Continuities, Discontinuities and Transition in Early Childhood Literacy Education at Digital Time

Наступність, етапність та перехідний період щодо навчання дітьей дошкільного віку грамоти в час цифровізації

Zoi T. Apostolou
PhD in Educational Studies
E-mail: apostolo@upatras.gr
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4359-397X

University of Patras (Greece)
University Campus, GR26504
Rion, Achaia (Greece)

Original manuscript received September 08, 2022
Revised manuscript accepted October 03, 2022

ABSTRACT

Introduction. This paper reports the results of a study concerning the views and the expectations of primary teachers for the transition from kindergarten to primary school.

Goal. In a recently new educational environment, in which all educators “forced” to continue their educational practices as to ensure for their students a smooth transition from one level to another, two transitions processes implemented. The first one concerns the move from in-person to virtual delivery of the language classroom and the second one concern the preschoolers’ transition from kindergarten to primary school.

Methods of the Research. In this context, 16 Greek first grade primary school teachers’ views about their (previous preschoolers) students’ literacy development and elements of literacy knowledge after remote teaching (in a preschool setting) were collected with semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis.

The Results. The results showed that support for the transition of young children from preschool to primary school settings and literacy development was inevitably affected
Continuities, Discontinuities and Transition in Early Childhood...

into this new educational environment. Therefore, teachers propose the continuity between early childhood and primary school literacy programmes as the key for a smoother transition. Based on evaluations of experiences, a smooth transition and continuity from one level to another could be also facilitated and intermediated by collaboration of preschool and primary school teachers and other stakeholders. Furthermore, discontinuities in early childhood literacy education and development could be disappeared if policy makers try to bridge and sculpt “distances” via effective transition programmes.

**Conclusions.** The knowledge of current practice, priorities, challenges, and opportunities will help language educators to adjust their education offer, their syllabi, expectations, or pedagogical approaches to facilitate a more positive and smooth transition process for each and every learner.

**Key words:** transition to primary school, lifelong learning, language, literacy pedagogy, early childhood education.

---

**Introduction**

Lifelong learning and its related agendas (up-skilling, re-skilling, flexible learning, blended/online learning, etc.) have lately been experiencing a rejuvenation (Koglbauer, 2022) as COVID-19 pandemic had a wide-ranging impact on the longer-term effects upon society, economy, health, and education. Considering that education changed significantly during the pandemic COVID-19 and remote teaching forced to displace the standard teaching process, European Commission champions a STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, the Arts and Mathematics) approach (European Commission, 2021), while language skills were highlighted as vitally important in levelling up agendas (Koglbauer, 2022; UNESCO and Council of Europe, 2021). Equally important and only more recently acknowledged is the fact that educational systems, schools and educators need to be ready, prepared for such changes. As a fact, an attempt has been made from many stakeholders (learners, parents, educators, school leaders, policy makers, etc. nationally and globally) to adapt and organize the educational process and practices. Specifically, the world of technology and information replaced direct communication and contact, written and oral speech in their traditional form and annihilated distances by giving a flexible and interactive dimension in education. Furthermore, digital media have been fully utilized in differentiated teaching methods
(Lockee, 2021; Stanistreet et al., 2020) that have come to replace traditional teaching methods by transforming the educational process and simulate in some extent the usual and traditional teaching process.

In the era of the pandemic, a question arose about the Greek educational system and its readiness to face efficiently such an unprecedented situation of health scope, which affected the educational community and student’s smooth transition from one educational level to another.

**Literature Review**

**Transition and Educational Continuum**

An important aspect of the effectiveness of educational practices is student’s smooth transition from one level to another (Margetts, 2002). There are many levels in the education continuum, and each time a child moves from one level to the other transition occurs (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). Amongst educators, the term transition is commonly understood as points in a learner’s journey where they are transitioning to a different level/stage of learning, a new organisation, a more advanced (or in some cases more achievable) programme or exam course (Koglbauer, 2022). In our study we are using the term transition to describe the period of time before and after a child moves into primary school (from an early childhood programme) and the passage from one to the other. Margetts (2002) defines the child’s transition as the adaptation to new situations and environments, which are more demanding compared to previous experiences, while Brooker (2002) mentions that the need of adaptation to a new environment represents the first challenge in young children’s lives.

Transition from the early childhood phase to primary school is one of the major steps that each child has to take in the education continuum and has been known to be traumatic for most children (Brooker, 2002; Rous & Hallam, 2006; Rous et al., 2010). So, starting primary school is a momentous experience for most children, as it is often stressful (nothing is familiar, everything is bigger, there are lots of unfamiliar people) (Pianta et al., 1999). Whether it is an exciting or terrifying experience it is a strong memory for most people (Early, 2004). There is also research evidence (e.g., Ackesjö, 2013; Ahtola et al., 2011;
Alatalo et al., 2016, 2017; Dockett & Perry, 2004; Ecclestone, 2009; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000) which contends that this transition to the first year of primary school is very important for the child’s future physical, emotional and intellectual development. Therefore, the results of many studies (e.g., Ahtola et al., 2011; Dockett & Perry, 2004; Jensen et al., 2013; Margetts & Kienig, 2013; Rous & Hallam, 2006) show that an unsuccessful transition is related to various school failures experienced during their later life, and during new transitions. In fact, an unsuccessful transition may affect children’s self-confidence and contribute to a feeling of failure during numerous activities of their lives. In the long term, all these create children full of insecurities and adults who are not satisfied by their lives and themselves (Brooker, 2002).

In this context, the start of primary schooling has been perceived as one of the most important transitions in a child’s life and a major challenge of early childhood (Alexander & Entwisle, 1988). Initial success at school, both socially and intellectually, leads to a virtuous cycle of achievement (Burrell & Bubb, 2000) and can be a critical factor in determining children’s adjustment to the demands of the school environment and future progress (Alexander & Entwisle, 1988). Several researchers (Ackesjö, 2013; Ahtola et al., 2011; Alatalo et al., 2016; Apostolou & Stellakis, 2019; Dockett & Perry, 2004; Hjelte, 2005; Vrinioti, 2008) mentioned that a stronger connection amongst kindergartens, primary schools and parents could facilitate a smoother transition to primary school and could have better children’s literacy outcomes. So, for transition to be smooth, children need to be ready for primary school. Equally important and only more recently acknowledged is the fact that primary schools need to be ready for pre-schoolers coming to their educational setting.

Therefore, transition can be greatly facilitated if educators from one area, for example early childhood education, work with those of the next level, that is, the primary school and vice versa (Ackesjö, 2013; Alatalo et al., 2016, 2017; Early, 2004; Ecclestone, 2009; Pianta et al., 1999; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). As Dockett and Perry (2004) mentioned the transition to school is not an individual experience for the child, but rather a shared experience, involving a variety of individuals. In fact, collaboration between teachers of different levels is assessed as particularly important and can be implemented both by students visiting the next class, because this contributes to their
adjustment, as well as by teachers’ discussions about the peculiarities of the curricula and by kindergarten teachers sharing information about the special characteristics of students who are about to go to primary school (Ackesjö, 2013; Ahtola et al., 2011; Alatalo et al., 2016; Dockett & Perry, 2004; Hjelte, 2005; Vrinioti, 2008). In this context, readiness and continuity could be in some extent ensured as possible processes.

Continuity (continuum) is the key and articulation between early childhood programmes and primary school education is a growing concern given increasing rates of participation in early childhood educational programmes. According to several researchers (Ackesjö, 2013; Ahtola et al., 2011; Alatalo et al., 2016; Apostolou & Stellakis, 2019; Dockett & Perry, 2004; Hjelte, 2005; Vrinioti, 2008) statistically significant associations between children’s adjustment to preschool educational setting, to the first year of school, personal and background factors, transition activities conducted by schools, children’s preschool and early school experiences, the absence or presence of a friend, and a number of other factors concerned children’s succeed in later school and social life. Therefore, transition programmes should create an appropriate degree of continuity between preschool and school experiences and develop strategies to help children to their smooth transition and adjustment to first-grade of primary school.

**Early Childhood Literacy Education in Transition**

The literature on transition to school amongst the factors which impact on successful transition for the child from the early childhood phase to primary school include the continuum on literacy practices.

Trying to define literacy practices, language, reading, and writing are generally considered to be interrelated processes that correspond to emergent literacy in children ages 0 to 6 (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008). Through quality educational practices and a well-structured and organized educational environment of the classroom the child's engagement in emergent literacy development and learning situations could be supported (Baroody & Diamond, 2016). In this context, the educational environment includes the physical dimension (classroom layout, resources, books, writing materials) as well as the interactive dimension (teacher and child interactions) (Guo et al., 2010). Child engagement refers to interactions with the teacher, peers and his or her involvement within tasks and activities (Downer et al., 2010).
The quality of these interactions plays an essential role in the development of 4 and 6-year-olds’ emergent literacy and in their current and later educational success (Guo et al., 2010). Therefore, as the transition to school is not an individual experience for the child, but rather a shared experience, involving a variety of individuals (Dockett & Perry, 2004) and literacy concerns a social practice, literacy development during transitions processes consists one of the most important practices that ensure personal and social integration. The path to literacy is a lifelong process (lifelong learning) that is treated as a continuum with various levels that are acquired during a person’s life, from the basic to the most developed (Djonov et al., 2018). Therefore, a child’s literacy experiences in preschool age are crucial for all children, since preschool is not just the first phase in a person’s lifelong literacy process, but is its foundation.

UNESCO (2016) and ELLINET network (2016) recognize that early childhood education plays a key role as the foundational phase for the literacy pathway, which has a multiplier effect as it “empowers people”, makes them “able to participate fully in society”. The relationships between the quality of the educational environment and the child’s engagement in developmental and learning situations relating to emergent literacy in preschool classes could be linked to the subsequent school success or failure of the child. So, as the practices of strengthening and/or teaching first literacy concern mainly the school context, it is important to develop knowledge regarding the quality of the educational environment and the child’s interactions within this environment considering the importance of language development in preventing later reading and writing difficulties.

Ensuring a successful preschool-to-primary school continuum and collaborative practices between preschool and first-grade teachers could provide higher quality literacy experiences.

**Conditions for Literacy Education in Transition at Face-to-Face Teaching**

Preschool teacher’s role as an “intermediate” (mediator/facilitator) of literacy in the acquisition of reading, written language and cultural literacy, is investigated and analysed from several studies (see e.g., Chall, 1967; Dickinson & Brady, 2006; Kondylis & Stellakis, 2006; Piasta et al., 2012; De Silva Joyce & Feez, 2016). Literature review
(e.g., Apostolou, 2021; Campana et al., 2016; Kondylis & Stellakis, 2006; Paris, 2005; Scull et al., 2013; Tracey & Morrow, 2007; Xefteris, 2017; Xue & Meisels, 2004) mention that in face-to-face teaching preschool teachers adopt a combination of approaches related on the one hand to practices, such as taking into account children’s interests and knowledge (emergent literacy), extracting and rendering meaning from a text, etc. (communicative approach) and on the other hand technical skills, such as phonological awareness, decoding, etc. (conventional literacy). So, as can be seen by further researchers (Ackesjö, 2013; Ahtola et al., 2011; Alatalo et al., 2016, 2017; Apostolou & Stellakis, 2019; Broström, 2007; Dockett & Perry, 2004; Early, 2004; Ecclestone, 2009; Fabian & Dunlop, 2007; Karydis, 2014; Pianta et al., 1999; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000; Sivropoulou & Vrinioti, 2009; Vrinioti, 2008), for teaching language preschool teachers try to empower their students by preparing them for a smooth transition to the first grade of primary school and the elaborated school language by combining teaching models and techniques.

Although, according to literature review (Apostolou, 2021; Apostolou & Stellakis, 2020; Karydis, 2014) both preschool and primary school teachers showed ignorance of each other’s teaching practices and curriculum, many studies (Ackesjö, 2013; Alatalo et al., 2016, 2017; Apostolou & Stellakis, 2019; Broström, 2007; Dockett & Perry, 2004; Early, 2004; Ecclestone, 2009; Fabian & Dunlop, 2007) verified that teachers from both educational settings are trying to help students in their transition experiences by developing strategies to help them to adjust to primary school educational setting.

The question is what about this transition during remote teaching at digital time?

**Conditions for Literacy Education in Transition at Digital Time**

As we have already seen, literature review refers to transition as a demanding process in face-to-face teaching. This process could be described as an extremely demanding and difficult process in the context of remote teaching.

Regarding literacy education, one question arose which concern language teaching practices in the period of the COVID-19 pandemic to preschool children aged 4–6 years through remote teaching and the degree of convergence of these practices with the corresponding
practices of traditional face-to-face teaching. How could preschool teachers ensure the smooth transition of children from kindergarten to primary school, the transition from early literacy to the elaborated language of the school context?

Several researches (e.g., Apostolou & Lavidas, 2022; Hodges et al., 2020; Lavidas et al., 2022; Zhao, 2020) mentioned the difficulties encountered and the teaching practices adopted by preschool teachers at various learning areas during remote teaching. However, no research was found regarding the practices adopted of preschool teachers during the pandemic period for literacy development as to ensure the smooth transition of preschool students to primary school. As the practices of a smooth transition concerning the learning area of the language and literacy development do not seem to have been unaffected by the forced admission of remote teaching to preschool education, the question of comparing and relating the two ways, of face-to-face teaching and alternative practices adopted in the digital age is really important for academic community. Therefore, teaching reading and enhancing literacy require a wide range of skills and abilities that must be acquired during initial education and continuously improved through training programs in the context of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) (EACEA, 2011).

Furthermore, considering the practices of strengthening literacy as particularly important for preschool education but also as a demanding process for teachers, one more question arose. At digital age were the practices of strengthening literacy sufficient to offer the appropriate cognitive supplies that preschool students need, so that they can academically, communicatively and cognitively make a smooth transition to the level of primary education?

Regarding this question, during the pandemic preschool teachers were forced to use ICT in the educational process, some only as a means of communication with students and others incorporating in their teaching interventions to a small or large extent proposals for utilization proposed by the curriculum and facilitated by various bases of ICT utilization scenarios (repository etc.) (Samuelsson et al., 2020). In the context of considering the curricula according to which the goal of education today is the formation of learning environments that acquaint children with a variety of tools for processing and exchanging information in order to face the challenges of contemporary social reality
and decode the world around them, one more question arose concerning the “readiness” and willingness of preschool teachers to adapt to the emerging new conditions of teaching practice.

This research gap identified both in the international and mainly in the Greek scientific community strengthened the need to conduct the present research. In this context, the purpose of this research is to investigate primary teacher’s views about the practices were implemented during the pandemic period of preschool teachers to strengthen the literacy of their pupils as to have a smooth transition to first grade of primary school, collaboration’s practices with preschool teachers for language and finally their perceptions about the changes that will be needed if the digital classroom was “forced” to return to our lives.

**Research aims.** This research aimed to investigate:

a. First-grade teachers’ views and expectations for the appropriate framework (literacy development program) to ensure preschool student’s smoother transition to primary school.

b. First-grade teacher’s collaboration practices with preschool teachers in language area after remote teaching for student’s smoother transition from kindergarten to first grade and their views about the changes that will be needed if the digital classroom was “forced” to return to our lives.

**Methodology**

**Research procedure & Research instrument**

This research was carried out from January to May 2022, some months after educational institutions returned back to face-to-face education. Research followed a qualitative methodology that allows researchers to analyse facts holistically and in-depth (Bryman, 2016). More specifically, we focused on first-grade teacher’s views of teaching language in a preschool setting before and after the pandemic. Semi-structured interviews with first-grade teachers were carried out to identify their attitudes, expectations and views. In designing and conducting the research we have considered ethical issues and ethics (Bryman, 2016). Teachers’ participation was voluntary and prior to the start of each interview, the participant was briefed on the purpose of the survey, the value of participation, the anonymity of participants...
and the communication of the results. All procedures performed with
the permission of the teachers who participated in the research for the
processing and analysis of their data. Further, the collected information
from each participant was assigned pseudonyms (numbers) as part of
concealing participants’ identities and ethical issues were considered.
The interviews were conducted individually and at a distance (web
meetings), and each interview lasted about 25 minutes.

The interview protocol was based on the research objective.
Before the primary survey, the interview protocol was tested with one
first-grade teacher to review the interview and make corrections. This
teacher is not included in the final sample. Table 1 presents the final
interview questions that consisted of two parts. The first part was the
demographic profile of teachers (gender, studies, work experience and
the number of their students). The second part was about the views of
teachers for language.

**Table 1**
*Interview protocol*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First part</th>
<th>Second part</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Teacher’s gender, studies, teaching experience, number of students | *Literacy development of preschool students in the context of face-to-face classrooms:*
1. What do you think should be the language skills a preschooler should acquire in kindergarten?
2. Do you think that the methods followed in the kindergarten are effective in the students’ understanding of the language?

*Expectations for literacy development of preschool students during the pandemic in the context of digital classrooms:*
3. Did you expect that students who entered the first grade this year would have become familiar with literacy? If so, mention any specific expectations you had?

*Literacy development of preschool children in digital classrooms:*
4. Do you know the methods followed by kindergarten teachers to cultivate students’ oral and written language in remote teaching during the pandemic? If so, do you think they delivered on students’ understanding of the language, were they sufficient to meet your expectations and requirements?

*Literacy development in digital classrooms and transition to the first grade of primary school:*
5. Do you think that literacy education of preschoolers as it was carried out in remote teaching was sufficient to cover the cognitive/learning requirements of the first grade of the primary school?
6. Did you find any differences in the language skills of the students who entered the first grade of primary school this year (in the previous two years they took part in distance learning during the pandemic) compared to those who attended in previous years face-to-face teaching in conventional kindergarten classes?
7. Did you collaborate with preschool teachers after the pandemic to discuss the oral
and written language practices of the students who entered the first grade of primary
school this year? If so, describe to us how you work together?
8. If the digital classroom was “forced” to return to our lives, what would you like
to be done to cultivate the oral and written language of the students who attend
the digital classroom in the kindergarten, so that their transition to the first grade is
smoother and be able to meet the learning requirements?

Participants
The purposive sample consisted of 10 female and 6 male first-grade teachers from various Greece regions. The initial selection for participating in the interviews included 21 voluntary teachers. The sampling process took into account until theoretical saturation has been achieved (Bryman, 2016; Creswell, 2016). So, only 16 out of 21 teachers participated in the interviews, and therefore the final sample consists of these 16 first-grade teachers. Table 2 presents the demographic information of the participants. All the teachers declared that teaching experience varied from 5 to 30 years, 8 (50.0%) hold a postgraduate degree. 5 (31.3%) teachers stated that the number of their students is about 21–25, although other teachers refer minor numbers of students (Table 2).

Table 2
Demographic characteristics of the sample and characteristics of settings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher code</th>
<th>Studies</th>
<th>Years of teaching experience</th>
<th>Number of students in classroom</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>T1</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>26–30</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T2</td>
<td>Post graduate</td>
<td>11–15</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T3</td>
<td>Post graduate</td>
<td>1–5</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T4</td>
<td>Post graduate</td>
<td>11–15</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T5</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>21–25</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T6</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>16–20</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T7</td>
<td>Post graduate</td>
<td>1–5</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T8</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>26–30</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T9</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>16–20</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T10</td>
<td>Post graduate</td>
<td>11–15</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T11</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>21–25</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T12</td>
<td>Post graduate</td>
<td>11–15</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T13</td>
<td>Post graduate</td>
<td>1–5</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T14</td>
<td>Post graduate</td>
<td>6–10</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T15</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>21–25</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T16</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>16–20</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data analysis method

Initially, all interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. For the qualitative data analysis, a data-driven thematic analysis was conducted. During the analysis, relevant codes, categories, and themes were (Bryman, 2016). For process validation, a second coder was also employed. Consistency between the two coders was high, about 90% and the discussion between them led to an impressive list of codes and the determined themes.

In the following section, the research results are presented and analysed.

Results

The analysis of the results revealed themes such as first-grade teacher’s views about cultivating oral and written language of pre-schoolers during remote teaching as to affect student’s “smooth” transition from kindergarten to first grade of primary school, teacher’s expectations about the practices implemented in remote teaching in a preschool setting, theirs’ collaboration practices with preschool teachers in language area after remote teaching for student’s smoother transition from kindergarten to first grade and their views about the changes that will be needed if the digital classroom was “forced” to return to our lives.

Teacher’s views for early childhood literacy education in face-to-face teaching

Almost all the interviewees (15) stated that during face-to-face teaching in a kindergarten a pre-schooler had the opportunity to acquire several language skills, as preschool teachers implement several literacy activities, such as producing oral speech or written language. In this context, 8 teachers declared that they consider that a pre-schooler should be highly enhanced with language skills which could described as “learning to break the code” (technical language skills) during his transition to the first grade of primary school. Specifically, one teacher stated that:

“A pre-schooler should have phonological awareness, know how to write letters and match them with their sounds, write
words, read them and most importantly be able to produce spoken language”. (T2)

“I believe that a pre-schooler should be skilled with phonological awareness abilities, familiarized to narrative speech, understand and produce spoken language, factual awareness, take speech spontaneously, participate in discussions, use arguments, adopt basic reading conventions of the alphabetic writing system (e.g., that we read from left to right and from top to bottom, that books are read from beginning to end, etc.)”. (T9)

Some other teachers seemed to believe that a pre-schooler has already mastered language communication skills (engaging in meaningful reading and writing activities) during his transition to the first grade of primary school. Therefore, one teacher declares:

“In my opinion a pre-schooler should have strong language communication skills, follow and understand stories, follow instructions, use correct prepositions, express ideas...”. (T11)

At the question concern their views about the methods followed in the kindergarten for language development and if they consider them as effective in the students’ understanding of the language, all teachers stated their satisfaction about them. Specifically, one teacher mention:

“I think that in kindergarten children learn many things about language through play, mainly their oral language is cultivated but they also become significantly familiar with the written language. All these years I was always pleasantly surprised by the satisfactory level of the students coming from the kindergarten”. (T3)

“In the kindergarten children learn in a beautiful way through play and activities! I consider that they learn a lot and remember it!” (T12)

**Teacher’s views and expectations for early childhood literacy education in digital time**

For remote teaching, first-grade teachers seemed to consider that, although preschool teachers faced a lot of difficulties and barriers, however they tried to implement many activities for language development, mainly with the utilization of several digital tools or platforms. When teachers asked to describe the methods used by
preschool teachers to teach the language, all participants stated that they did not know anything about this. In particular, according to T8:

“I do not know at all the methods that preschool teachers used in distance teaching, but I think that they also tried as we do for the students’ understanding of the language. The truth is that I am aware of the honourable efforts made by them and my students often communicate them to me by telling me examples of the digital classroom as it took place in kindergarten. But I believe that the preparation of children in the living classroom of the kindergarten cannot be compared at all with the digital classroom. The gaps are many and significant”. (T8)

“During COVID-19 the conditions of the digital classroom do not help the development of written and spoken language (especially at young ages). I don’t could even imagine the methods that preschool teachers used for language development”. (T8)

About their expectations for the literacy education of pre-schoolers during the pandemic in digital classrooms, all first-grade primary school teachers seem to don’t have any expectations. More specifically, they stated:

“After these 2 years that children spent in digital classrooms, I did not expect this school year that they would have become familiar with the written language. I thought I would meet students who didn’t know to hold a pencil or had no phonological awareness at all. However, contrary to my expectations, I was happily disproved since my students became quite familiar with the cultivation of written and spoken language”. (T13)

“I have not high expectations for this year. The difficulty was great, the gap of non-attendance of students significant and therefore a lot had to be done in the first months. We had to fill in the blanks. And the truth is that this year the work had been done in the kindergarten was very visible. The difference of not attending kindergarten was seen”. (T7)

“I understand the difficulty that exists and we have to do a lot of things in the first months. The difficulty was mainly in the area of motoring skills and oral expression”. (T9)

Noticeable seems to be the highlighting of a teacher with many years of experience who made the following remarkable comment:

“In distance education I consider that preschool teachers mainly cultivated and implemented oral language activities.
My students were really familiar with descriptions, narrations, fairy-tales, routines, etc. and more less with the written language. So, I could say that there were many differentiations among the practices for oral and the practices for written language during remote teaching in kindergartens. It seems normal and expected, as we, in our own digital classrooms, had the same capabilities and similar tools to work with. So, I understand this, the promotion and the strengthen of oral language over the written one”. (T14)

Teacher’s views for the effectiveness of early childhood literacy education in digital time for smooth transition and continuity

Regarding the effectiveness of the language activities carried out during remote teaching, first-grade teachers answered negatively. Especially, for the effectiveness of early childhood literacy education in digital time to cover the cognitive/learning requirements of the first grade of primary school, almost all participants (14) declared their negative attitude about these language activities’ effectiveness. More specific, teachers stated that:

“I believe that all preschool teachers worked significantly in distance education and the parents also helped. I think that a fairly important job was done and I recognize the effort of kindergarten teachers, but unfortunately, like us, there were many problems and shortcomings. Distance created significant gaps at our educational setting. In no way the digital classroom could be compared to face-to-face teaching”. (T5)

“Unfortunately, the teaching of the language in kindergarten was not sufficient and effective as it was in distance education. The students came unprepared, they didn’t even know the basics. There was a big difference in relation to face-to-face teaching. Nevertheless, I believe that preschool teachers tried, they tried significantly”. (T10)

“I consider that language practices during remote teaching in no way can approach and compare with face-to-face teaching”. (T15)

However, 2 other teachers mentioned a more optimistic and positive view about this. Specifically, they stated characteristically:

“I think that the methods that preschool teachers used during remote teaching for language education were enough sufficient considering the difficulty of distance teaching. This year
my students when came into first-grade had already acquired phonological awareness skills, they recognized several letters, and they immediately mastered the mechanism of writing. Regarding the oral language, they expressed themselves fluently and argued to a satisfactory degree”. (T14)

“I think it depends on each teacher how they worked in distance education and how much the parents helped. I consider that, regarding the difficulties, a good job was done to a large extent”. (T16)

In the same context, regarding the effectiveness of literacy practices in preschool settings during remote teaching first-grade teachers pointed out some differences in the language skills of students who entered the first grade of primary school this year (in the previous two years they took part in distance teaching during the pandemic) compared to those who attended face-to-face teaching in previous years in conventional kindergarten classes. More specific, teachers reported that:

“In face-to-face teaching they had developed language skills to a much greater extent”. (T9)

“Some children find it difficult to follow simple small instructions to perform a simple task, they had not developed gross motor skills, they were not familiar with the written language. There was significant variation compared to other years attending face-to-face teaching”. (T11)

Teacher’s collaboration practices in literacy education at digital time for smooth transition and continuity

Almost all the participants (15) stated that during distance learning they didn’t collaborate with preschool teachers generally and more specifically for language practices as to promote student’s smoother transition from kindergarten to first grade. Specifically, some participants stated that:

“No, we didn’t work together, although I would like to. I think we need to work together and exchange thoughts and practices. In the years that I have been working this has happened very few times and only opportunistically, not purposefully”. (T6)

“We were not concerned with the subject of collaboration at all as we focused on our newly arrived students and their needs
along with the multimodality of demands of the current school year”. (T5)

“No, I have never collaborated with preschool teachers. There is no case to find a way to ask them something during or after remote teaching, as the conditions were really difficult and specific”. (T12)

Only one first-grade teacher mentions that after remote teaching and during their return to face-to-face teaching is discussing with the preschool teacher of its co-located kindergarten some things about educational-learning practices during remote teaching in general and not specifically for language education. This teacher mention characteristically:

“At the beginning of this school year, as I do always, I discussed with the preschool teacher of our co-located kindergarten and she informed me about each student individually. Also, she pointed out to me any difficulties my students had and how they responded to oral and written language during digital time. However, we did not discuss the practices that she followed for language development. I asked her but she explained that there isn’t something particular to describe, as she tried to adjust remote teaching to the same conditions as face-to-face teaching”. (T9)

Teacher’s views for the changes that will be needed for smooth transition and continuity if remote teaching was “forced” to return to our lives

Research findings show that 14 of the 16 first-grade teachers interviewed seemed to agree that if remote teaching will be “forced” to return to our lives, there are many changes that have to be done in a preschool educational setting as to ensure a smoother transition for students from kindergarten to primary school. 9 first-grade teachers referred to the need for students to be more familiar with the written language during remote teaching. Teachers reported:

“In this case, emphasis should be placed on the use of digital tools for the cultivation of the written language, not only oral. It needs some extra cultivation as to prepare our students for a smooth transition to first grade. We need some training to be able to respond to first grade requirements”. (T8)
“Specifically for the written language, a screen is not the best in student’s learning process and this will certainly have negative effects, especially if a student faces some learning difficulties. Preschool teachers should focus at the cultivation of written language”. (T10)

“In my opinion, the digital classroom cannot replace the education and development of written language. Many students face difficulties and preschool teacher cannot monitor the child’s progress and intervene. As for the oral language, I think it could be cultivated to a satisfactory degree since there is enough digital material that can be used and will attract the students’ interest”. (T16)

Participants seemed to agree that preschool teachers could play a very important and essential role for student’s smoother transition to primary school. Most of them reported the emergency need for a cooperation framework and a common training program. Some teachers stated:

“… cooperation, common training, and common practices to help children in their transitions, in the smoothest transition to first grade”. (T2)

“We need a common training setting for both preschool and first-grade teachers. We should adopt common practices, common methodologies. Maybe then we can overcome the problems that arise during digital classrooms and beyond. But the most important thing is to cooperate with each other and exchange thoughts and practices”. (T7)

“There is need for change. We must create a framework for collaboration, a common training program by preschool teachers. We have to overcome the gap”. (T13)

Only one first-grade teacher with small experience but well qualified with post-graduate studies mention a more optimistic and positive view about this situation, implying and indicating the characteristics of the blended teaching method that combines features of face-to-face and remote teaching. This teacher state characteristically:

“I would like to keep the good things of the digital classroom and all the new knowledge it offered us, to use all the tools given to us (e-Me, e-class, flipped classroom), so that we can offer an
interesting lesson to our students with the cooperation of course of the parents”. (T9)

Discussion

This research seeks to shed light on the pandemic’s consequences for education systems around the world following the closure of schools and transition processes implemented during this period. In one hand in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, online learning with use of ICTs and adoption of remote teaching methods is becoming a transition extremely important in education systems and on the other hand student’s smooth transition from one level to other is one more transition process.

The changes on planning and implementing educational responses to the social and health crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic may require active participation on the part of all those involved in education, both during the closure periods and in the process of reopening schools. It is important to see learning not as a process of imparting knowledge, but as a social and cognitive process that includes various interactions that take place within it.

Specifically, this research aimed to investigate first-grade teachers’ views about oral and written language during face-to-face and mainly in remote teaching in a preschool setting and the effectiveness of these practices to student’s smooth transition from kindergarten to primary school. Concerning their views first-grade teachers seemed to state that during face-to-face teaching in a kindergarten a preschooler had the opportunity to acquire several language skills, as preschool teachers implement several literacy activities. First-grade teachers referred to technical language skills which could described as “learning to break the code” and simultaneously to language communication skills which could described as “engaging in meaningful reading and writing activities”. They seemed to believe that a preschooler has already mastered with these skills during his transition to the first grade of primary school. These findings support earlier findings (e.g., Apostolou & Stellakis, 2020; Apostolou, 2021; Campana et al., 2016; Paris, 2005; Scull et al., 2013; Tracey & Morrow, 2007; Xue & Meisels, 2004). According to these findings preschool teachers for enhancing literacy in their classes adopt a combination of approaches related on the one hand to practices,
such as extracting and rendering meaning from a text, etc. (Apostolou & Stellakis, 2019) and on the other hand to technical skills, such as phonological awareness, decoding, etc. (Apostolou, 2021). In other words, they seemed to take into account children's interests and knowledge (emergent literacy) and understand language and literacy as an ability to draw meaning (communicative approach) and not as a simple skill of decoding written symbols or spelling (conventional literacy) (Apostolou, 2021).

In this context, the question arose concerning the ability of preschool teachers to adopt a combination of approaches for teaching language during remote teaching in a preschool setting as to prepare pre-schoolers for a smooth transition from kindergarten to first-grade. Although, as the participants teachers at the present study highlight the importance of language in their teaching these findings verified that during remote teaching literacy development was difficult in kindergartens. They pointed out some differences in the language skills of students who entered the first grade of primary school this year. Teachers want children to be healthy, confident, active and attentive, able to communicate their needs, feelings and thoughts, enthusiastic and curious when approaching new activities (EFA, 2007). They also place importance on skills such as the ability to follow directions, not being disruptive in class, and being sensitive to others (Darling-Hammond et. al., 2020; EFA, 2007). But, according to our findings, first-grade teachers mentioned a lack of basic skills, like gross mobility skills, pencil grip, etc., which could be explained by the distance and the absence of preschool teacher next to pre-schooler. These findings are in line with previous studies (e.g., Apostolou & Lavidas, 2022), according to which preschool teachers have no the ability to combine methods and techniques, and they focused to the cultivation of oral language during remote teaching.

There is however another phenomenon in education which is worth highlighting, mentioning, and scrutinising: the blended teaching method that combines simultaneously features of face-to-face and remote teaching and it will be really sufficient and adequate during remote teaching and after it, with the return to face-to-face teaching. Previous research verifies these findings. Specifically, Apostolou and Lavidas (2022) found that preschool teachers seemed to support in some extend the blended teaching method after their return to face-to-face teaching for language development and more generally to other learning areas.
In this context, transition can be greatly facilitated if educators from one area, for example kindergarten, work with those of the next level, that is, the primary school and vice versa (Ackesjö, 2013; Alatalo et al., 2016, 2017; Early, 2004; Ecclestone, 2009; Pianta et al., 1999; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). In fact, collaboration between teachers of different levels is assessed as particularly important and can be implemented both by students visiting the next class, because this contributes to their adjustment, as well as by teachers’ discussions about the peculiarities of the curricula of the language course and by kindergarten teachers sharing information about the special characteristics of students who are about to go to primary school (Ackesjö, 2013; Ahtola et al., 2011; Alatalo et al., 2016; Dockett & Perry, 2004; Hjelte, 2005; Vrinioti, 2008).

Regarding their collaboration with preschool teachers, participants stated that during distance learning they didn’t collaborate generally and more specifically for language practices as to promote student’s smoother transition from kindergarten to first grade. The lack of relevant research in Greece and generally makes it difficult to interpret this result. Although, as can be seen by our findings the results are in line with the existing research literature (e.g., Ackesjö, 2013; Ahtola et al., 2011; Alatalo et al., 2016; Apostolou & Stellakis, 2019; Broström, 2002; Dockett & Perry, 2004; Fabian & Dunlop, 2007; Karydis, 2014; Sivropoulou & Vrinioti, 2009; Vrinioti, 2008) highlighting the importance of collaboration in face-to-face teaching. But, according to our research findings in remote teaching there is no option for collaboration among preschool and first grade teachers. The results showed that at distance education the priority were the problems that arose and both first-grade and preschool teachers seemed to focused to find solutions for their problems and not to collaborate among them to ensure a smooth transition for their students.

Furthermore, research findings pointed out the need for significant changes in language teaching practices at preschool classrooms in the case that remote teaching will be “forced” to return to our lives. First-grade teachers referred to the need for students to be more familiar with the written language during remote teaching, a result that verified from Apostolou and Lavidas (2022) research which investigated preschool teachers’ views. According to these researchers’ findings preschool teachers consider that there were many changes and transformations
would have been done during remote teaching in language education in preschool settings. In the same context and according to our findings, first-grade teachers seemed to agree that preschool teachers could play a very important and essential role for pre-schooler’s smoother transition to primary school. Most of them reported the emergency need for a cooperation framework and a common training program.

Regarding the effectiveness of literacy practices during remote teaching, transition programmes should create an appropriate degree of continuity between preschool and school experiences and develop strategies to help children adjust to school, as it occurs during traditional teaching in conventional educational settings. Furthermore, although first-grade teachers mentioned their negative mood about the existing (or not existing) transition programmes however they verified their importance for a smooth transition from one level to another. These findings are consistent with previous research who emphasize to educational continuity (e.g., Ahtola et al., 2011; Dockett & Perry, 2004; Fabian & Dunlop, 2007; Margetts, 2002; Niesel & Griebel, 2007; Pianta et al., 1999; Pearson et al., 2007; Pressley, 2002, 2005; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000) in face-to-face teaching processes and not in digital age (as there are no research findings).

Continuity between early childhood programmes and primary school education is the key for a smooth transition. As results revealed that support for the transition of young children from preschool to primary school settings was inevitably affected, transition programmes should create an appropriate degree of continuity between preschool and school experiences and develop strategies to help children adjust to school, avoid stressful experiences and experience success in later school and social life.

### Conclusion

By ensuring a smooth transition process to school, learning is likely to progress. In order to achieve this, policy planners need to embrace the idea of co-construction of transition which is shared by all the participants: teachers, parents and students. Schools have to being sensitive to the needs of individuals and particular groups and having strategies to help children develop resilience to cope with change.
and to be active in making the transition work for them; curriculum continuity across phases of education, that results from establishing the prior learning that has taken place and where children are helped to learn with and from each other; collaboration between pre-school and school teachers and common training programmes; schools evaluating induction and the management of transitions and transfers from the perspective of all participants, and that help to question the assumptions of the setting and see life from the child’s perspective; special training for staff working with those children who are starting school (Koglbaus, 2022).

The knowledge of current practice, priorities, challenges, and opportunities will help language educators to adjust their education offer, their syllabi, expectations, or pedagogical approaches to facilitate a more positive and smooth transition process for each and every learner. Also, cross-phase policy engagement contributes to further enhancing one’s understanding. However, collaboration between education providers and wider stakeholders will increase these positive experiences. The introduction and extended use of educational technology during the pandemic must be seen not only as a temporary “emergency tool” to bridge the distance between teachers and students but as a fast-track to move the educational system into a digital age.

Finally, based on evaluations of experiences during the pandemic, a smooth transition and continuity from one level to another could be facilitated and intermediated by preschool and primary school teachers and other stakeholders simultaneously. Discontinuities in early childhood literacy education and development could be disappeared if stakeholders (learners, parents, educators, school leaders, policy makers, etc.) nationally and globally try to bridge and sculpt “distances” via effective transition programmes.

**Limitations and Implications**

The small sample size is the main limitation of this study. Future research is suggested to include a more significant sample, examine school characteristics (e.g., school context and leadership) in relation to teachers’ practices, providing insights into which digital tools could be more utilized as to be more appropriate to reduce barriers and enhance students' literacy.
Its origin from one country and the geographical limitation of research, which took place in a specific geographical area of Greece and a limited number of the survey population, does not allow us to generalize the results. However, this research must be considered as a first attempt to investigate an unexplored issue due to its importance for preschool and school education. It would be useful to repeat the research by drawing a larger representative sample of teachers and other areas without geographical limitations.

We consider that this study provided valuable insights into primary teachers views about literacy development, continuities, discontinuities and transition from kindergarten to primary school. Our findings could provide a basis for literacy education in a transition setting for all stakeholders. Based on evaluations of experiences during the pandemic, this perspective would want to pursue the future of literacy education based on the perspective of a smoother student’s transition. However, such a view will need to be implemented thoroughly and will need further discussion with teachers and other stakeholders in all academic fields. Emphasis must be given to the transitional activities participated in by the stakeholders and the effectiveness of these activities. Regarding that pedagogical discontinuity is a major issue of difficulties in school transition these experiences of children’s transition to school will inform further research into the design of effective transition programmes in the local context.

ETHICAL STANDARDS

Ethics Declarations. All procedures performed with the permission of the teachers who participated in the research for the processing and analysis of their data.

Funding. No funding was received to conduct this research.

Conflict of Interest. The author does not have any potential conflict of interests that may influence the decision to publish this article.

Author’s Contribution. Zoi Apostolou: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis and investigation; Writing – original draft preparation, Writing – review and editing; Funding acquisition, Management activities to annotate (produce metadata), scrub data and maintain research data; Resources, Supervision, Preparation of tables; Programming, Software development, Verification, whether as a part of the activity or separate, of the overall replication/reproducibility of results/experiments and other research outputs, Submission of a data set to the international repository.

Consent for publication. The authors approve of this submission and, conditional upon the decision made by the editorial board from the peer-review
process, consent to the publication of the current work. The work has not been, nor has it been submitted to other journals in consideration for publication.

References


Ecclstone, K. (2009). Lost and found in transition: educational implications of concerns about “identity,” “agency,” and “structure”. In J. Field, J. Gallacher, & R. Ingram (Eds.), Researching transitions in lifelong learning (pp. 9–27). Routledge.


Continuities, Discontinuities and Transition in Early Childhood...


© Zoi T. Apostolou
Наступність, етапність та перехідний період щодо навчання...


АННОТАЦІЯ
Вступ. У статті наводяться результати дослідження поглядів і очікувань вчителів початкових класів щодо переходу дітей від закладу дошкільної освіти до навчання в початковій школі.
Мета. В новому освітньому середовищі, у якому всі педагоги “змушені” продовжувати власну освітню практику, щоб забезпечити своїм учням плавний перехід від одного рівня до іншого, реалізовано два процеси переходу. Перший – стосується переходу від очного до віртуального навчання на прикладі розвитку мовлення у дітей, а другий – переходу дошкільників із закладу дошкільної освіти до початкової школи.
Методи дослідження. У цьому контексті проаналізовано погляди 16 грецьких вчителів початкових класів початкової школи щодо розвитку грамотності їхніх учнів (дошкільників-випускників) та сформованість у них елементарних знань грамотності після дистанційного навчання (у закладі дошкільної освіти), що були зібрані за допомогою напівструктурованого інтерв’ю і тематично презентовані.
Результати. Результати показали, що підтримка переходу дітей старшого дошкільного віку із середовища закладу дошкільної освіти в початкову школу та розвиток у них грамотності залежали від впливу нових реалій часу. Тому вчителі пропонують дотримуватися принципу неперервності між програмами навчання грамотності в дошкільному дитинстві та початковій

© Зої Т. Апостолу
школі, що є ключем до більш плавного переходу. Виходячи з оцінки досвіду, плавний перехід і безперервність від одного рівня до іншого може також забезпечуватися завдяки співпраці вихователів закладів дошкільної освіти і вчителів початкових класів та інших зацікавлених сторін. Крім того, розриви в навчанні та розвитку грамотності в дошкільному віці можуть бути усунені, якщо управлянці спробують подолати та усунути “відстані” за допомогою ефективних програм переходу.

Висновки. Знання сучасної практики, пріоритетів, викликів і можливостей допоможе викладачам мови скоригувати свої освітні пропозиції, свої навчальні плани, очікування чи педагогічні підходи, щоб сприяти більш позитивному та плавному переходу навчання для кожного учня.

Ключові слова: перехід до початкової школи, навчання впродовж життя, мова, педагогіка грамоти, дошкільна освіта.