



## **Coeducation of preschool and primary school teachers as a basic factor in ensuring continuity in the transition from preschool to primary school: The approach of the School of Education at the University of Western Macedonia in the framework of the Comenius project "Early Years Transition Programme" (EASE).**

### **Introduction**

The University of Western Macedonia's<sup>1</sup> contribution to fulfilling the goals of EASE may be divided into two phases. The present report is concerned with the first phase, which was completed in February 2009. In this first phase, a form of coeducation of preschool teacher candidates and primary school teacher candidates was attempted for the first time. It was achieved with the experimental introduction of a course<sup>2</sup> designed to achieve the following two aims of EASE:

- «*To maximize cooperation between the Early Childhood and Primary School sectors and to forge a common understanding of the education that can be adopted to both levels and thus facilitate the transition for children 5-7 years old.*
- *To promote the involvement and exchange of views between parents and professionals of both sectors, and in particular to ensure the inclusion of children with special needs and children from marginalized families».*

Furthermore, the experimental introduction of this course aimed to explore the necessary requisites to attempt a proposal for its incorporation in the core curriculum of departments of preprimary-and primary school teacher education in Greece.

### **Course description**

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<i>Course title:</i>	“Transition from preschool <sup>3</sup> to primary school and cooperation between the two institutions”
<i>Who is this course for?</i>	Undergraduates, preprimary school teacher candidates and primary school teacher candidates
<i>Semester:</i>	6 <sup>th</sup> and 7 <sup>th</sup> (two consecutive academic semesters)
<i>Duration:</i>	Summer semester 2007-2008 (14 weeks) Winter semester 2008-2009 (14 weeks)
<i>Student workload</i>	240 hours (Lectures, tutorials, individual research & study, preparation for group essays, collaboration with partnerships)
<i>Course type:</i>	Elective

<sup>1</sup> School of Education, Department of Early Childhood Education and Department of Primary Education.

<sup>2</sup> It would not have been possible to realize this innovation if the two department chairs, Professor Kariotoglou and Professor Andreou, had not warmly supported it at their departments' general assemblies. Furthermore, this innovation would never have taken off if in 2007 Professor Kyridis, then-President of the Department of Early Childhood of Education, had not immediately set the bureaucratic process in motion. I owe all three my deepest thanks, both for their initial support in the introduction of this innovation and for their continuing hands-on interest in its further development.

<sup>3</sup> In this text the terms “kindergarten” and “preprimary school” are synonymous.



<i>Course level:</i>	Advanced
<i>Entry requirements:</i>	a) Candidates choosing this course in the summer semester had to continue with the course in the winter semester. b) Students worked in pairs, one preprimary school teacher candidate collaborating with one primary school teacher candidate.
<i>Credit points:</i>	3 CP
<i>How is this course assessed?</i>	Final project.

*Course content:* The course contains a theoretical and a practical part. The theoretical foundation (starting point) of the course is based on: (a) An social constructivist approach (Beck & Kosnik 2006) and (b) an ecological perspective on the transition to primary school (Bronfenbrenner,1979).

*Aims:*

The coeducation of future preschool teachers and future primary school teachers, as well as their cooperation concerning the transition of children from kindergarten to school, is an innovation.<sup>4</sup> This is precisely one of the main purposes of the course: **to create a culture of cooperation between the two institutions.**

One central aim of the course was the **experiential process of coeducation** between the Department of Preprimary School Teachers and the Department of Primary School Teachers to achieve the smooth transition of children from kindergarten to primary school, “by developing a position for using transitions as a tool for change” (Dunlop 2007:151).

More specifically, the students were invited to undertake the following goals:

- to confront the **difficulties** as well as the **developmental challenges** created by the discontinuity in teaching and learning process during the transition from kindergarten to primary school.
- to appreciate the consequences of an uneven transition on the child’s further school career, and on the development of his or her personality, in terms of **the rights of children as citizens.**
- to search out the research bibliography on the **factors governing the transition** from preschool to primary school, and detailing the relation between a smooth transition and a fundamentally positive attitude toward **lifelong learning.**
- to study topics in **remedial education and equality of educational opportunities**, with a focus on the transition from optional to mandatory education (e.g., the language spoken in the home and the official language spoken at school).

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<sup>4</sup>A common coeducation concept of preprimary school teachers and primary school teachers already exists in 7 EU countries: France, Great Britain, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Sweden (Oberhuemer 2008:17). Also in Germany, since 2005, the University of Bremen has offered the Bachelor of Arts in subject-related educational sciences (pre-school sector, primary and secondary education).



- to compare the **institutional relationship** between kindergarten and primary school in Greece with that in other countries, with the goal of discovering the institutional prerequisites for the cooperation of the two education institutions in Greece.
- to explore key topics in transition and collaboration, e.g. to explore the **perceptions, expectations and experiences** of children, parents and teachers regarding the transition, in the framework of the ecological approach of Bronfenbrenner (family, kindergarten, primary school and local community).
- to design a program for the smooth transition and collaboration between the two institutions, and to **apply certain assessable activities and strategies** as part of the overall program, in the framework of self-assessment.

### **Organization and student responsibilities**

The above goals have been organized into two semesters with a view to the following responsibilities for students:

The 18 students who have chosen the course (9 preschool teacher candidates and 9 primary school teacher candidates) are grouped in 9 mixed pairs, so that every two students building a pair work together as a “*tandem bicycle*.” This collaboration has two dimensions: a) participating in the theoretical course, and b) actively promoting on their part the creation of a strong and equal partnership with the kindergartens and the primary schools which decided to participate in our project.

### **Summer semester 2007-2008** (February-May)

Each student pair undertook the collaboration described above at the beginning of the summer semester 2007-2008, with the two institutions linked by the project to prepare the transition activities. The target was the planning, organization and realization of activities conducive to a smooth transition. Each student pair had to observe a group of 6 to 8 children who would be attending primary school at the beginning of September 2008 (these children are now finishing first grade), and to carry out the following activities related to transition and cooperation:

- Becoming familiar with the children.
- Participatory observation of the children in their target group.
- Semi-structured individual and/or group interviews with the children in the kindergarten to find out what expectations the children have concerning primary school **before** they enter it. (Interview techniques: storytelling, puppet-show, board games).
- Interviews with the parents of the preschool children in order to explore their expectations concerning primary school **before** their children enter it.
- Interviews with the kindergarten teachers to find out what their views are concerning cooperation with the primary school.
- Cooperation with the teachers of both institutions concerning the organization and realization of mutual visits and joint transition activities of preschool and primary school.



### **Winter semester 2008-2009 (October- January)**

At the beginning of the winter semester 2008-2009, each student pair, apart from its participation in the theoretical courses, cooperated also with the first grade class the children had just entered. The aim of the cooperation with the first grade teachers was to continue the process of implementing the transition activities, which have been planned through the end of the winter semester. These activities are the following:

- The candidates visit the children, now attending first grade, with whom they had worked in the summer semester, when the latter were in kindergarten. The students refresh their relation with these children.
- The candidates observe the children during school hours, with a special focus on the process of integration of the children into the setting of Grade 1.
- The candidates interview the school beginners to explore their experiences, 6-8 weeks after school begins. (Interview technique: board games.)
- The candidates interview the parents of the first graders in order to explore their experiences concerning the transition of their children from kindergarten to primary school, 6-8 weeks **after** entering school.
- The candidates interview the Grade 1 teacher about his or her views concerning the children's entering first grade.
- The candidates take part in the dissemination of the results of their EASE activities in the two semesters.

### **Cooperating institutions**

All the cooperating institutions are located in Florina

- 1) The School of Education of the University of Western Macedonia
- 2) The District Office of Primary Schools in Florina
- 3) Nine Kindergarten classes
- 4) Eight Grade 1 Primary School classes

### **Collaborators**

- 1) The children
- 2) The parents
- 3) Nine kindergarten teachers
- 4) Eight Grade 1 teachers
- 5) The headmasters of the kindergartens
- 6) The headmasters of the primary schools
- 7) The kindergarten adviser
- 8) The primary school adviser
- 9) Nine students of the Department of Early Childhood Education
- 10) Nine students of the Department of Primary Education

### **Results-Feedback**

Next, there is a presentation of certain<sup>5</sup> points in the feedback received from the experimental introduction of the course, based on the evaluations performed by the

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<sup>5</sup>A more detailed presentation of this feedback is provided in the paper to be presented at the conference being organized by the Department of Preschool Education, University of Crete, 22-23 May, 2009, on "Education and Professional Development of teachers."



candidates vis-à-vis the aims of the course. Candidates wrote their assessment in the projects turned in following completion of the course.

Firstly, we should note that the opportunity for partial coeducation offered the candidates of the two departments through the course described above brought the students face to face with the key question: *why* offer coeducation to preschool and primary school teacher candidates? The candidate pairs, working like “tandem bicycles,” discovered through the research bibliography, as well as through their observation of children in kindergarten and grade school, that *children of the same chronological age may present developmental divergences as wide as three years in one or more areas of the learning process.*

Given this fact, it became clear that education in these grades needs to develop a common perception of “the child” and “childhood” as a foundation for unified pedagogical action. Thus, it was obvious that partial coeducation is a necessity, not only for ensuring continuity of the curriculum between the two sectors, but chiefly to cultivate a **common and unified communicative and teaching style**, which would ensure a **high-quality continuity in the interaction between educators and children**, reaching across the “impermeably bureaucratic” barrier of the children’s chronological age.

Further, it seems that the candidates developed a clear opinion on the need to **ensure continuity in the personal learning process** of the child, not only to prevent academic failure, but chiefly because the transition is a unique challenge and an opportunity for the further development of the child.

At this point, we must point out that the candidates expressed a serious interest and fulfilled all the goals of the course, in spite of the criticism by some of them, especially in the 7<sup>th</sup> semester, that the goals were numerous and demanding. This comment is understandable, given that students often expect elective courses to be less demanding than core curriculum courses. However, it is also true that this course had demanding aims, in the sense that the students had to connect the theory with the practice where preschool and primary school education meet. Apart from their classes at the School, the candidates also had to work together with children and their parents, as well as with teachers of both sectors, developing a plan of action backed by scholarly documentation. **The difficulties posed by a cohesive and unified link between the two grades in both theory and practice** are precisely those which led the students to suggest the incorporation of this course in the core curriculum.

It must also be noted that the students’ collaboration in partnerships was not incorporated into their official teaching practice, a fact which led to certain difficulties. Given that this collaboration had an informal and somewhat optional nature vis-à-vis the partnerships, transition activities scheduled jointly by the candidates and the educators were often postponed or cancelled. The main reason was that the kindergartens and primary schools of Florina are encumbered not only with the practice teaching by teacher candidates, but are also “swamped,” as they claim, by the experimental research applications being undertaken by regular teaching personnel of the School of Education.



Last but not least is the fact that all participants in the experimental introduction of the course in question agree that the students of both departments must carry out their practice teaching in both the kindergarten and the primary school. This view is fully aligned with the practices already followed by various models of coeducation of educators, for instance at the University of Bremen, where students attending the course of study entitled “Bachelor of Arts: subject related educational sciences (pre-school sector, primary and secondary education)” divide their practical training evenly between the two institutions.

In concluding, there are good reasons to expect that a course concerning transition will soon be included into the curriculum of the university departments of preprimary and primary teacher education. An intensive dialogue has already started in Greece!

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