

## **SUCCESSFUL HANDLING OF ENTRANCE TO FORMAL SCHOOLING: TRANSITION PRACTICES AS A LOCAL INNOVATION**

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### **Abstract**

*This study examined at which system level—local school administration, school, or teacher—factors can be found that regulate the implementation of transition practices to formal schooling in Finland. Thirty-six teachers from 22 elementary schools in two towns completed a questionnaire on the transition activities with partner preschools. In addition, local school administration professionals were interviewed. The municipal-level activities and guidelines, along with the teacher-reported importance of the transition practices, were found to be the only recognizable factors clearly connected to the implementation of transition practices. Results suggest that not only the school transition itself but also the handling of it should be examined from the ecological perspective. National and municipal guidelines for handling the elementary school transition may be recommended, but commitment at teacher and school level is essential, as successful change of schools is a reciprocal process.*

### **Introduction**

School transition has been a subject of major interest for quite some time (see, e.g., Ramey & Ramey, 1998; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000; Vernon-Feagans & Blair, 2006). Traditionally, the main attention of multiprofessional personnel in preschool and school has focused on the level of individual children and their readiness for school—however, the ecological and dynamic model of school transition states that the transition to school must not be conceptualised only in terms of individual children (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000; see also, Carlton & Winsler, 1999; Graue, 1999; Kim & Suen, 2003; La Paro & Pianta, 2000; Meisels, 1999, 2007; Niesel & Griebel, 2007; Snow, 2006). Instead, the surrounding contexts, such as the family, the preschool, and the school should be taken into consideration, as successful relationships between children and these important contexts smooth the discontinuity of transition to formal schooling (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). Activities which build and strengthen relationships between these significant contexts, so called transition practices, have been shown to predict better learning and adjustment in school (Ahtola et al., 2011; LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2008; Margetts, 2007; Schulting et al., 2005), and are now considered the primary means to support the school entrance by the multiprofessional school personnel (see, e.g., Broström, 2003; Clark & Zygmunt-Fillwalk, 2008; Dockett & Perry, 2001; Einarsdottir 2006; Einarsdottir et al., 2008; Kagan & Neuman, 1998; Pianta et al., 1999; Pianta et al., 2001; Thorsen et al., 2006). The factors regulating the handling the elementary-school transition and the implementation of transition practices are of interest in the present study.

The ecological and dynamic model of school transition is based on the ecological view with concentric micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems (see Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Following ecological terminology, the actual entrance to formal schooling, as well as the concrete activities aimed to smooth it, take place at micro- and mesolevels: transition is directly experienced by the child (microsystem), and transition practices are interrelations among settings in which the child actively participates, that is, the preschool and elementary school professionals, and the family (mesosystem). Accordingly, earlier literature on handling the school transition has mainly concentrated on the level of micro- and mesosystems, thus not yet fully following the guidelines of the ecological and systemic perspective. Concerning the

implementation of transition practices, various teacher- and school-level regulators have been explored. It has been found that general training in early education and specific training in transition practices positively affect the use of transition practices by individual teachers, whereas evidence of the effect of length of work experience is mixed (Early et al., 2001; La Paro et al., 2000; Nelson, 2004; Rous et al., 2010). Rous and colleagues (2010) have shown that the reported barriers for the implementation of practices are associated with less frequent implementation. School environment contexts, such as location in metropolitan or non-metropolitan area, or location in high- or low poverty area, as well as the school size, have been found to determine the implementation of transition practices (Pianta et al., 1999; Rous et al., 2010).

In the present study, we attempt to complement this knowledge by broadening the scope to the next level, the exosystem. Exosystem indirectly affects children's development by modulating, for instance, activities implemented by teachers and schools (see also, Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Fullan, 2007; Gallagher, 1999; Shinn, 2003). The exosystem effects we will investigate in the present study are the guidelines set by local school administration; curricula as well as other decisions and procedures that ground and guide the transition activities in schools. We will examine characteristics of teachers, schools, and local school administration as possible regulators of the implementation of transition practices. To our knowledge, there are no previous attempts to link local-level activities with actual transition practices in preschools and schools.

### **The Finnish system**

Possible exosystem effects, such as local administration guidelines and curriculum, are essential in countries like Finland, where the macrosystem, the culture as a whole, is based on high quality public services, for example, locally organised early education, basic education, and health care. The Finnish society heralds egalitarian values, with the school system offering the same basic nine-year education with free lunch to everyone. Local municipal authorities organize, and, with government support, fund the preschool and basic education. In addition, local authorities have considerable powers to guide education policies and content, as the municipalities and ultimately each preschool and elementary school are allowed to apply and modify the national core curricula (Core curriculum for preschool education, 2000; National core curriculum for basic education, 2004). Another macro-level feature of the Finnish educational system is the high quality of teacher education. A Master's degree in education is the norm for elementary-school teachers, and preschool teachers usually have a Bachelor's or Master's degree in education. The Finnish school system has become internationally famous during the 2000's due to success in the PISA surveys (Programme for International Student Assessment) of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Finnish 15-year-olds are among the best in reading literacy, mathematical literacy, problem solving and scientific literacy, and the between-school variance is small (OECD, 2001, 2004, 2007, 2010). We argue that it is especially worthwhile to investigate variance in transition practice implementation within the context of such a well-performing public school system.

Transition to formal schooling means, by definition, a change. In Finland, practically all 6-year-olds attend voluntary, free-of-charge preschool (Kumpulainen, 2009). The transition of seven-year-olds from preschool to Grade 1 in compulsory elementary school may include organisational, physical, pedagogical, and functional disparities. Preschool education is organised in preschool classrooms, located either in daycare centers or in elementary schools. The majority of preschool classrooms are located in and organised by daycare centers (Kumpulainen, 2009; Rautanen, 2007), which, until recently, have been organised within

social services both at municipal and at national level. This reflects the different educational origins and traditions of Finnish early childhood education and preschool versus basic education (see Hännikäinen, 2003). In this setting, the function of transition activities is, on the one hand, to help children and adults to prepare and adjust in this time of change, and, on the other hand, to actually reduce the discontinuity between the elementary school and the preceding preschool. Currently, a major reform is under way in both macro- and exosystems in Finland, as about 50% of municipalities have already transferred administration of early education to the school department, and, in the near future, early education as a whole will become a part of the basic education system also at national level, as it already is in Sweden, Norway, and Iceland (Petäjaniemi & Pokki, 2010).

### **The present study**

In this study we examined how authorities and teachers in two Finnish middle-sized municipalities have perceived and dealt with the challenge of discontinuity between daycare-based preschool and elementary school. Our previous work has shown that the implementation of transition practices is positively related to subsequent academic achievement (Ahtola et al., 2011). The elementary schools were chosen for closer examination because the role of the elementary school, and that of the principal, has been suggested to be central in creating the relationships with preschools and families (Melton et al., 1999; Smolkin, 1999). Moreover, elementary school teachers are active agents in the children's and families' lives for the next six years, whereas preschools' responsibility is about to end after the school transition period. As more active implementation of comprehensive transition programmes seems to be a relatively simple and inexpensive way to enhance home-school relationships, adaptation, and the better learning of all children, it is of interest to find out why all elementary schools and local authorities have not fully utilised this potential.

In this study, we considered transition practices a function of exosystem-level decisions and guidelines concerning preschool and elementary school education and policies. We aimed to find out (1) whether the number of implemented transition practices varied between schools and between the two municipalities, and whether this variation was connected with (2) the local-level efforts on development of transition practices, (3) school characteristics (i.e., the elementary school size, the number of preschool partners), or (4) elementary school teachers' reports on the importance of and obstacles to transition practices, and the length of their work experience.

### **Method**

#### ***Participants***

Data for the present study were drawn from the ongoing longitudinal First Steps Study: Interactive Learning in the Child-Parent-Teacher Triangle (Poikkeus et al., 2006). First Steps is a prospective follow-up of approximately 2000 children from four municipalities from the beginning of their kindergarten year to the end of the fourth school year (2006–2011). Data from two municipalities, where the preschools were organised within social services and were not, on a regular basis, located in the elementary school building, were included in the present study. Both municipalities were rather large towns on the Finnish scale. In Town 1 from Eastern Finland, the whole age cohort (about 900 children) and all elementary schools (27) were targeted in the larger study, with all schools except one consented to participate. In Town 2 from Southern Finland, due to financial restrictions, only about half of the age cohort

(750) and half of the elementary schools (21) were targeted in the larger study. The final sample was formed on the basis of preschools' and elementary schools' acceptance to participate, and, because of lack of translation resources, the exclusion of elementary schools that had an exceptionally high proportion of immigrant pupils.

#### Subsample of the present study

The original data in these two municipalities consist of 47 (26 + 21) elementary schools and 80 preschools. To examine transition practices in a controlled setting of established preschool–elementary school pairs, we used three criteria to draw our subsample: First, we identified the elementary schools that had preschool partners in actual transitional co-operation. We asked the elementary schools for the names of the nearby preschool partners with whom they routinely implement transitional practices. In Finland, municipal preschools and elementary schools are organised regionally in such a way that, as a rule, children from given preschools go to the nearby elementary school. Second, as the need for transitional practices is most crucial when the transition requires overcoming a physical distance, we included the elementary school only if there was no preschool located in the elementary school building, but the feeding preschools were located in a daycare center or elsewhere. Third, teachers of special education classes and special classes (e.g., foreign language class) were excluded, because starting school in these classes usually includes individual-level guidance and familiarisation for the families.

#### Schools, teachers, and administrators

Our final subsample consisted of 22 (11 + 11) elementary schools, with school size ranging from 112 to 444 students ( $M = 264$ ,  $SD = 103$ ). There were no significant differences in the school size between the two towns,  $U = 58.00$ ,  $p = .898$ . The partners of the 22 elementary schools were 36 (17 + 19) preschools. Each elementary school had one to three preschool partners (as defined above); there were no significant differences in this respect between the two towns,  $U = 54.50$ ,  $p = .699$ . Thirty-six (90%) of the 40 elementary school Grade 1 teachers in these schools completed the questionnaire, 16 from municipality 1, and 20 from the municipality 2. Ninety-seven percent of them had a Master's degree in education, data were missing from one teacher. Nineteen percent had worked as a teacher for 0–5 years, 22% for 6–15 years, and 58% for at least 16 years. The length of work experience of teachers was similar in the two municipalities,  $U = 133.50$ ,  $p = .404$ . Eight percent of the elementary school teachers were male. In addition, the heads of early childhood education and basic education in the two towns were requested to choose three professionals, who were well acquainted with the school transition phase, for the group interview in each town: one professional from the early childhood education administration; one from the basic education administration; and one elementary school principal. We used group interviews to simulate the transitional co-operation which takes place between preschool (daycare, early childhood education) and elementary school (basic education). The number of interviewees per group was kept to a minimum of only three professionals to ensure active participation and interaction in the group.

#### ***Measures and procedure***

The design of the present study comes close to a multiple case study (Stake, 2005), which is why we decided to exploit data and method triangulation (Cohen et al., 2007; Denzin, 1970, 1997; Patton, 2002).

### Questionnaires on transition practices

The questionnaire for teachers was designed to examine the implementation and importance of six transition practices, as well as the significance of five potential obstacles to co-operation. First, a pilot questionnaire was developed based on the previous literature (Einarsdottir, 2003; Pianta et al., 2001; see also, e.g., Einarsdottir et al., 2008; LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2008). This pilot questionnaire was trialled in a pilot study for preschool and elementary school teachers, which was conducted in a large Finnish town that did not participate in the final First Steps Study. The final set of six practices and five obstacles, pertinent in Finnish schools, was then selected and summarised. Compared to earlier research on transition practices which has often included quite general activities such as flyers and open houses (see, e.g., Pianta et al., 1999; Schulting et al., 2005), the practices in this set are somewhat more intense and specific to the elementary school transition. These practices were as follows:

1. The preschool group familiarises itself with the elementary school activities by visiting the elementary school, or by having the elementary-school teacher and/or students visit the preschool group.
2. The preschool teacher and the elementary-school teacher co-operate, for example, organise joint events, plan teaching together, or teach together.
3. The child, the parents, and the future grade 1 teacher meet personally before the start of elementary school.
4. The preschool teacher, the grade 1 teacher, and the specialists (e.g., special education teachers, school psychologist) discuss the school entrants (e.g., skills, peer relations).
5. The child's preschool education plan and/or "growth portfolio" (includes, e.g., child's output) is passed on to the elementary-school teacher.
6. The preschool teachers and the elementary-school teachers write and revise the preschool and grades 1 and 2 curricula together.

The final set of obstacles emerged as follows:

1. I hesitate to contact the preschool teacher.
2. I feel that it is difficult to engage in professional dialogue with the preschool teacher.
3. Differing personal views on child upbringing and education.
4. I don't have time for preschool–elementary school co-operation.
5. Administrative obstacles restrict natural co-operation between preschool and elementary school.

Elementary-school teachers completed the questionnaires in spring 2008, when the children were in Grade 1.

The frequency of each practice was rated on a scale of 1 to 3 (see Table 1). A transition practice index was calculated by summing the total number of different transition practices (out of the maximum of six) reported by elementary school teachers. This index was used as the general measure for *Number of transition practices* (Table 1). The importance of each transition practice, as well as the significance of five potential obstacles to co-operation with the preschool, were rated by elementary school teachers on a scale of 1 to 5 (Tables 1 and 2). Summed variables *Importance* (Cronbach alpha .81) and *Obstacles* (alpha .62) were computed (Tables 1 and 2).

## Curricula

The national core curricula for preschool and elementary school (Core curriculum for preschool education, 2000; National core curriculum for basic education, 2004), as well as the locally complemented curricula of Town 1 and Town 2, were available on the Internet.

## Semi-structured group interviews

In order to examine various exosystem-level factors (see Bronfenbrenner, 1979), that is, the local guidelines for handling school transition, that may affect the implementation of transition practices, a semi-structured group interview was carried out with locally chosen administrators in each town. The purpose of the interviews was to obtain information about the local administration and curricula by covering the following six themes: (1) The prescription of the transitional co-operation in local curricula (preschool, basic education); (2) The history of co-operation in the municipality; (3) The aims and foci of transitional co-operation now and in the past; (4) The physical location of the preschool education: the history, the present, and the future aims; (5) Challenges in the transitional co-operation; (6) Future plans in the middle of the ongoing administrative reforms.

Interviewers were to cover the six themes in the same order in about an hour's time, but the exact questions were not predetermined. The interview in Town 1 was carried out by the first author in May 2010, and the interview in Town 2 by the fourth author in April 2010. To enable orientation to the interview, these themes were e-mailed to the interviewees a few days earlier. The interviews were electronically recorded and later transcribed by the first author.

## Analysis strategy

Numeric data were analyzed by nonparametric tests, Mann-Whitney's *U*-test and Spearman's correlation coefficient, (SPSS 15.0), due to the small *N* and non-normal distributions. Mann-Whitney's *U*-test is a nonparametric alternative for Student's *t*-test, and it examines the rank-order of observations. Each observation receives a ranking value, and the sum of these ranking values is compared between two subsamples (in this study, two towns).

In the analysis of the interview data, we followed the principles of theory-driven qualitative content analysis (see Patton, 2002). According to Patton, qualitative content analysis is used to reveal predominate phrases, concepts or core meanings in text documents. It is appropriate to various types of qualitative data and depths of interpretation (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). In the content analysis, the six interview themes were used as thematic headings (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). These themes represent exosystem-level factors that we hypothesised might be related to implementation of transition practices in preschool–elementary school pairs. Units of analysis were segments of transcripts (so-called meaning units) rather than single words. The transcriptions were analyzed individually by the first, second, and third author to obtain reliable results and investigator triangulation (Denzin, 1970, 1997; Patton, 2002), as one of the authors is a psychologist, and two are educationalists.

The analysis proceeded in multiple stages throughout which the data were repeatedly read through. At the first stage of the analysis, the transcriptions were read through carefully in order to obtain a general view of them. At the second stage, relevant topics were identified in each transcription. At the third stage, these topics were organised into the coding categories, the six interview themes. All topics fitted in the six categories, so there was no need to

TABLE 1 Implementation and Importance of Elementary School Transition Practices Reported by Elementary School Teachers

Transition practice		Never	1-2 times a year	More often	Importance on scale 1-5 1 = not at all important, 5 = very important			
					%	%	%	<i>M</i>
1. Familiarisation with school	(n=35), (n=35)	9	80	11	4.0	5.0	1.2	1-5
2. Teacher cooperaton	(n=35), (n=35)	51	46	3	2.7	3.0	1.0	1-5
3. Personal meeting with the teacher	(n=34), (n=34)	71	26	3	3.0	3.0	1.0	1-5
4. Dicussions about school entrants	(n=35), (n=35)	0	86	14	4.8	5.0	0.6	2-5
5. Preschool education plan and/or 'growth portfolio' passed on	(n=35), (n=34)	69	29	3	3.6	4.0	0.9	2-5
6. The curricula written together	(n=34), (n=35)	76	24	0	2.9	3.0	1.0	1-5
Total number of implemented transition practices (n=35)					3.2	3.0	1.4	1-6
Sum variable Importance (n=35)					3.5	3.5	0.7	1.5-4.7

consider any new data-based categories. Finally, at the fourth stage, the topics of two municipalities were compared with each other in order to identify similarities and differences. Next, according to investigator triangulation, the three investigators compared their theme summaries with each other. The internal consistency between the three investigators was high, and the three analyses were mostly overlapping and partly complementary. No disagreement occurred between the investigators.

## Results

### Number of preschool–elementary school transition practices

As noted in Table 1, on average, teachers reported implementation of three different transition practices between preschools and elementary schools (Table 1). Nearly every elementary-school teacher reported that both familiarisation with the school environment and discussions on school entrants take place. Less than one third of the elementary-school teachers reported a personal meeting with the family before school starts, receiving the education plan or growth portfolio from the preschool, or co-operation over curriculum issues. In Town 1, elementary schools and preschools implemented an average of 4.1 different practices ( $SD = 1.2$ ), whereas in Town 2, only an average of 2.5 practices were implemented ( $SD = 1.3$ ),  $U = 51.00$ ,  $p = .001$ . We repeated the test on the basis of the frequency of each transition practice, and found significant or nearly significant differences in frequency of teacher co-operation,  $U = 92.50$ ,  $p = .048$ , passing on the education plan to the elementary school,  $U = 81.50$ ,  $p = .018$ , and the family having a personal meeting the future teacher before school starts,  $U = 92.00$ ,  $p = .075$ . The differences between the two towns were not significant in the frequency of familiarisation with the school  $U = 127.50$ ,  $p = .422$ , and discussions on school entrants,  $U = 139.50$ ,  $p = .683$ , which were the most often implemented practices, or co-operation on curriculum,  $U = 100.50$ ,  $p = .147$ , which was the least often implemented practice.

TABLE 2 Obstacles to Elementary School Transition Practices Reported by Elementary School Teachers

Obstacle	n	M	Mdn	SD	Range	Significance on scale 1-5
						1 = not significant, 5 = very significant
1. Hesitation to contact	36	1.6	1.5	0.8	1-4	
2. Professional dialogue	36	1.5	1.0	0.6	1-3	
3. Differing views	36	1.4	1.0	0.5	1-3	
4. Lack of time	36	2.4	2.0	1.2	1-5	
5. Administration	35	2.5	3.0	1.2	1-5	
Sum Variable						
Obstacle	36	1.9	2.0	0.6	1.0-2.8	

### Importance of and obstacles to transition practices

Results presented in Table 1 suggest that all practices were considered at least somewhat important by elementary school teachers. Discussions on school entrants were typically considered very important. Familiarisation with the school environment and passing on the education plan or growth portfolio to the elementary school were considered of somewhat lesser importance but clearly more vital than teacher co-operation, meeting the teacher and joint writing of the curricula.

Results reported in Table 2 indicate that lack of time and administrative obstacles were considered to be the most significant obstacles to elementary school transition practices.

In comparing the questionnaire findings, elementary school teachers in Town 1 considered the practices more important,  $M = 3.9$ ,  $SD = 0.5$ , than teachers in Town 2,  $M = 3.2$ ,  $SD = 0.7$ ;  $U = 50.50$ ,  $p = .001$ , but the potential obstacles were considered in a similar manner in the two towns,  $M = 1.8$ ,  $SD = 0.7$ ;  $M = 2.0$ ,  $SD = 0.5$ , respectively;  $U = 129.50$ ,  $p = .499$ . The tests were repeated using the individual variables, importance of each practice and each obstacle, instead of the sum variables 'Importance' and 'Obstacles'. Teachers' ratings on importance were significantly different between the two towns in the case of four practices; familiarisation,  $U = 78.50$ ,  $p = .014$ , co-operation,  $U = 65.00$ ,  $p = .003$ , meeting with teacher,  $U = 89.00$ ,  $p = .059$ , passing on education plan,  $U = 83.50$ ,  $p = .036$ , but the ratings were similar in the case of discussions,  $U = 146.00$ ,  $p = .857$ , and curricula,  $U = 106.50$ ,  $p = .133$ . Additionally, the teachers' ratings on obstacles were similar between the two towns; hesitation,  $U = 147.00$ ,  $p = .694$ , difficulties,  $U = 151.50$ ,  $p = .789$ , differing views,  $U = 135.00$ ,  $p = .440$ , lack of time,  $U = 136.00$ ,  $p = .459$ , administration,  $U = 121.00$ ,  $p = .347$ .

Do local-level factors account for the differences in the implementation of transition practices?

#### *Local curricula*

In the interviews, professionals in both towns reported that the local curricula, which have been prepared jointly by preschool and elementary school professionals, guide the preschool–elementary school co-operative activities during the school transition phase. The school-level curricula and plans are more explicit. Information in Tables 3 and 4 show that the curriculum descriptions differ markedly between the two towns. The curricula in Town 1 elaborate the national guidelines further in quite concrete and versatile ways, reflecting the ecological view on school transition. Continuum of education and regional co-operation are highlighted, and concrete examples of co-operation are provided, such as developing procedures together as well as pedagogical discussions and staff training. In the interview in this town, it became evident that the administrative professionals approached the elementary school transition comprehensively, and the transition of every child as well as the partnership with parents were considered important. Co-operation is seen as an integral part of normal work activities. The plan of action seems to be concrete, and it is evaluated on a yearly basis.

Conversely, in Town 2, the curriculum for basic education consists mainly of disconnected phrases concerning the school transition, while the preschool curriculum discusses the co-operation between preschool and elementary school during the school transition phase in somewhat broad terms and on a general level. Accordingly, the professionals reported in the interview that not all good practices are documented.

#### *The history of transition practices*

In both towns, the professionals reported that the history of transition practices extends at least to the 1990's. Interestingly, both towns also reported numerous projects that have, among other things, focused on transition practices, but only in Town 1 are the transition practices more widely spread among the schools. In Town 1, factors from within the local organisation have initiated the development. Practical need to utilise existing resources in enhancing the elementary school transition as well as the initiatives of active professionals, "innovators", have been the main triggers of transition practices between preschool and elementary school (bottom–up). One concrete trigger to develop transition activities may have been the reported lack of adequate assessment and support services for children aged 0–6

TABLE 3 Excerpt from the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education Concerning the Preschool–Elementary School Transition Phase, and the Local Additions

<b>National core curriculum for basic education 2004</b>	<b>Town 1</b>	<b>Town 2</b>
<p>In formulating a curriculum for basic education, attention is to be given to the pre-primary educational curriculum. (p. 8)</p> <p>In the first and second grades, the instruction is to consider the abilities provided by early childhood education – pre-primary education in particular. Pre-primary and basic education must make up a consistent, unified whole. (p. 13)</p>	<p>Co-operation between early childhood education and basic education, 2004: Grades 1 and 2 education should build on ground of preschool. Co-operation secures the continuum of education and upbringing from preschool to grades 1 and 2. The aim of co-operation is to ease the school beginning of the child. Preschool and grades 1 and 2 professionals co-operate regionally. Principles for this co-operation are documented in preschools’ and elementary schools’ own curricula. Co-operative transition practices, and the persons in charge, are documented every year in the plan for co-operation, which is a part of the year plan of the elementary school. Co-operation should focus on curricular work: contents of education and upbringing, planning joint teaching, developing procedures together, pedagogical discussion and staff training, and using joint facilities and equipment. Whenever possible, the preschool will be placed in the elementary school building. Information concerning the pupil’s upbringing and education is to be transferred during the transition phase. The preschool education plan of each child is transferred to the elementary school via parents. Elementary school and preschool assess the realisation of curricula in regular meetings.</p>	<p>Formulation of the curriculum, 2008: Curricula should be planned together with the regional preschools.</p> <p>Learning environment, 2004: Elementary schools and daycare centres with preschools are divided into regions for co-operation between preschools and grades 1 and 2. The co-operation is described in the elementary school curricula.</p> <p>Co-operation between home and school, 2004/2008: Especially the transition phases (preschool–elementary school, elementary school–middle school, middle school–upper secondary education) should be taken into account.</p> <p>Pupil welfare 2004: The elementary school carries on the work for the pupil’s welfare, which has been started together with the preschool. The aims of the pupil welfare work are prevention and early intervention.</p>

years until lately. In Town 2, an external factor, the national core curricula in the first half of the 2000's, focused local attention on transition practices (top-down). Since then, according to the professionals, the co-operation has been obligatory and documented as well as more systematic and planned.

#### *The aims of transition practices*

In both towns, professionals reported that seamless transition from preschool to elementary school is the aim of the transition activities. Both towns are currently improving the process of school readiness assessment and the pedagogical arrangements concerning Grades 1 and 2 of the elementary school. In Town 1, partnership with parents on child rearing is considered one aim of the transition practices. Additionally, the approach to school transition and support is comprehensive; life-long learning and transition between different learning environments are considered. In Town 2, the focus is more on the level of individual school entrants, on children with various special needs, and on passing on information about these children.

#### *Physical location of preschools*

In both towns, professionals reported that the main reason for school-based location of preschools has been financial and practical. However, in Town 1, it soon became obvious that physical proximity also enhances preschool-elementary school co-operation in elementary school transition phase. Now the curriculum for basic education specifies the goal of physical proximity (Table 3). In line with this, of the total of 26 elementary schools which participated in the First Steps Study, 13 already had a preschool group in the elementary school building. In Town 2, the co-operation has reportedly been sparse even when the preschool is located in the school building. The goal of shared facilities has been adopted more recently, and, consequently, only three elementary schools, out of the total of 21 schools in the First Steps Study, had a preschool group in the school building.

#### *Challenges in preschool-elementary school co-operation*

Professionals in both towns found that different organisational cultures, as well as passing on information between early childhood education and basic education, have been problematic. Professionals reported that implementation of transition practices is too dependent on individual and interaction factors leading to unequal situations in many preschool-elementary school pairs. In Town 1, professionals reported more concrete attempts to solve problems in co-operation; sufficiently similar transition program in each preschool-elementary school pair is clearly targeted. In Town 2, financial issues, as well as bureaucracy, were reported as obstacles to co-operation, while the recently ended phase of "territorial behavior" between preschool and elementary school was also mentioned. Additionally, until recently, there has been no administrative professional responsible for basic education development; this may have partly hampered development in this town.

#### *Administrative reform*

In Town 1, early education and basic education have been administratively integrated quite recently. Professionals reported that, in practice, the work has not changed. The main aim is to extend similar transition practices to every preschool-elementary school pair. The opportunity for the elementary school to learn from preschool and early education policies and goals is recognised. In Town 2, the administrative integration will take place in the near future. Early childhood education has so far been quite closely related to child welfare services, and it has been considered mainly a support system for families. However, the integration is expected to form a continuum of child education and child support from early education to preschool and elementary school, with improved co-operation.

TABLE 4 Excerpt from the Core Curriculum for Preschool Concerning the Preschool–Elementary School Transition Phase, and the Local Additions

<b>Core curriculum for preschool 2000:</b>	<b>Town 1</b>	<b>Town 2</b>
<p>Early childhood education, with preschool as part of it, and basic education make up a whole that proceeds consistently, considering the child’s development. In the organization of preschool education, the aims and contents of basic education must be taken into consideration. (p. 7)</p> <p>Co-operation with the basic education must be part of the preschool curriculum. (p. 21)</p>	<p>Early childhood education and basic education need regional co-operation, with a regional framework. There must be engagement in ongoing development of the co-operation. Principles for this co-operation are documented in each unit’s own curriculum. Professionals in early childhood education and basic education make a plan for co-operation every year. A regional person is assigned to be in charge. It is to the advantage of the child that experiences concerning the content and procedures in early education and in basic education are exchanged. Co-operation should focus on curricular work: contents of education and upbringing, planning joint teaching, developing procedures together, pedagogical discussion and staff training. It is important to get to know each other’s work, activities, and physical facilities in practice. Co-operation emphasizes the transferring of essential information concerning the upbringing and education of each individual child. The elementary school should also give feedback to daycare centres about the preschool education it offers. Information that is consistent with the advantage of the child is transferred to the elementary school. The parents are entitled to participate in this information exchange. Co-operation is very important especially when the child has special needs. A well-functioning network between home, early childhood education, and basic education enhances the safety of the child and supports parenting</p>	<p>Joint town-level and regional training is organised for preschool and elementary school staff. Teachers co-operate regionally by having discussions on values, getting to know each other’s work, and assessing and developing the co-operation. The yearly plan for co-operation must define the regional guidelines for co-operation. Curricula are revised regularly. Professionals of preschools and elementary schools jointly follow up the general and individual aims of the children, as well as transferring the information from preschool to elementary school.</p>

*Do elementary school -level factors account for the variation in the transition practice implementation?*

Statistical analyses indicated that the number of transition practices between the elementary school and preschool as reported by teachers was connected neither with elementary school size,  $r_s = -.03, p = .880$ , nor with the number of preschool partners,  $r_s = -.28, p = .099$ .

*Do teacher-level factors account for the variation in the transition practice implementation?*

Teacher reports on the general importance of practices correlated with the number of transition practices the elementary school implemented,  $r_s = .42, p = .014$ , and this correlation repeated itself when testing the frequency and importance of the transition practices against each other: frequency and importance of personal meeting with future teacher and curriculum co-operation (curriculum written together) were significantly associated,  $r_s = .47, p = .006$ , and  $r_s = .40, p = .018$ , respectively, while the associations between frequency and importance of familiarisation with the school,  $r_s = .31, p = .072$ , and teacher co-operation,  $r_s = .33, p = .054$ , were close to significant. There were no significant associations concerning discussions,  $r_s = .17, p = .340$ , or passing on education plan,  $r_s = .20, p = .254$ .

Teacher reports on the significance of obstacles to transition practices did not correlate significantly with the number of implemented transition practices, neither with the summed variable Obstacles  $r_s = .09, p = .598$ , nor with the individual obstacles. Nor were the elementary school teachers' work experience and reported number of transition practices significantly associated,  $r_s = -.04, p = .802$ . Correlations between work experience and frequencies of individual practices were also not significant.

## **Discussion**

Transition practices between preschool and school predict and may even lead to better learning and adjustment in school (Ahtola et al., 2011; LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2008; Schulting et al. 2005; see also, Margetts, 2007). Why some schools implement several of these useful practices, whereas other schools only a few of them, was of interest in the present study. Earlier studies have looked for explanations at the level of micro- and mesosystems, analyzing features of individual teachers and schools. However, we were interested in broadening the scope and looking at exosystem qualities. We found that in the Finnish context, the municipal-level activities and guidelines, along with teacher-reported importance of the transition practices, were the only factors significantly associated with the implementation of transition practices between elementary schools and partner preschools. Teacher- and school-level factors available in this study turned out to be mostly not significant.

Our data stem from two Finnish towns, in which elementary schools reported considerably different numbers of transition practices during the school transition phase. Interestingly, closer examination of the local curricula and the interviews with local administration on the history and goals of the preschool–elementary school co-operation emphasised this difference. In Town 1, where schools implement more transition practices, the elementary school transition is also perceived and documented in a more elaborate, comprehensive, and concrete way. The transition of every school entrant and the partnership with families were highlighted, and also the challenges were openly discussed and confronted. A process could be identified whereby intrinsic need and active individuals, "innovators", initiate a

progressive development which results in versatile transition activities in most of the preschool–elementary school pairs. In the town, where fewer transition practices were implemented, the motivation for developing the transition activities had been more externally guided from the national level, which seems to be an insufficient base for local innovation. The curriculum texts, as well as oral reports, were scarce, incoherent, and abstract. School transition was viewed primarily from the perspective of children with special needs and passing on information about children.

On the basis of our data, we can only speculate why these two municipalities have progressed along such different paths concerning the support for elementary school transition. The lack of adequate multiprofessional assessment and support during the early development might have been one factor contributing to the situation, in which alternative and complementary means for successful handling of the school transition are easily developed and adopted. Attention is forced to shift from the level of individual children to the level of professionals and organisations, and the partnership with families becomes more crucial (see also, Pianta & Cox, 1999). On the other hand, the lack of professionals focusing on the development of education at the local administration level may hinder the local adoption and spreading of new policies. As these results and hypothesised explanations highlight the importance of both school- and teacher-level work and active administration, they reflect the dynamics of successful change in schools: a reciprocal process between individual agents is needed (Fullan, 2007; Kirk-Downey & Perry, 2006).

Concerning the teacher- and school-level factors, we also found that the perceived importance of transition practices varied between the two towns, and this was positively connected with the reported number of implemented practices. However, on the basis of these teacher-level data we cannot know to what extent the individual teachers who valued transition practices more actually implemented more of them. We suggest that the observed connection between reported number and reported importance of transition practices may also be due to the response bias of teachers. Additionally, it seems that the experienced importance of transition activities is not only an individual-level attitude, but also a local-level (exosystem) feature, and may evolve concurrently with actual activity implementation. In school change, deeds are supposed to change before beliefs (Fullan, 2007). The potential obstacles, in turn, were not connected with the number of practices—contrary to the findings of Rous et al. (2010)—and were evaluated similarly in both towns. Thus, reported obstacles seem to represent a general individual-level attitude with no connection to actions in practice, or to the real barriers of co-operation with preschool. Surprisingly, the number of implemented transition practices was not connected with elementary school teachers' years of work experience. Neither were the school size and number of preschool partners connected with the number of transition activities. This is contrary to the findings of earlier studies (Early et al., 2001; La Paro et al., 2000; Nelson, 2004; Rous et al., 2010).

Obviously, this is not to say that teacher- and school-level factors do not affect the implementation of transition practices in Finland. Our interview data clearly highlighted the significance of active individuals and schools. One explanation is the content of our data, which comprised only 22 schools and were incomplete, especially concerning the school-level information. More detailed and deeper information on teachers and elementary schools, for example, on school climate or ethos, teacher turnover, and leadership, as well as larger samples, are clearly needed (see Hargreaves et al., 2007; Love et al., 1992; Rutter et al., 1979; Smolkin, 1999). A second possible explanation for the conflicting findings is the structure of the Finnish macrosystem. The education system is public, nationally and locally regulated and coordinated, and, on an international scale, the wealth distribution in Finland tends to be equal. Thus, severe stratification of, for example, neighborhoods and elementary schools rarely occurs. This leaves less need and space for widely different school-level or teacher-

level decisions and policies, compared to the U.S., where the earlier studies have been conducted (see also Shinn, 2003).

The most severe limitation in this study is the small database which restricts the generalisation of our findings. Obviously, a larger sample of municipalities, schools, preschools, as well as teachers and administration would allow the use of more sophisticated statistical methods, e.g., multi-level modelling, thus helping to investigate the systemic nature of the implementation of transition practices further. In terms of the questionnaire, the lack of alternative category 'other' might have limited our perspective on transition practices and obstacles to them in elementary schools. Moreover, the use of different interviewers for each group may be considered a shortcoming, as the course of a semi-structured interview is rather dependent on the interviewers' personal decisions to expand or discard topics.

## **Conclusion**

Our results suggest that not only the school transition itself but also the handling of it should be examined from the ecological perspective. Teachers, schools, and local-level resources and policies must all be considered, because the promotion and prevention programs that are delivered through social systems and individuals inevitably trigger multilevel dynamics (Choi, 2003). Alignment and coordination, which in childhood education enable more effective teaching processes and more positive child outcomes (Bogard & Takanishi, 2005; Kagan & Kauerz, 2007), must take place on each system level. Local-level and school-level curricula and other formal documents are of value as means, as they serve as a top-down guide for school-level activities to support school entrance. What is more, they comprise a desirable end as a mutual process which produces trust and understanding between the preschool and elementary school staff and administration. Hence, as national and municipal guidelines for handling the school transition with supporting activities may be recommended, commitment at teacher and school level is also essential.

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