school has a curriculum to follow, and it is difficult for it to organize anything extra, while in kindergarten everything is more flexible, so we can make adjustments.« (Teacher 5)</i> <i>»Schools have their schedules; I am not sure how they would host us if we wanted to organize more than one visit ...« (Teacher 4)</i>
	Stereotypical approaches (n = 2)	<i>»Everything is the same each year, from one generation to another. Other methods need to be created.« (Teacher 10)</i> <i>»I think that we are sticking to some stereotypes, the usual models of work.« (Teacher 3)</i>

<p><b>Communication and collaboration: kindergarten-family</b></p>	<p>Unrealistic expectations of parents (n = 4)</p> <p>Weak response of parents (n = 3)</p> <p>Overlapping transitions (n = 2)</p>	<p>»There are parents who refuse to openly admit that they idealize their child and with whom it is not possible to establish good cooperation.« (Teacher 13)</p> <p>»Parents do not like to have a written record of their child, especially if it is about certain concerns, and that is why the documentation remains in our internal records.« (Teacher 11)</p> <p>»Most parents do not come for parent-teacher meetings, and it is difficult to establish cooperation with them.« (Teacher 16)</p> <p>»Very few parents respond when we invite them, and when they hear that we will be holding a workshop or giving a lecture, only 5-6 parents come.« (Teacher 7)</p> <p>»If a child is already going through a new period while, at the same time, they need to enrol at a kindergarten or school, that can be really challenging. For example, we had a case of the unsuccessful transition of a child from the family to the kindergarten environment because the boy became a brother to a baby sister at the same time. We advised the parents to wait a little longer with regard to kindergarten.« (Teacher 4)</p>
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<p><b>Communication and collaboration: kindergarten-school</b></p>	<p>Kindergartens and schools are not linked within the system (n = 17)</p> <p>Lack of cooperation between the kindergarten and school teachers (n = 10)</p>	<p>»Smaller schools have fewer children enrolled, and it is in their interest to enrol as many children as possible; thus, they are more willing to cooperate and engage more, which is not the case with bigger schools, who are not so enthusiastic ...« (Teacher 12)</p> <p>»... in another case, also with regard to the mandatory preschool programme, the school was not interested at all. I asked if we could come for a visit or if someone could visit us, but they were not interested at all ... you know – they invited us to come at five o'clock in the afternoon when the school was empty and that's it ... everything was locked, we could not visit any rooms or meet anybody, we only met the janitor ladies ... It all varies from school to school ... this opportunity which we had, it was without children as the school would not interrupt its curriculum, because it cannot postpone its activities. This should be introduced to schools as a mandatory type of cooperation, where they assist kindergartens and their future students.« (Teacher 18)</p> <p>»Do you know when the teachers show their willingness to cooperate? ... When they get an aggressive child or a special needs child, and then they call the pedagogue from a public institution and ask about the child's past development.« (Teacher 18)</p>
<p>Deficits in terms of professional training</p>	<p>Lack of education (n = 15)</p> <p>Inadequate forms of professional training (n = 5)</p>	<p>»I always get upset because we always have seminars about children with developmental disabilities. Regardless of how difficult it is for us in terms of inclusion, somehow all our workshops boil down to that, and there are so many other things that should be worked on further.« (Teacher 10)</p> <p>»I think there is just too little education and too few exchanges of experiences of important things. Pretty much everything comes down to the story of inclusion and very little about other things.« (Teacher 8)</p> <p>»The teaching staff training is a formality where the topics covered are often those that are already familiar to us. We miss being able to share our examples of good practice with our colleagues and learn from them.« (Teacher 3)</p> <p>»For the past two years, we have not seen each other personally during teacher staff training because it has been held over Zoom. We sign in to the meeting and continue cleaning our houses while the meeting takes place. It would be very different if we had the opportunity to physically be together and discuss things.« (Teacher 12)</p>

Table 3: Professional challenges that preschool teachers face in the process of transitioning children from kindergarten to elementary school

*Suggestions for improving the transitioning of children from kindergarten to elementary school*

According to the responses from the kindergarten teachers, suggestions for improving the system of transitioning children from kindergarten to elementary school can be classified into several categories, as shown in *Table 4*. The most common suggestions are related to the distribution of information and kindergarten–school collaboration, where they suggest professional networking between kindergarten and school teachers, visits by school teachers or pedagogues to the kindergartens and the involvement of other experts. Under the category of information distribution and kindergarten–family collaboration, proposals include workshops for parents, keeping pedagogical documentation for the purpose of information exchange and the exchange of experiences among parents. Under the category of familiarizing children with the school and school staff, kindergarten teachers especially highlight various networking activities between kindergarten and preschool children, as well as the design of more meaningful kindergarten visits to the school when compared to the existing ones. Only a few kindergarten teachers point to an element under the domain of elementary school reform, because the education system should be designed in such a way that the first grade is considered preparatory (grade zero and not grade one). Therefore, preschool teachers perceive the age from 6 to 7 years old as a transitional period that requires the cooperation of preschool and school teachers.

Category	Code	Example
<b>Introducing children to the school and school staff</b>	Networking between kindergarten and school children (n = 6)	<p>»Organize competitions between first graders and school children to socialize, sing, act ...« (Teacher 1)</p> <p>»I would organize activities between the first graders and our children who will now be entering the first grade, so they spend time together and play and become familiar with the school.« (Teacher 8)</p> <p>»Designing a kindergarten–school cooperation week and different activities within that week.« (Teacher 3)</p>
	Designing more meaningful kindergarten visits to the school (n = 3)	<p>»When school visits are already planned, make an actual plan and think about content, instead of just telling the kids, ‘This is a school, these are desks, this is a teacher ... you have to sit still and listen to the teacher ...’ Even organize a couple of visits and establish better cooperation ...« (Teacher 12)</p>

<p><b>Distribution of information and collaboration between the kindergarten and the school</b></p>	<p>Professional networking between kindergarten and school teachers (n = 9)</p> <p>School teacher or pedagogue visit to the kindergarten (n = 8)</p> <p>Involvement of other professionals (n = 2)</p>	<p>»There is no professional cooperation between kindergarten and school teachers. I was contacted only once by a teacher acting on her own initiative who found out that a child with Down syndrome from our kindergarten would be joining her class, so we exchanged information. This should be the practice for all children.« (Teacher 9)</p> <p>»It would be easier for teachers if we passed on the information we have about the children. They would have more information about the children joining their classes, but instead, they start at the very beginning of getting to know each other. We really could have close cooperation with them.« (Teacher 8)</p> <p>»It would not be bad if we established cooperation with school teachers and gave them information about children; for example, some children are withdrawn or shy, and some have difficulties ... it would be easier for them.« (Teacher 16)</p> <p>»It would be good if the school teachers came to the kindergarten to meet the children and spend time with the kindergarten teacher. We need to communicate, cooperate and exchange information about the children much more often, especially those who will join their classes.« (Teacher 13)</p> <p>»For the teacher and pedagogue to visit the kindergarten, for the children to make their first contact with them in a safe environment while their kindergarten teacher is with them.« (Teacher 15)</p> <p>»Involve other experts such as psychologists or psychiatrists. I say this because I know what a little girl who has just started first grade is going through. Her mother was killed in a traffic accident, and it is now difficult for her to watch other mothers come to the school yard with their children.« (Teacher 1)</p>
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<b>Distribution of information and collaboration between the kindergarten and family</b>	Workshops for parents (n = 4)  Pedagogical documentation (n = 4)  Exchange of experiences between parents (n = 2)	<i>»Workshops for parents can be organized on the topic of preparing a child for school.« (Teacher 3)</i>  <i>»My position is that development maps should be created starting from the youngest group and that they should travel to the schools together with the children.« (Teacher 6)</i>  <i>»It would be great to enable the exchange of experiences between parents – those whose children already go to school and those whose children are yet to start school ... Also, in the group, we would always have parents with children already in school and those whose child is just starting school as it is important that they exchange experiences.« (Teacher 18)</i>
<b>Reform processes</b>	The first grade of elementary school as an »intermediate space« (n = 2)	<i>»The first thing I would do is return to eight years of education. When children start school at the age of seven, how much the children mature during that one year makes a huge difference to how much more ready they are for school.« (Teacher 13)</i>  <i>»The first years of elementary school should be taught by preschool teachers. Those children, today's first graders, are actually the children that used to be in our oldest educational groups in the kindergarten. The school literally took from us one of our kindergarten groups. I think the school encounters difficulties, because it is teaching children a year earlier.« (Teacher 15)</i>

Table 4: Preschool teachers' suggestions for improving the transitioning of children from kindergarten to elementary school

### *Preschool teachers' need for support in the process of implementing the successful transition of children from kindergarten to elementary school*

The fourth research question concerned the analysis of kindergarten teachers' need for professional support in the process of implementing the successful transition of children from kindergarten to elementary school (Table 5). The teachers most often cited the importance of a supportive system, based on the principle of both the kindergartens and the schools possessing equal responsibility in the organization of transitioning activities, so such actions would not be based on the free will of educators or the passive positions of teachers. When it comes to educational support and professional networking, according to the responses of educators, equal value is placed on education organized through the exchange of experiences between teachers and during professional meetings of preschool teachers together with elementary school teachers.

Category	Code	Example
<b>Educational support and professional networking</b>	Education organized through the exchange of experiences between kindergarten teachers (n = 6)	» <i>The exchange of experiences is what we need the most, not meetings where you sit, listen and cannot wait for them to finish. When we hear someone's experience, we realize that we had not considered such a possibility but that it could be of use to us.</i> « (Teacher 10)
	Professional meetings of preschool teachers and school teachers (n = 6)	» <i>We miss sharing examples of good practice with our colleagues and learning from them.</i> « (Teacher 3) » <i>I would like for some kind of education to exist where we get together with the school teachers who will be teaching the children in the first grade and where they can get some information from us about the children who attended our kindergarten, and they can tell us about the challenges they normally face.</i> « (Teacher 6)
	Examples of stimulating practice (n = 4)	» <i>We do not have the opportunity to learn from people who excel in their practice or from more experienced kindergarten teachers. Examples of their stimulating practice would mean something to us.</i> « (Teacher 11) » <i>Education organized for both kindergarten and school teachers, where we exchange experiences and find solutions.</i> « (Teacher 7)
<b>Support of the system</b>	Equal responsibility of the kindergarten and the school and the sustainability of transitioning activities (n = 17)	» <i>There should be a system that supports the transition of children; where the schools are also obliged to establish cooperation with us, to open up, and where transition does not only rely on our good will or desire ... where transitioning is not at the will of the kindergarten or school teacher, but where the system regulates the need for it.</i> « (Teacher 12) » <i>That it is mandatory and continuous, instead of one year one way, and the next year a different way, as it is now. Activities should be intensified, especially in the last phase, right before graduation from the kindergarten and enrolment at the elementary school.</i> « (Teacher 7) » <i>That cooperation with the school is a regular process, whose activities already begin in September instead of next year in April or May. Cooperation with the school should be a mandatory type of work.</i> « (Teacher 18)

Table 5: Preschool teachers' need for professional support

## Discussion

The research results presented here indicate the highest representation of transition activities in areas such as talking to children about school, organizing closing ceremonies, one-time visits of kindergartens to the school and informing parents as part of regular teacher–parent meetings, and the lowest representation is shown in the area of collaboration with the school and parents. Visković and Višnjić Jevtić (2019, p. 142) indicate that such occasional and one-time activities may be initially successful but are not a long-term solution. The research results stated here correspond with research results from other countries (OECD 2017), especially neighbouring countries such as Croatia and Slovenia. According to the research in Slovenia (Ministry of Education, Science and Sport 2017, p. 50), the most common activities being carried out are talking about the school, kindergarten visits to the school and informing parents, while for Croatia (Visković 2018, p. 70), the most common transitioning activities are also discussions about the school and one-time visits of kindergartens to the school. In this regard, the authors (Ahtola et al. 2011; Visković 2018; Visković and Višnjić Jevtić 2019) conclude that the most common forms of such work are also the least efficient (discussions about the school and a one-time visit to the school) and that those that would enable a more successful transition, such as more comprehensive and long-term cooperation and collaboration, are lacking. The results of this research consistently indicate that there are many challenges in the area of ensuring professional, pedagogical and developmental continuity, which an OECD (2017) study indicates also exist in other European countries.

The research shows that the biggest challenge for preschool teachers is the lack of a formal system (based on which the transition system would be designed) that encourages communication and collaboration between the kindergartens and the schools. Therefore, one of the most needed form of support is system support – based on introducing equal responsibility shared by the kindergartens and the schools and the sustainability of transitional activities. After analysing the cantonal preschool curricula (in BiH, there is an uneven curricular approach), it can be said that even at the curricular level, there is no equal emphasis on ensuring continuity in education through designing the transition of children from kindergarten to elementary school. Namely, only three preschool curricula, Entity of Republika Srpska (Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports of the Republic 2007), Zenica-Doboj Canton (Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports of Zenica-Doboj Canton 2011) and Central Bosnia Canton (Ministry of Education, of Science, Culture and Sports of the Central Bosnian Canton 2018), out of a total of ten such curricula emphasize the importance of partnerships with schools and define the tasks of kindergarten teams. They point out that it is necessary to develop different forms of cooperation between preschool institutions and local schools in order to jointly plan support for each child transitioning from one education sub-system to another, with an emphasis on creating individual transition plans for children with special educational needs. The aforementioned programmes, however, do not offer any concrete forms of networking between preschool institutions

and kindergartens that would ensure sustainable and good quality transitions, but rather emphasize that the content of a partnership with a school and the local community is designed by each kindergarten in accordance with its traditions, customs, preferences and the needs of all those involved.

In the National Curriculum for Early and Preschool Education in neighbouring Croatia, ensuring continuity in upbringing and education is highlighted as one of the principles and a base value, serving the successful transition of children from one educational environment to another. However, Visković and Višnjić Jevtić (2019, p. 142) state that the formal educational system in Croatia does not provide for the planned and systematic cooperation of teachers in the institutions of the educational system either; however, this may not be the reason for the absence of collaborative activities. Based on the results of this research, we see that cooperation is highly dependent on the influence of other factors, which the educators cite as challenges such as organizational barriers (the number and composition of children in the group, a lack of time, the distance from the school, coordination with the school schedule, etc.) or deficits in the system of the professional development of educators, including the lack of education, especially in the domain of relevant topics (e.g. the transitioning of children from kindergarten to elementary school) or their inadequate implementation.

The challenges in the process of professional development that the kindergarten teachers in this research cite are globally present in other countries as well, although in a somewhat milder form. Namely, in an OECD (2017) report, it is stated that many countries declare that educational support in the domain of transition exists in the process of the initial education of preschool teachers as well as through various forms of professional training. However, it is still evident that both preschool teachers and school teachers note a lack of relevant training and educational support. In order to respond to such challenges, many countries are expanding their offerings of relevant educational programmes in the domain of children's transitioning from kindergarten to school. Research (Rous et al., 2010) shows that preschool teachers who were provided with educational support more often organized different transition activities compared to those who were not. Therefore, an important implication for the education of future preschool teachers is an awareness of the importance of education for ensuring the »smooth« transition of children from kindergarten to elementary school, as well as cross-border cooperation with classroom teachers.

The results of the research consistently point to a chronic lack of professional cooperation between kindergartens and schools, and several kindergarten teachers expressed a need for professional networking with school teachers and joint learning. In OECD (2017, 2020) reports, it is stated that preschool teachers in many countries also face the challenges of cooperation and collaboration and the distribution of information in the process of transitioning children from kindergarten to elementary school. The reason for this is the different expectations and the diffusion of responsibilities of the various institutions involved in the transitioning process, but also the daily challenges that educators face (the location mismatches between kindergartens and schools, the lack of time as well

as opportunities to exchange information between preschool and school teachers, the lack of incentives for professional development in the area of children's transitioning). According to OECD (2017, 2020) reports, many countries (Austria, Germany, Saudi Arabia) overcome these barriers through the physical integration of preschool institutions and elementary schools, which encourages a more consistent exchange of information between kindergartens and schools but also facilitates the transition process itself because children do not need to change their primary locations. In Saudi Arabia, a system has been defined for children aged 0–3, 3–6 and 6–8 years old, which aims to achieve better developmental, pedagogical and professional continuity and greater consistency with regard to the approaches used. In addition, the sensitive transition between preschool and school modes of operation (ages 6–8) is also indicated, which is particularly challenging in ensuring continuity. These could be important guidelines for improving the transition system in BiH, especially when it comes to pedagogical discontinuity between preschool and primary education<sup>2</sup> and location mismatches between kindergartens and schools. Taking into account such strategic efforts and the results of this research, relevant conclusions can be drawn.

## Conclusion

In this paper, an attempt was made to analyse the process of transitioning children from kindergarten to elementary school from the perspective of preschool teachers in BiH. The author of the paper is not aware of any previous research on the process of transitioning children from kindergarten to elementary school in BiH, and therefore, the results of this research significantly fill the information gap that exists in this area. The findings indicate a very weak system of transition and thin connections within the mesosystem, which should enable intensive and long-term cooperation in the relationship between family–kindergarten–school. Accordingly, the following conclusions and recommendations can be made for the improvement of the transition system:

The most common transitioning activities organized are precisely those that are considered the least efficient, while the most important transitioning activities that include deeper cooperation between kindergartens and schools (networking between kindergarten and school children, the exchange of information between kindergartens and schools, collaboration ...) are not represented. Therefore, it is necessary to design an efficient and sustainable system of transition activities that will facilitate the transition of children from kindergarten to elementary school.

The research shows that there is a complete lack of intensive collaboration

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<sup>2</sup> The concept of 9-year primary education in BiH has been based on the 3 + 3 + 3 model since 2004, in such a way that children start school at the age of 6 and not at the age of 7, as was the case until then. However, the transition from 8-year to 9-year education is generally misunderstood in practice, so one grade is added (8 + 1) as the ninth, instead of seeing the first grade as a period of transition (1 + 8) in which the emphasis should be on a »smooth transition« through ensuring pedagogical, developmental and professional continuity.

between families, kindergartens and schools. The implementation of such a system would ensure that the discontinuity between different developmental contexts is overcome. In particular, it is necessary to systematically connect kindergartens and schools and encourage interprofessional cooperation, the professional exchange of experiences and joint learning between preschool and elementary school teachers in order to ensure pedagogical and professional continuity in the process of transition.

Given that communication and collaboration between families, kindergartens and schools are at an unsatisfactory level, this is also reflected in the distribution of information about children, which is another important aspect of the transition. The results of the research indicate that documentation on children's development is based only on the transferal developmental assessments that remain in the kindergarten archives. It is necessary to improve the system regarding the continuous documentation of the developmental statuses of children (for example, through developmental maps) to serve children's transitioning through the distribution of information from one developmental context to another.

Bearing in mind the existing shortcomings in the process of transitioning children from kindergarten to elementary school, it is possible to single out two basic ways to achieve a high-quality and sustainable system: (1) ensuring a supportive system through the development of a national strategy or guidelines on »smooth transitioning«, which will define intersectoral cooperation and networking between kindergartens and schools in order to ensure developmental, professional and pedagogical continuity; and (2) guaranteeing the quality initial education of preschool educators and classroom teachers and their further joint professional development in the area of transitioning children from kindergarten to elementary school.

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## PREHOD IZ VRTCA V OSNOVNO ŠOLO – IZKUŠNJE VZGOJITELJIC IZ BOSNE IN HERCEGOVINE

**Povzetek:** Začetek šolanja je za otroke, starše, strokovne delavce in vzgojitelje zelo zahtevno obdobje prehoda. Zato sta za pozitivne rezultate ključna dejavna podpora in sodelovanje vseh sodelujočih. Prispevek analizira proces prehoda otrok iz vrtca v osnovno šolo z vidika vzgojiteljic v Bosni in Hercegovini (BiH). Izvedli smo kvalitativno raziskavo s polstrukturiranim intervjujem z 18 vzgojiteljicami predšolskih otrok, njihove izkušnje pri delu z otroki pa nam pomagajo razumeti proces prehoda iz vrtca v osnovno šolo in z njim povezane izzive. Rezultati raziskave nakazujejo uporabo najmanj učinkovitih dejavnosti pri prehodu ter odsotnost sodelovanja in izmenjave informacij med vrtcem in šolo pa tudi potrebo vzgojiteljic po pedagoški podpori in strokovnem sodelovanju z osnovnošolskimi učiteljicami. V skladu s tem prispevek podaja priporočila za izboljšanje in stabilnost sistema prehoda otrok iz vrtca v osnovno šolo.

**Ključne besede:** prehod, dejavnosti ob prehodu, vrtec, osnovna šola, Bosna in Hercegovina (BiH)

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