



EARLY YEARS TRANSITION PROGRAMME

Progress Report Public Part

Project information

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Executive Summary

Target Audience

This Interim Report is intended for a potentially wide readership. For representatives of the Executive Agency and the wider European Union organisations; for members of the Project partnership and Project participants, and for the wider policy and research communities in Education and Training across the different partner countries and the other EU member member states. As such it is hoped that the information presented here is accessible and clear. If any reader wishes further clarification, however, she or he can contact the Project Co-ordination Team at the EU-Agency, Local Government of Cologne (www.brk.nrw.de/europa).

What does EASE stand for?

EASE stands for **E**arly **Y**ears **T**ransition **P**rogramme. As the name suggests, the Project aims to improve the quality of education and children's learning in pre-schools and primary schools to facilitate the transition process for children (aged 5-7) and their families as well as to help both educational institutions to connect and to collaborate more effectively. The Project focuses on children's participation and encouragement of knowledge acquisition through Language Practice and Early Literacy.

The overall goal is to enable pre-school teachers and primary school teachers to find a more unified approach to learning and a common understanding of education that should be adopted at both educational levels to reinforce educational continuity and thus enhance teaching and learning in the early years' classrooms.

Project Objectives

The aim of the EASE Project, as outlined in the application, is to conceive a joint Educational Transition Course in initial and continuing education for EC and Grade 1 teachers that ensures successful transition within a rights-based, socio-constructivist approach, and that incorporates the four Headline Project Objectives:

1. to maximize cooperation between the EC sector and primary school and thus facilitate the transition
2. to promote the involvement and exchange of views between parents and professionals in both sectors
3. to develop connecting curricula in early literacy and language practice within a play-oriented and participatory approach
4. to assess children's literacy learning and thus encourage them to reflect on their own learning processes and to empower them to become autonomous learners throughout life

Project Approach

On the basis of the didactic concepts of the EC sector and primary school, common education concepts were developed in order to initiate effective co-operation at both educational levels. Teaching materials which were conceived in early literacy for co-operative teaching are being tested and will be implemented. This is intended to promote an exchange of views among all involved in the educational process and document the individual pathways of each child at the beginning of lifelong learning.

The EASE Project includes a wide range of partners and participants: the Local Government of Cologne as the Co-ordinating Partner, including the regional school board which covers approximately 80 vocational training colleges in the region of Cologne. 5 of those are partners in the EASE Project.

The geographical spread of the trans-national partners is excellent, as is their expertise. The consortium consists of world leaders in research and renowned teacher trainers in the fields of transition, pre- and primary teacher training, early language and foreign language acquisition, and intercultural learning.

The Project's external evaluator is Dr. John Bennett, OECD consultant and co-author of *Starting Strong*.

Outcome and results

The project relies on embedded evaluation and dissemination from the outset in order to analyse and raise awareness of the impact of the approach on teachers and their professional development.

The evidence for satisfactory progress can be found both in the public section of the interim report as well as in the confidential section.

Significant achievements and out-puts to date have included:

- Strong motivation and commitment from all partners
 - Evidence of very positive engagement with the EASE concept from all short-term and long-term target groups
 - Overview of the national organisation of early education and early primary services
 - National course descriptions
 - A Paper on Coeducation of preschool and primary school teachers as a basic factor in ensuring continuity in the transition from preschool to primary school
 - National bookmarks for self-printing
 - In-and-out questionnaire and its analysis in English and German.
 - EASE adaptation of the learning-story approach, including Context and Literacy Indicators in English and German.
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Plans for the Future

Plan and priorities for the remainder of the project:

- Compilation of best practice examples for the Handbook of Educational Transition
- Particular focus on best practice examples related both to the training and implementation sectors (four EASE Headline Objectives)
- Enhanced dissemination activities

Sustainability

Short term target group

The providers of day-care centres and primary schools collect the Project's results into a Quality Development Profile containing numerous examples of good practice and practical procedures. This way the benefits of the inter-connecting curricula will be sustained.

Long-term target group

In all countries day-care providers, primary school boards, trade unions, politicians, representatives of ministries are involved in the EASE Project on a permanent basis.

The Project Web-sites

There are two principal websites for the project:

1. a freely accessible site for the general public

www.EASE-EU.com

2. a password-protected site for the internal project activities:

<http://internal.ease-eu.com/>.

All appropriate content will be made available on the freely accessible site at the conclusion of the project.

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1. Project Objectives

Research suggests (OECD 2001, 2006) that a more unified approach to learning should be adopted in both the early childhood education and the primary school systems, and that attention should be given to transition challenges faced by young children as they enter school. Transitions for children are generally a stimulus to growth and development, but if too abrupt and handled without care, they represent the risk of regression and failure, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The project therefore aims at enabling pre-school teachers and primary school teachers to find a more unified approach to learning and a common understanding of education that should be adopted at both educational levels to collaborate more effectively, i.e. to improve educational continuity and thus facilitate the transition process of children (aged 5-7) and their families.

The pedagogical approach is built on the strengths of the "school readiness" approach and the "social pedagogy" tradition, bringing together concepts of care, nurture, and education. Children's development will be stimulated by learning experiences and guided participation. Adults and peers will nurture their learning and development.

On the basis of the didactic concepts of the EC sector and primary school, common education concepts will be developed in order to initiate effective co-operation at both educational levels. Teaching material in early literacy for co-operative teaching is being conceived, tested and implemented. This will promote an exchange of views of all involved in the educational process and document the individual pathways of each child at the beginning of lifelong learning.

Early literacy and language practice are being assessed by applying the EASE adaptation of the learning-story approach by M.Carr. The child is involved in progressively more complex patterns of reciprocal activity and by gradual shifts in the balance of power from the teacher to the learner. These shifts reflect children's ability and inclination to set their own goals, reflect on their own learning process - (meta-cognition) and thus take on some of the responsibility for learning.

This approach embraces a view of learning that focuses on the relationship between the learner and the environment, and seeks ways to document complex reciprocal and responsive relationships in that environment. Children's learning dispositions and the competences acquired by the children and the strategies they have applied in acquiring them are central. This approach is seen as paving the way to more individualised learning where the child is seen as a capable and competent learner.

The project, firstly aims at increasing equity, quality and effectiveness during the crucial transition phase from pre-school to compulsory school, and secondly at enriching the education and training systems for pre- and primary school teachers through an additional qualification course in „Educational Transition” to ensure coherence and continuity in pedagogical approaches.

Reinforced motivation to learn and a variety of learning opportunities, embedded in responsive, reciprocal approaches, are the ultimate keys to implementing lifelong

learning successfully for all target groups.



2. Project Approach

The EASE programme is conceived as a contribution to the development of a sustainable society.

On the occasion of the project's preparatory meeting, the project partners have agreed to follow an ex-ante valorisation plan, in order to reach all long-term target groups and address all project related issues onward.

The trans-national partners work in national teams, that is educational staff institutions in cooperation with EC settings and primary schools.

The project results have partly been evaluated in workshops consisting of international teams during the four trans-national meetings, where the findings and draft concepts of both the Handbook and the teacher training curricula have been discussed, adapted and finalized.

All partners will maintain close contact to the Project's co-ordinators who will always be informed of the status of the work of all individual national teams. This procedure ensures that the objectives of the project are carried out on national and international levels in order to meet national needs. The concrete work results of the project serve as indicators for the assessment of the Project's progress.

All national teams conceptualized initial or in-service Educational Transition courses for the EC and Grade 1 teachers, by incorporating the four EASE objectives:

1. Enhancing the effectiveness of transition through co-construction

by developing a cooperative approach to and resulting in a common understanding of education that can be adopted at both educational levels

- Sensitisation - raising awareness for both teachers/trainers and students
- Curricula framework, guidelines, didactic concepts of the EC sector and primary schools
- Ecological transition - systems model (Bronfenbrenner)

2. Ensuring roles for the key actors at various levels as a developmental task

that is the promotion of involvement and exchange of views between children, parents and professionals in both sectors

- Project management,
- Co-operative practices with "feeders" (EC sector) and "receivers" (primary school) institutions
- Co-operative practices with children and parents

3. Developing activities that support learning across the transition process

that is, developing inter-connecting curricula in early literacy and language practice with a holistic and participatory approach

- Presentation of examples of successful initiatives and co-operative practices
- Joint conception of inter-connecting curricula in early literacy in peer-to-peer groups (professionals of the EC sector and primary school)
- Focus on child's ability to cope with transition in an active and play-oriented way

4. Supporting socio-emotional well-being and cognitive achievement

which means assessing children's literacy competence and thus encouraging them to reflect on their own learning paths and enabling them to become autonomous learners throughout life

- EASE adaptation of the learning-stories approach (M.Carr 2001) - a common base for discussion between institutions (pre-primary and primary) children and parents
- "Learning how to learn" including meta-cognitive approaches
- Specific support for at-risk children including intercultural education
- Support for gifted children

The courses are being carried out in training and/or implementation modules depending on whether students, teachers or professionals of both sectors are involved.

The consortium agreed to carry out project evaluation involving the four main target groups: children, their families, EC teachers, Grade 1 teachers.

Children: the EASE adaptation of the learning-stories approach (M. Carr 2001) provides a pedagogical documentation to establish a common base for discussion between institutions children and their parents. This competence-oriented record in narrative form will be used to assess children's progress related to knowledge building in language and early literacy.

Parents, EC and Grade 1 teachers: a questionnaire will be administered to parents, educators and primary school teachers. The aim is to clarify the perceptions of the target groups regarding successful transition practices. The questions are open-ended allowing the target groups to express their ideas freely. The questionnaire will be administered twice, at the beginning and at the end of the Project, in order to find out how perceptions may have changed.

Dissemination strategy

Dissemination has been embedded into the planning of the Project from the outset, both with a view to short term opportunities and to strategic longer term prospects for dissemination and exploitation. Thus in the first year of the project, a number of events and outlets have been utilised in order to raise awareness about the EASE project to relevant audiences, summarised as follows:

- Symposia
 - Dissemination congresses, please see: www.EASE-EU.com and partners valorisation sheets: <http://internal.ease-eu.com/>
 - Distribution of EASE bookmarks in DA, DE, EL, EN, HU, PL, SE and IS (more than 1000 copies)
 - 10 EASE roll-ups for congress use
 - Stakeholder meetings on national and trans-national levels
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3. Project Outcomes & Results

The end-products of the project have been planned to be:

- Promoting awareness of fostering a new and shared understanding of the child's learning and knowledge-process to create a strong and equal partnership between pre-school and primary schooling.
- A European Handbook of Educational Transition
This handbook will include not only useful information on transitional approaches in the partner countries, but will also contain materials, instructions and examples of successful implementation of a common-knowledge base for building partnerships of equals. The handbook is to appear in the national languages of the participating countries.
- additional qualification curricula on a national basis, for EC and Grade 1 teachers in initial education and in-service training, and interconnecting curricula putting into practice the described aims and objectives
- bibliographies in DA, DE, EL, HU, PL, SE and IS,

All the working plans, partner meetings, national congresses, course descriptions, the internal evaluation tool and the EASE adaptation of the learning-story approach have been designed and carried out to achieve the best results to be used in the end-products.

Numerous dissemination congresses carried out in all partner countries have contributed to raise awareness in order to achieve a new and shared understanding of the child's learning and knowledge-process in pre-primary education.

The web-site of the project and its internal area have been online late November early December 2008. Both have been permanently updated and expanded as the products and outcomes of the project have progressed.

The **Internal EASE area** <http://internal.ease-eu.com/> contains the following information:

- **Drafts** related to the EASE questionnaire, national education systems, National course descriptions
- The EASE bibliography
- Project related information concerning trans-national meetings, minutes,
- Reports on national project activities
- National course descriptions including bibliographies
- The EASE internal evaluation tool, that is the in-and out questionnaire, and its Analysis in English and German

The EASE homepage www.EASE-EU.com consists of four sections:

Project Description, Partner Organisations, Project News, and Documentation

The Project News section provides information (downloads) on:

- Symposia and Dissemination Congresses.

The documentation section presents documents (downloads) on:

- Overview of the national organisation of early education and early primary services
- Paper on "Coeducation of preschool and primary school teachers as a basic factor in ensuring continuity in the transition from preschool to primary school

- National bookmarks for self-printing
- EASE-Learning-Story, including context and literacy indicator in English and German

Impact on target groups

The Project's result will safeguard coherence and continuity in pedagogical approaches and promote effective transition and greater equity and efficiency in learning in the pre- and primary sector. The initial education and in-service training of pre- and primary school teachers will be upgraded by an additional qualification in Early Literacy to respond both to changes and expectations in our knowledge-based economy and society

The objectives taught in the Educational Transition course are to reinforce children's motivation to learn, an essential pre-requisite for quality learning throughout their lives and thus reduce the incidence of low achievers. In addition the EASE project aims at giving supplementary support to children with diverse learning rights, including those whose mother tongue is not the language of learning.

All the partners have taken advantage of all possible channels to disseminate the project via a variety of direct and indirect means and the project has been valorised in meetings, seminars, school/university journals, internet sources and newspapers. It is notable that - although the project is only half completed, it has already been widely disseminated reaching over 3000 people.

4. Partnerships

European EC background

In the early childhood field in particular, European countries can and should learn from and with each other. Of all continents, we have the longest, most theorised and most successful early childhood sector (OECD 2001, 2006), yet, not all European countries reach the targeted levels of access and quality seen, for example, in the Nordic countries. Many governments continue to separate childcare from early education, often handing the education and care of this critical age group to unregulated, low quality market provision. The attitude is still present that children under 3 years need only care and protection rather than developmental services. The findings of neurological research on the developmental capacity of infants and toddlers– and on the critical importance of this period in life (Shonkoff et al. 2001, 2008) – are ignored or percolate only very slowly into public and governmental consciousness.

In early education, the European heritage of is also threatened. Holistic development goals and a pedagogy of care, nurturing and broad education are being replaced with an approach that is “narrow and atomising, calculating and contractual, instrumental and technical” (Moss, 2009). Rather than respecting the child’s learning strategies, in particular play and self-directed meaning-making, teachers are being trained to instruct and to understand learning as transmission or transfer of knowledge.

European projects such as EASE bring a broad cross-section of countries together to dialogue and reflect on best practices in each country. This valuable forum has provided participants with an opportunity to discuss critically the transition from kindergarten to school and to co-construct new knowledge. Already, we have reflected together on: comparative curriculum features through out the participating countries; early literacy; how young children learn and assimilate language; teacher training to support children’s learning; learning-stories as a means of evaluation; and parental involvement. It is important to expand such partnerships across Europe.

EASE Partnership

All partners work in national teams, i.e. educational staff training institutions, in cooperation with pre-schools and primary schools

The teaching materials in early literacy for co-operative teaching, conceived by each partner, are implemented in the “feeders” (day-care centres), and “receivers” (primary schools), evaluated and finally integrated into the institution’s programme.

The partnership is managed and administered centrally by the EU-Agency, Local Government of Cologne. The normal working language of partnership communication is English. The most essential component of the efficient EASE partnership is a positive working relationship based on mutual trust and respect.

Throughout the project, within our workshops, conferences and dissemination activities, we, as the consortium, have experienced enriching cultural and intellectual interactions which will have sustainable influence on our professional lives.

.5 Plans for the Future

The key priority for the remainder of the project will naturally be the satisfactory completion of all core aims, objectives and associated work packages. However there will be a growing emphasis on exploring emerging possibilities for further dissemination, exploitation and sustainability that could not have been foreseen in the preliminary stages of project planning, thus year 2 will see an emphasis on flexible, innovative and opportunistic approaches alongside the established strategic priorities.

On the occasion of the last trans-national meeting in Thessaloniki (7th-8th May 09), provisions were made for the EASE hand-book on Educational Transition.

The project partners have agreed on sharing responsibility for the theoretical underpinnings of educational transition in the final handbook.

There will be seven chapters. Each trans-national partner will be in charge of at least one chapter:

- Austria: Introduction (socio-political background)
- Sweden: Early Literacy
- Sweden: Observing and supporting children's learning
- Denmark, Greece, Iceland: Transition
- Denmark, Germany: Learning-stories approach
- Hungary Poland: Involvement of parents
- Sweden: Evaluation through an in-and-out questionnaire

The next trans-national meeting in Vác (14th-15th January 2010), will provide the platform to present, evaluate, discuss, and finalize the best practice examples relating both to the training and implementation sectors, as well as the project's internal evaluation and the in-and-out questionnaire.

The project's last trans-national meeting in Gothenborg (14th-15th August 2010) will primarily serve dissemination strategies among others on the OMEP world congress.

The long-term impact will hopefully result in promoting an awareness on the part of stakeholders in the EC and Primary Education:

- to invest more in education
- to invest in the on-going training of educational staff working in the two sectors
- to expand curriculum aimed at a better understanding of child development respecting cultural and individual differences
- to enhance job prospects for pre- and primary school teachers
- to encourage a greater pedagogical continuity, including reducing class sizes in early grades, and encouraging more child-centred teaching methods
- to achieve comparable status and pay for professionals working in the two sectors

This might help to promote a change in the perception of what it means to be a teacher in Europe, and what set of personal and professional attributes, knowledge and values are required to be a teacher in today's Europe.

6 Contribution to EU policies

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child establishes a common framework of philosophy of education. The Convention's distinguishing feature is its new view of the child. The Convention's three key principles are: a) non-discrimination of children, b) children's right to development, and c) children's right to participation.

"*Empowerment*" as the basic right of the child, means strengthening the children's position so that they may experience their dignity and rights while learning and developing.

This is evident in the EASE front page's motto:

"The education of the child shall be directed to...the development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential."

United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989 www.EASE-EU.com

All the LLP objectives, Lisbon indicators, key competences, and LLP horizontal policies, as well as the Education and Training Work programme 2010 are fully met on all levels

The EASE project addresses the E&T 2010 programme by improving E&T for teachers and trainers within a sector where pedagogical coherence and continuity is not yet achieved. In many countries there is little systematic coordination between different elements of teacher education leading to a lack of coherence and continuity.

The EASE project targets the enhancement of European training systems by introducing a module for individualised learning. Teachers are to be enabled, not only to impart knowledge, but to act as tutors and leading learners to show children their individual pathway to knowledge, to empower them to become autonomous learners.

The project is intended to promote an effective transition and greater equity and efficiency in learning in the pre-and primary sector. The initial education and in-service training of pre- and primary school teachers will be upgraded by an additional qualification in Early Literacy to respond both to changes and expectations in our knowledge-based economy and society.

The objectives taught in the Educational Transition course are to reinforce children's motivation to learn, an essential pre-requisite for quality learning throughout their lives and thus reduce the incidence of low achievers. In addition the EASE project aims at giving supplementary support to children with diverse learning rights, including those of children whose mother tongue is not the language of learning. In this approach the intrinsic value of each person is recognized. Learning to be, learning to learn and learning to live together are considered critical elements in the journey of each child towards human and social development.