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Empowering Pedagogical Staff for Transition of Children in Inclusive Education

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Extended summary

The problem of transition of children in the context of inclusion from one educational level to the next is omnipresent in practice. The reason may lie in the fact that there are neither organized mechanisms nor support for the transition of children from one level of education to another.

The paper presents a qualitative comparative analysis of the transition period in several countries in Europe, North America and Australia. The relevant and available documents issued in these countries were used regarding the protocols, procedures and guidelines for the transition in inclusive education. The research results indicate that there are similarities and differences in the transition process relative to: the fulfilment of children's rights to education and the right to choice, transition planning, formation of transition teams, description of the role of team members, duration and key areas of transition planning, parent participation, and the evaluation process. The possible mechanisms in the transition period and the guidelines for the preparation for the transition contributing to strengthening of the pedagogical staff in this process are elaborated in the concluding section of the paper.

The aim of this paper is to analyze the educational policy regarding the transition period in eight states which have a successful practice of transition. The specific goal of the research is to make the general goal operational by proposing a possible transition plan which would suit the educational practice in Serbia.

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We established the general principles of a successful transition by analyzing the content, principles, elements and forms of transition planning in eight countries (Canada, USA, Australia, Finland, Belgium, Denmark, Switzerland and Croatia). According to these principles, successful transition is based on planning the process in advance, providing sufficient information to the child/pupil and the family, ensuring effective cooperation between the participants in transition, and constructive support. Different transition models used in foreign countries offer created patterns, procedures and protocols as guidelines for collecting the necessary documentation in the transition process, as well as for planning strategies, steps and activities. These 'transition guides' also include the checklists of the key features of the educational system, along with the components and indicators in the transition process.

In addition, they clearly define the roles and responsibilities of all participants and partners in the process of transition and inter-institutional cooperation as necessary prerequisites for a successful transition.

National legal documents regulating the right of every child to have access to all levels of education and to continuing quality education are the starting point in providing support to children in transition.

In conformity with national legislation, pedagogical starting points in terms of supporting children in transition can be found in the perceptions of a new educational paradigm that includes: quality education for all children, social inclusion, holistic (personalized) approach, responsibility of the educational system, preparation of educational system for accepting and creating appropriate support for every child, parental participation and inter-institutional cooperation.

Inter-institutional cooperation can contribute to the provision of adequate support in the local community, given that the local authorities and the employees of social welfare centres, preschool institutions and elementary schools know the families living in their community. This kind of cooperation may be central in overcoming the challenges and problems pertaining to transition planning.

Based on the analysis, results and conclusions, the first step in creating the proposed mechanisms is the formation of a support team for children and pupils consisting of individuals who are directly involved (or will be involved) in the process. More specifically, the team should include a group of experts who, together with the family members, plan the transition period. It is recommended that a team coordinator should be appointed to handle the process and communicate effectively with the family and with the pedagogical staff of schools and different levels of education.

In addition, pupils in transition may have special learning difficulties, which makes a proper training of all pedagogical staff (teachers and support staff in education) before pupils come to school very important.

Finally, acceptance, understanding and empathy are the necessary values that pedagogical staff and peers have to develop.

Transition applies to all children. Transition is a process of operational, team-work planning for including a child in a group or institution. This involves action planning, as well as im-

plementation and evaluation of planned activities and outcomes. Transition requires a timely and functional provision of information to all participants, good cooperation among all participants, especially with the family. An efficient achievement of transitional outcomes depends on the achieved level of institutional work quality standards and professional competences of the employees in the period when a child/pupil enters or leaves the institution.

The paper concludes with the proposal of the mechanisms required for a successful transition: openness of educational institutions for all children; keeping children's families well informed; the minimum duration of the planned process is one to three years; formation of transition teams and a clear defining of the roles of teams members; joint planning with the child's family and his/her environment; professional development of pedagogical staff; sensitization of the peer group; introduction to the new environment and evaluation of the success of the transition.

We are aware of the obstacles and problems which may occur during the transition period and further complicate the already complex process of the education of pupils with difficulties or disabilities. Based on the research results presented in this paper, we assume that we can contribute to the empowerment of the pedagogical staff for transition period, which would resolve or at least reduce the problems arising during this period.

Key words: pedagogical staff, transition, levels of education, transition plan.

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