



Sustaining warm and inclusive transitions across the early years: preliminary findings

ARIANNA LAZZARI / LUCIA BALDUZZI, University of Bologna, Italy

MONICA LAVINI, DD Vignola/University of Bologna, Italy

EDDIE MCKINNON / ANGELA MALCOLM Pen Green Centre for Children and their Families

KATRIEN VAN LAERE, VBJK Centre for Innovation in the Early Years / Ghent university, Belgium

MATEJA REZEK, Educational Research Institute, Slovenia



BACKGROUND



- Council Conclusions on Education and Training ‘ET2020’: http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/strategic-framework/index_en.htm
- Studies funded by the European Commission on the role of ECEC in tackling Early School Leaving (Rimantas, Peeters, Hayes et al., 2014)

Thematic Working Group on ESL (Final Report, 2013): http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/repository/education/policy/strategic-framework/doc/esl-group-report_en.pdf

- Increased academic attention on transitions, but different perspectives:
 - School-ready children or children-ready schools?
 - Educational continuity, strong and equal partnership, pedagogical encounters...



The countries involved

Corby, UK:

- Pen Green Centre & Research Base
- Rockingham Primary
- Our Lady of Walsingham

Belgium /Flanders (Ghent & Aalst):

- VBJK
- Mezenestje childcare centre
- Sint Maarten kindergarten
- Mensen voor Mensen (AP)



Slovenia (Ljubana & Tisina):

- Educational Research Institute
- OSTisina (pre- and primary school)

Italia, RER:

- Bologna University
- DD Vignola (pre- and primary school)

SLOVENIA	BELGIUM	ITALY	UK
Integrated ECEC	Structural & conceptual split between child"care "and preschool "learning"	Split ECEC -> since 2015 law on the integrated system which will have effect since Sept 2017	Split ECEC (working on integration) /children transition from ECEC provision to primary school at age 5
Despite not being obligatory, high attendance of toddlers in ECEC, except in the case of Romani children	Research unravels assumption: children preferably attend childcare → danger to confirm social inequalities	As part of this reform process, greater attention to transition both in the pedagogical and political debate	'school readiness' and 'schoolification' processes
Transition between ECEC and primary school recurrent policy topic– yet more complex for Romani children	Growing attention of policy makers on the transition between home/childcare to preschool (not to primary school)	Emphasis placed upon educational continuity (VS school readiness) and longstanding tradition that gained new impetus in research and practices	ECEC seen as the critical time for early intervention with vulnerable children to 'close the gap', but government policy subverts this

Where does the project come from?

Shared concerns...

...the difficulties children experience over transitions have a long-term impact on their well-being and learning trajectories...

Fragmentation of pedagogical approaches and practices (SPLIT SYSTEMS - ECEC/CSE)

SMOOTH AND INCLUSIVE TRANSITIONS

SHARING MEANINGS AND NEGOTIATING PRACTICES BY INVOLVING ALL ACTORS

PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

...children who do not speak the dominant language and whose families come from different socio-cultural background are the ones experiencing more difficulties in this process...

→ Children are required 'to be ready' and to 'adapt' to what come next (kindergarten, school...)

...and will to change perspectives...



School readiness

- Learning in ECEC is functional to what come next (and ultimately the goal of schooling is to prepare responsible workers for labour market) - HIERARCHY
- early intervention for disadvantaged children
- Schoolification / pre-primary approach to early education (formalised learning, narrow curriculum approach)

OMOLOGATION

Strong Equal Partnersip

- Each educational level is equally important, based on the acknowledgement that children learn in different ways at different times in life
- Interplay between continuity/discontinuity - COMPLEMENTARITY
- Inter-institutional cooperation respecting the pedagogical identity of each setting
- Mutual exchange re: approaches & methods

Vision of a meeting place

- Dialogic perspective and SHARED VISION
- Negotiated values and pedagogical assumptions (image of the child, vision of learning, understanding of diversity...) -
- co-construction of educational contexts valuing multiple way of learning (INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH)
- Extended collegiality & shared reflection on practice and approaches

ETEROGENEITY

...how?

Participatory research approach involving all stakeholders (multiple perspectives):
practitioners/teachers,
children, families,
community groups

Sustaining the empowerment
of all actors involved starting
from their needs and
aspirations
*(what matters to them about
transitions?)*

Recursive interaction
between research and
experimentation,
between theory and
practice

Peer-learning and
reflection in groups
Pedagogical guidance

START

A good start for all: Sustaining
Transitions across the Early Years



Exploring transitions from children's perspectives

Researching transitions ‘with’ children:

- How transitions are experienced by children?
- Coping with transition processes: what are the needs of children – as well as their resources?
- How can children’s views / lived experiences be taken into account in order to improve transition practices?

Re-thinking transitions by listening to children

Theoretical/methodological framework

- Interpretative re-production of everyday experiences in ECEC / primary school settings (Corsaro & Molina, 2005)
- Participatory research: focus on children's perspective and intentionality (Mortari & Mazzoni, 2010)
- Ethical stance of the researchers (Arnold & Brennan, 2013; Dockett, Einarsdottir & Perry, 2009; Flewitt, 2005)

Listening to children as experts of their own lives: recognising children's agency in making sense of everyday experiences in educational settings and shaping interactions with peers / adults /surrounding environment, as well in expressing / making their own choices

Multi-site case study: methods

Joint / shared reflection on collected data, where multiple standpoints are taken into account for interpretation of children's experiences (*all stakeholders were involved in data analysis, not only researchers!*):

- Children's views (eg. comments on drawings, conversations,...)
- Pre- and Primary Teachers' understandings (eg. *'reciprocal confrontation' on children's observations,*)
- Parents' perspectives (eg. *'focus groups' and 'interviews' with parents concerning transitions experiences of their children*)

Findings (I): changes & potential challenges faced by children in transitions

- Space: rigidly defined (by adults) VS flexible organisation (multifunctional & adjusted in relation to children's engagement in diversified learning activities/projects)
- Learning environment: split between adult-directed (learning) and child-led (recess) activities VS interconnected experiences (play / learning activities)
- Relational agency: confidence & independency VS more passive role (see drawings of children's bodies in relation to adults and peers)
- Implicit changes in rules and expectations

ALLA SCUOLA DELL'INFANZIA



GIOCAVO, COLORAVO, DISEGNAVO, MI DIVERTIVO

I was playing, coloring, drawing,
having fun

Elena, 6 yrs old

ALLA SCUOLA PRIMARIA



I write, read, study and
carry out homeworks

ALLA SCUOLA DELL'INFANZIA

ALLA SCUOLA PRIMARIA

I was playing with my
friends

GIOCAVO CON I
MIEI AMICI



STIAMO ASCOLTANDO LA MAESTRA

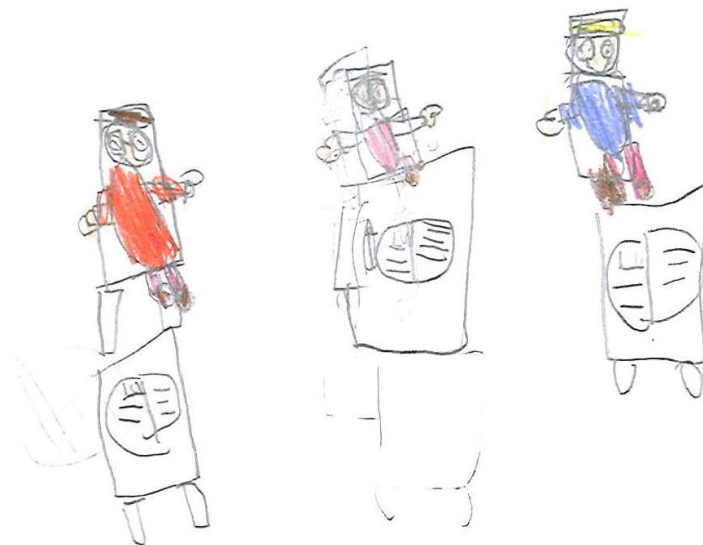
We are listening to the
teacher



Fatima, 6 yrs old



I was playing with ball in the garden along
with my friends



We write dates, we do many words and we
write titles in red

Francesco, 6yrs old



Hasan, 6yrs old

I was buiding a tower with lego, and then we were doing head count...those who were more silent did the waiters at lunchtime...and then we were playing outside...those who were not playing nicely had to sit down.

We write and we read, those who are not able to read have to learn.

Findings (II): overcoming the challenges of (vertical) transitions from one setting to another

- Supporting children in transition by anticipating change

“Well we told Kieran on Thursday that soon he is going to school. We explained to him and he was ever so excited which makes us excited. He still asked if he was going to have toys there and he was singing “I’m going to school in September!” (Kieran’s mother, UK)

“The best option of preparing him for school is to make him a picture book to explain to him who in is at the school, what the school is like, how things will be changing, that it’s not going to nursery, ‘You’re going to school, you are big boy, you need to wear a uniform’. Because of his disability we have to prepare him in a different way” (Freddie’s mother, UK)

Findings (II): overcoming the challenges of (vertical) transitions from one setting to another

- Relationships and connections as a key in sustaining children to face changes and challenges (settling in)

“At first he made friends with Angus who was also from here and they would natter. So the teacher ended up having to split them up on the mat, because they were talking so much. At the first parents evening, she told me about this and I went back and said “It’s really nice you made friends with Angus I said you talk a lot and that’s why you can’t sit together.” He said “If I promise not to talk can I sit next to him? When I told the teacher she said ‘OK, let’s give it a try’ and she went with it.” (parent, UK)

“After a visit to his new school one little boy, who was a connector, connected himself to me with snap-hooks for the rest of the day when we got back to nursery” (practitioner, UK)

Findings (II): overcoming the challenges of (vertical) transitions from one setting to another

- Co-constructing the learning environment as ‘lived space’: making space for the newcomers

“When she was trying out a desk and chair one little girl asked the teacher ‘Where’s Tessa going to sit?’”

“Another asked a teacher ‘When is Sarah coming? When is it her day?’”

Findings (III): horizontal transitions as boundary spaces where relationship with families are played out

Difficult transitions for children and parents - are teachers engaging with parents about their children's needs, and their needs?

My child cried from September till the Easter holidays in April. He clamped himself to me. The teachers pulled him away from my arms because he did not want let me go. You are helpless as parent. Saying goodbye at the school gate is difficult. A separation like this breaks my heart, and I think that it is a very traumatic experience for my child. Now, quite a while later, he says goodbye without crying. The teacher and I didn't talk about the difficulties during the 'saying goodbye' moments. I think that accompanying my child into the classroom and saying goodbye in the classroom would be better and more comfortable for me and my child. (parent, BE)

Findings (III): horizontal transitions as boundary spaces where relationship with families are played out

Benefits of being able to accompany your child into the school

“When I can be present in class with my child in the mornings, he is doing better. He has more confidence because he knows I’m present. He knows his space in the class. He wants me to help him, but now and then he tells me he can do it himself. He gives me a kiss and then goes playing. When I couldn’t enter the class, he was scared of everybody else” (parent, Be)

Creating boundary spaces for ‘free confrontation’ with parents (dialogue & informal support)

The afternoon reading club was a great opportunity to meet with the parents and offer advice and guidance on supporting children’s reading at home... more than a third of the parents attended the afternoon reading club sessions regularly (reception teacher, England)

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Transitions across the Early Years



The voices of families in transitions

Introduction

- Absent perspective in research studies and debates
- Predominantly an instrumental focus on parents' involvement in transitions

(e.g. McIntyre et al. 2007)

- Social Constructivist and Critical Pedagogy frameworks

Research Question

- What are the perspectives of families on transitions
 - From home/childcare to preschool
 - From preschool to primary school
- What do we learn from families in developing transitional practices?

Methodology and ethics

- Focus groups (n=25)
- Semi-structured questionnaire (n = 92)
- Individual in-depth interviews (n=13)
- Informal talks (n=11)
- Informed consent as ‘an interpersonal process between researcher and participant’ (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004)

Socialisation

- Learning to be and become in group and deal with diversity
- Good relationships between children are the key element in creating a peaceful climate that allows and sustains meaningful learning (*It*)

Socialisation

“

I hope that my daughter will find a positive, collaborative and stimulating environment that supports her in her growth as a student and as a person” (It)

“I think she will get on fine but I’m still nervous about it because of the way she is, because everyone knows her from here, so it’s her getting to know other people again there” (UK)

Socialisation

“The school will teach the rules of civil coexistence” (It)

- What if school fails to deal with diversity and confirms existing social power relationships and inequalities (e.g SL/Be)?
- What if worlds are separate?

“I do not let my child to go the neighbors, why should I then enroll her to kindergarten?”(SL)

Learning & Achievements

- Internal motivation to learn

“We expect a serene and quiet environment in which each child could learn according to his rhythm, avoiding conflicting or competitive situations” (It)

- Influence of schoolification

“I expect that the schools will provide a solid foundation that will lead to an excellent career for my child. We hope to have good school education that pushes my child into further education (It)”

Learning & Achievements

“So the biggest challenge for me was to find out actually how to deal with the school requirements, when are we supposed to read with him, practice some words, practice the sounds when literally I cannot manage to keep him awake long enough to brush his teeth after dinner. Then he wants to sleep as long as possible in the morning, and then there is still the breakfast, and then we run to school and then we haven’t practiced the sounds and the words and I feel from one side guilty as I understand the need for education but I also cannot push him over the limits. It’s too much, not to go to sleep as you have to do the homework” (UK)

Safe

“There are too many children in kindergarten, you can not have everyone under control, so somebody can do him harm.”(SL)

“I do not want to enroll my child a kindergarten, because I'm afraid that something might happen to him. He often falls at home, because he is clumsy, he probably will fall in the kindergarten even more often, because there are more children.”(SL)

“I was looking for a safe school for Freddie, he must be safe, and he must be really looked after all of the time that he's at the school. It is a special school which has a medical team. It's very important with his condition. That is my point.”(UK)

Safe

Will my child be emotionally and physically safe?

- Fear of getting hurt or sick
- Fear of exclusion and fear of bullying
- Especially for parents with children with special needs or in the position of extreme exclusion: Romani families

Care

- *Will you take care of my child? versus “Is my child self-sufficient?”*
- Irrespective of context and system, questions on care!

“I have the impression they look out for him, that they care. When he hurted himself, there is a patch on his wounds” (Be)

“From the moment she has a bruise or a scratch, I would like to know. I ask them to contact me. Ofcourse a child can fall, but I would like to know what happened” (Be)

Care and lack of communication

“Well I don’t know whether he has eaten in primary school, I don’t know whether he has had a good day, bad day, don’t know what kind of mood he is going to be in, don’t know nothing!...Pen Green is more relaxed...more friendly and welcoming... Now, you have to stand in the playground, you have to stand outside. The children come out one by one, go straight to the parents and then you leave so you don’t even get to talk to a teacher or find out anything...I felt like I could tell you anything...now I don’t feel like I can say anything. The only place you can go into is the office, which always seems to be locked, or you go through the office and sit in the corridor...I don’t like that either “(UK)

Implications for practice and policy

- Complex position for parents: adhering and challenging dominant practices / ideas
- **Relationship – Care - Trust – Community** as key levers!!!
- ‘Teachers/educators as most important ‘go to person’” → Supporting professionals in democratic approach of pedagogical quality

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Sustaining practitioners and teachers in developing inclusive transitions

PRACTITIONERS /TEACHERS

- Are the most important **‘go to person’** according to parents, to discuss transitions of children
- Have a **key role** in making schools more open and **welcoming** for children / parents
- Have a key role in **developing relationships** with children and parents in transitions

PRACTITIONERS /TEACHERS

“*But there is still the bit around early years and children having plenty of time to explore, experiment, discover, learn for themselves . But then schools do want children to comply and follow things...**transition is not just about children, it’s about parents too...***

*For parents it can take 6 to 8 weeks to find their way, not knowing who you can go to and probably thinking “I’m not being neurotic, I’m not being awkward”. “I just want somebody to go to **help me as a parent to make those relationships.** I think they are really important things” (Primary school teacher, UK)*

CHALLENGING INSTITUTIONAL SPLITS BY

- **Raising awareness on the socio-historic construction of ‘ECEC’** , splits and primary school
- Stimulating thinking from **‘children’s and parent’s needs’** instead of solely institutional, historically grown logic
- Supporting professionals in **democratic approach** of pedagogical quality
- **Facilitate collaboration** with other practitioners and increase a **shared responsibility** in transition
- Feeling sure enough **to experiment and think out of the box**

PARTICIPATORY ACTION- RESEARCH

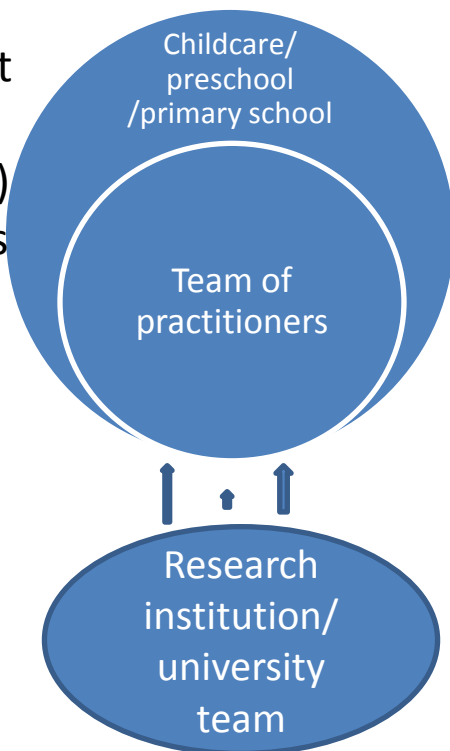
- Builds on
 - well-established European traditions (Formosinho & Formosinho,2012; Bove,2009)
 - international research evidence on professional development (Peeters et al.,2015)
- Showing that long-term training initiatives that are integrated into practitioners' everyday practice are the most effective in enhancing the quality of educational settings through increased reflectivity

OBJECTIVES

- Shared understanding
 - importance of developing trustful relationship/ partnership with parents among different profiles of practitioners and teachers, as assurance for sustainability of project ideas/innovation.
- Developing a supportive/ competent system
 - in which individual professionals are supported in implementing ideas, innovations

BUILDING SUPPORTIVE SYSTEMS

National project team= team of practitioners (6) and researchers (2)



WHAT WAS IMPLEMENTED SO FAR?

- Analysis of local needs
- International training on participatory action research (Pen Green Centre)
- Developing national action plans
- Transfer into practice- experimentation and documentation of innovative transition practices

ANALYSIS OF LOCAL NEEDS

Example 1: Italy – focus group (practitioners and researchers)

PRACTITIONERS SHARED THE NEED TO FOSTER:

- MOTIVATION(question making, active listening, rewarding attitude)
- AUTONOMY (routines, cognitive autonomy, space organization, time management)
- COGNITIVE CHALLENGE (trustful – rewarding attitude towards childrens' potentials)
- APPROACH CONTINUITY(preparation of activities and structured material, DIVERSIFYING, ANTICIPATING ACTIVITIES (stimulate learning styles), METACOGNITIVE STRATEGIES (to foster children' s self consciousness, Scaffolding)

Analysis of local needs

Example 2: Slovenia

- Questionnaires for preschool, primary school teachers and Roma assistants on importance of transitions for Roma children
- Developing partnership with Romani parents and strategies on doing so, outreach programs
- Great differences in understanding and great differences in valuing them

Transfer into practice/ in national contexts- experimentation and documentation of innovative transition practices

National project team (project team of practitioners and researchers)



Introduction/sharing with pre/primary school teachers team

Immediate experimentation with practices which contribute to sustaining transition

Developing culture of professional dialogue/professional learning communities
Developing shared understanding of the meaning on importance of developing trustful relationship/ partnership

PEN GREEN RESEARCH CENTRE, CENTRE FOR FAMILIES AND CHILDREN- Corby-UK

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BELGIUM

- **START critical learning community with all stakeholders involved-** preschool teachers, childcare workers, directors and people of advocacy group for families living in poverty.
- **Monthly meetings on** developing vision, action and evaluation.
- **Staff meetings in each organisation to raise awareness** and increase shared responsibility
- this project start is **changing the vision and attitudes of preschool teachers towards parents**. But also renewed and strengthened the **‘settling down’ policy for welcoming children and parents**. Since everybody thought this was well-established, but it wasn’t in a systemic manner.

SLOVENIA

- The national project team and director of the primary school co-decided, to organize a **series of workshops to discuss these topics in order to create a common understanding and start to build culture of professional dialogue and reflection among teachers.**
- **the team of practitioners started implementing activities in the Roma settlement,** which contribute to the softer transition of children to preschool and school.
- **Change of leadership in primary school,** reduced support of the project idea by the management
- In the coming school year challenge: **to create a supporting system** within the institution that will enable the implementation of activities that will contribute to the soft transition of children.

ITALY

PEER OBSERVATIONS between practitioners (March/April 2017)

MEMORY BOOKS-CIRCLE TIME-ROUTINES-2 ACTIVITIES AT THE
SAME TIME, SELF-LEARNING ACTIVITIES



CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS

- **Document successes as milestones** so that the changes lead to success
- Developing **professional learning community (PLC)** within and across different institutions as supportive system for professionals.
- Without PLC, developing **culture of dialogue**, no innovation is sustainable
- **Critical role of the directors**

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Preliminary Conclusions

Pathways of systemic change through small steps!

- ❖ by constantly engaging with children and families to keep us focused on the issues that matters to them in transitions
- ❖ by constantly supporting practitioners in dealing with the challenges that such transformative process implies

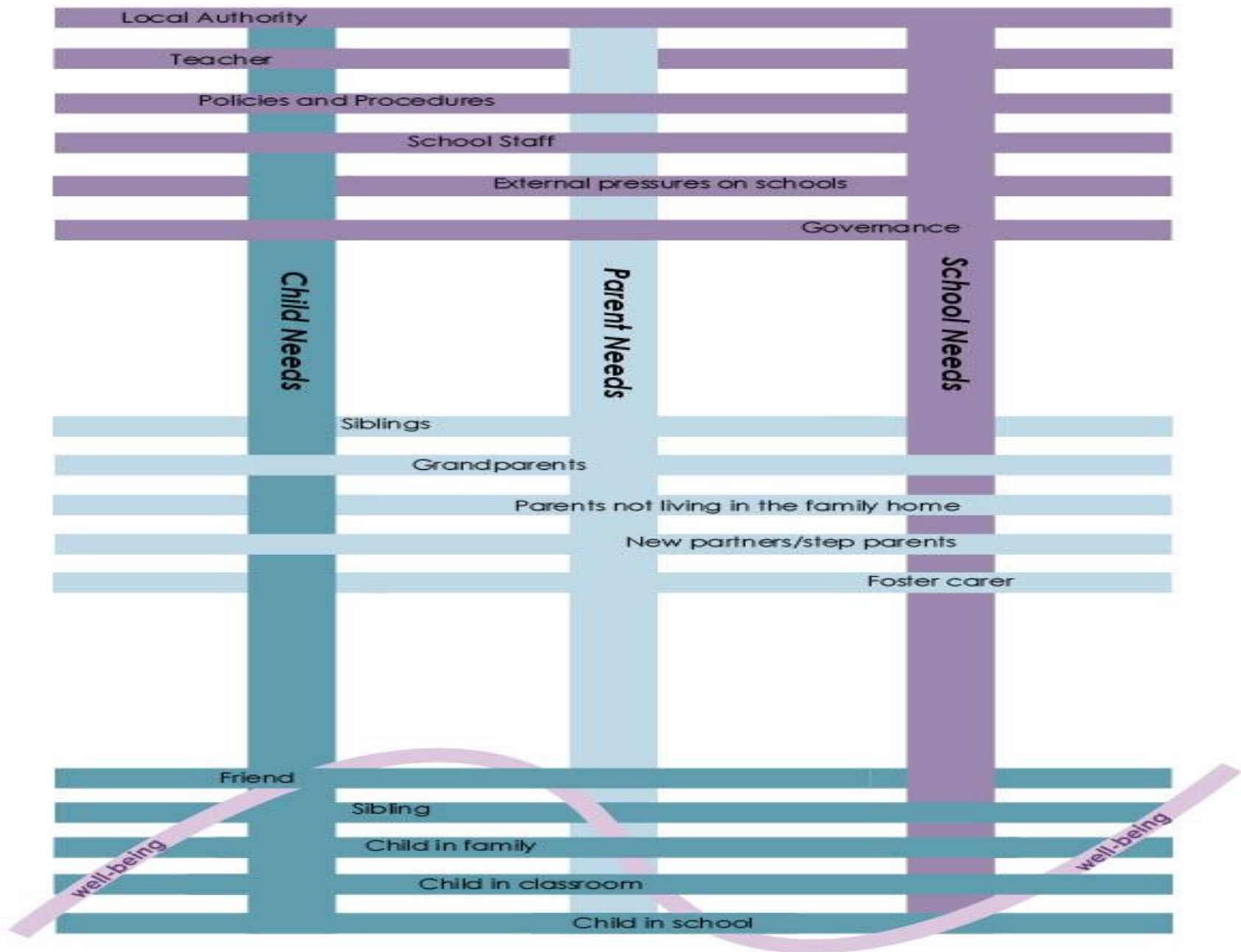




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Check out the project website and  for updates:

<http://start.pei.si>

