



**Mirjana M. Nikolić, Isidora B. Korać**

**Preschool Teacher Training and Business Informatics College –  
Sirmium, Sremska Mitrovica, Republic of Serbia**

**Milijana B. Lazarević**

**Preschool Teacher Training College “Mihajlo Palov”,  
Vršac, Republic of Serbia**

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## ***Transition in the Context of Inclusive Education: Opinions of Preschool Teachers and Professional Associates***

### **Extended summary**

The transition from one level of education to another is a period of transition when it is very important to make harmonious relationships in different environments and activities as well as establish connections with children's everyday life context and their previous experience. Given that transition from one level of education to another can be especially sensitive for children with disabilities, the aim of the research was to determine the opinion of preschool teachers, professional associates in preschool institutions, and members of the Professional Team for Inclusive Education (hereinafter: PTIE) on the current practice of transition from preschool institutions to primary school with regard to this group of children.

The research described in the paper was a combined research. In the first phase of the research, a sample of 234 preschool teachers from eight preschool institutions in four cities was given a close-ended questionnaire created specifically for the purpose of this research. Based on the quantitative analysis of the obtained data, the majority of the respondents believe that the transition between preschool institution and primary school in working with children with disabilities is not realised. In their opinion, the main obstacles to this transition are: insufficient involvement and support of professional associates, inconsistency of the methods applied by the preschool and primary school teachers respectively, the lack of interest in the previous development of children with disabilities, the absence of a binding legislative act which would define the

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1 vs.mirjana.nikolic@gmail.com

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process of transition, and the insufficient competencies of preschool teachers for working with pedagogical documents.

To collect the additional data on the researched problem, in the second phase the researchers conducted focus-group interviews with 15 members of the PTIE from two preschool institutions. The guidelines for the focus group interviews were created as well. The questions were grouped in two thematic units: 1) PTIE members' experience with tackling the difficulties occurring in working with children with developmental difficulties during the transition from a preschool institution to primary school and referring to the support of institutional defectologists, psychologists, and pedagogues, and the difficulties related to the activities, roles, responsibilities, and commitment of all participants in the process of transition, as well as the preschool teachers' competencies for handling pedagogical documentation in this process; 2) PTIE members' suggestions for changes in the practice of transition (operationalisation of the process of transition and the roles of the participants).

The research findings indicate that there is a need for improving the framework shaping the transition of the children with disabilities from preschool institutions to primary schools, both at the level of educational policies and that of initial education and preschool teachers' professional development, as well as at the level of educational practice. As far as educational policies are concerned, an enactment of a legislative act on transition that would clearly define the roles and duties of all participants in the process is a key element in the transition of children with developmental difficulties from the preschool to primary school level. Changes in the preschool teachers' initial training should include students' more active participation in the real educational practice and a critical reconsideration and modification of theory and practice, rethinking personal competencies in a given context through an interaction with practitioners, professional associates, and experts. In this way, the gap between theoretical and practical knowledge would be smaller and preschool teachers would be better prepared for working in an inclusive environment. Preschool teachers' professional development should include, among other things, the process of horizontal learning which implies different forms of organised and planned learning, joint actions, reflecting on the practice from different angles, as well as building common knowledge with other colleagues. The research findings provide some guidelines and recommendations with regard to the process of transition, timeline, and coordinators of activities and their roles, all of which can serve as a basis for creating a model of putting transition to practice. The authors of the paper also suggest that, apart from preschool teachers, parents, professional associates, and representatives of other institutions should all be involved in the preparation of pedagogical documentation. To make this happen, preschool teachers should be additionally trained in preparing pedagogical documentation, particularly in developing Individual Educational Plans, and professional associates should be more involved in the process and offer greater support. The research findings show that there is a lack of professional associates in preschool institutions, which points to the problem of the current legislation regulating their number. The process of transition should begin minimum one year before a child with a disability enrolls at a primary school, in order to make a timely decision what school, and what form of further education, is in the child's best interest. PTIE schools must be included in assessing what types of support are adequate for these children in the process of transition. Building partnerships between the two levels of education should be

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an important prerequisite for the joint participation and negotiations between the representatives of the preschool institutions and primary schools. An inter-sectoral cooperation (building a support network) at the level of educational institutions, social protection and healthcare institutions, with the participation of inter-sectoral commission and in line with their competences, is an important support to inclusive education and the transition process. Further research should involve examining the opinions of the representatives of schools and other institutions about the issues of transition, including the opinions of parents because transition cannot be planned and realised successfully without their participation.

**Keywords:** children with disabilities, inclusive education, preschool institutions, primary school, transition.

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