

# Children's Under the Age of 3 Transition from Home to Nursery: Exploring Greek Nursery Teachers' Perspectives

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## Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine the perspectives of nursery teachers who work in Attica (Greece) about the transition of the children under the age of 3 from home to the nursery. The research was conducted with the quantitative sampling method, using a questionnaire with closed questions; a total of 195 educators were asked to answer a questionnaire using a five-point scale concerning the characteristics of children and the nursery environment which may affect the process of transition. In addition, the study examines whether the demographic characteristics of educators influence their views about transition. In summary, the aim of the study is to fill the existing research gap in Greece regarding the transition of children under the age of 3. The findings of this study suggest that nursery teachers place more emphasis on developing the emotional and social skills of

children than skills related to language development and the ability to follow instructions. These findings are implications practitioners to further develop their nurseries transition programme.

**Keywords:** Transition, Nursery, Children under 3 years old, Nursery teachers, Greek ECEC

## 1. The Importance of Transition

Many studies (e.g., Jensen et al., 2013; Margetts & Kienig, 2013; Ahtola et al., 2011; Dockett & Perry, 2004) have examined children's transition to school environments and the consequences they face when that transition is not successful. In fact, the results show that an unsuccessful transition is related to various school failures experienced during their later life, and during new transitions (Rous & Hallam, 2006).

Therefore, an unsuccessful transition may affect children's self-confidence and contribute to a feeling of failure during numerous activities of their lives. In the long term, all these create children full of insecurities and adults who are not satisfied by their lives and themselves (Brooker, 2016).

According to Fabian & Dunlop (2002), the term transition refers to the process of change that occurs when children move from one environment to another and as a result, their role in the community changes. Similarly, Margetts (2002) defines the child's transition as the adaptation to new situations and environments, which are more demanding compared to previous experiences.

In particular, children's transition from the family environment to preschool and care structures is crucial for their development, as these are the first institutions of education and socialization after their family. Children's entrance to the nursery school represents the removal from the home environment, which is familiar to them, and the integration to a new structure which is initially unknown. Therefore, the need of adaptation to a new environment represents the first challenge in young children's lives (Brooker, 2016).

Children's reaction and behavior during that transition is not always the same. Some children may adapt easily to the new environment while others may face difficulties. The explanations given so far about children's different ways of adapting in these new environments include (a) children's personality, (b) the role of the family and (c) the characteristics of the nursery school (Nathanson et al., 2009).

Regarding children's personality, several studies (e.g., Nesheiwat & Brandwein, 2011; Silva et al., 2011; Dockett & Perry, 2004) emphasize the importance of a child's social and emotional skills in coping with this new situation. For example, characteristics such as autonomy, emotional expression, empathy and the ability to adapt to social expectations regarding their behavior, affect children's transition (Blair, 2002).

In the same context, Bodrova and Leong (2003) refer to the degree of self-regulation of young children. Self-regulation is defined as children's ability to control their emotions, to interact positively with others, and to avoid inappropriate or aggressive behaviors (Bronson, 2000). Therefore, the greater the degree of self-regulation during the transition, the more

autonomous and independent the child appears to be (Cooper, 2006).

Another factor that is directly related to self-regulation and is considered important for children's transition is the repressive control they can exercise over themselves. The term depressive control refers to the ability of children to self-limit and suppress the behaviors which are allowed in the family environment but are not acceptable in the nursery (Rotenberg et al, 2008; Strayhorn, 2002).

For example, a child can get up from his seat whenever he wants and run or play while at home, whereas in the nursery these behaviors are limited due to restrictive rules. Therefore, a child should be able to set limits on himself, follow the rules and not engage in unacceptable behaviors in the environment in which he interacts.

Furthermore, according to Bodrova and Leong (2003) children's transition can be affected by their ability to focus. In other words, it is important for the children to have the ability to concentrate on the instructions of the nursery teachers without being distracted. Likewise, Margetts (2002) reports that a child's transition is successful when he can follow instructions and concentrate on his tasks.

Additionally, the material and human environment of the nursery is equally important for children's smooth transition. Silva et al. (2011) believe that children who develop a close emotional relationship with their educators adapt more easily to the nursery and also perform better academically when they go to school.

In general, the environment of the nursery can facilitate young children's transition; the building infrastructure, the financial resources, the time schedule that has been set, the number of children who attend the nursery and the child-educator ratio, are contributing factors to the smooth transition (Germanos, 2015; Kakana, 2015).

In the same way the routine hours, which are an integral part of a nursery's daily schedule, contribute to children's transition. The routine hours mainly include moments of care and personal hygiene, such as meal times (breakfast and lunch), hand washing, visiting the toilet or diaper changing (depending on the age of the child), and bedtime. Routine hours are important because they help children feel like home and remind them of their daily home routine (Brooker, 2016).

The present study attempts to highlight the importance of children's transition from home to the nursery - focusing on children under 3 years of age. Its purpose is to examine the perspectives of Greek educators on which characteristics of children assist children to adjust smoothly to the nursery and how the nursery environment may affect the transition process.

Therefore, the research attempts to answer the following questions:

- Which characteristics of children under the age of 3 contribute the most to the smooth transition from home to nursery?
- To what extent does the environment of the nursery contribute to the smooth transition of children under the age of 3?

Additionally, the researchers assume that the views of nursery teachers are affected by their demographic characteristics such as gender, age, years of work experience and type of educational qualification (research hypothesis).

To address the research questions, the sampling quantitative research method using a closed questionnaire was chosen; the researchers begin with an already existing theory (deductive reasoning) and expect an answer, which is a verification through numerical data (Blaikie, 2004).

The aim of this study is to add to the Greek literature, which so far is limited, regarding children's transition from home to nursery; the research in Greece has focused mostly on children's transition from kindergarten to primary school (e.g., Sakellariou & Mpesi, 2014; Sidiropoulou et al., 2011). On the contrary, the available research on children's transition from home to the nursery is limited (Anagnostopoulou, 2017) and, to our knowledge, no research has conducted so far concerning children under the age of 3.

## **2. Method**

### *2.1 The Sample*

The sample in the present study consists of 195 nursery teachers from Attica, Greece. The method by which participants were selected was the simple random sampling. This is a probability sampling method, in which the probabilities of selecting units from the population are equal. In this case, the sample was randomly selected from lists of numbers corresponding to educators (Creswell, 2016).

Concerning the social and the demographic characteristics of the sample, the educators were asked to answer about (a) the gender, (b) the age, (c) the years of work experience and (d) the type of educational qualifications.

Therefore, the results show that (a) 90.8% of the sample is female and 9.2% is male, (b) 43.5% of the educators are 31- 40 years old, 23.2% are 41-50 years old, 13.3% are 51 years old and more than 20% are 20-30 years old, (c) 33.3% of the sample has 0-5 years of work experience, 26.7% has 11-20 years, 20% has 6-10 years, 13.3% has 21-30 years and 6.7% has 30 years or more, (d) 59% of the nursery teachers have a university degree, 34.9% have a vocational training degree and 6.1% have a postgraduate degree. None of the educators had a Ph.D degree.

### *2.2 Ethics*

The questionnaires had in the beginning one paragraph explaining to the participants the purposes of the study. In order to ensure the participants anonymity and the confidentiality of the data (Cohen & Manion, 2008) no other information was collected that could make participants identifiable, by their colleagues or other people from the field, such as their name or place of work.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1 Data Analysis

The educators who participated in the research were instructed to answer using a five-point Likert scale; 1: strongly disagree, 2: disagree, 3: neither agree, nor disagree, 4: agree, 5: strongly agree.

Table 1. The means of statements about the factors which affect the transition

<b>A. Characteristics of children under 3 years old</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std.</b>
A1. Ability to build friendly relationships with their classmates	195	4.07	.740
A2. Ability to collaborate with their classmates	195	4.07	.740
A3. Ability to resolve conflicts	195	3.57	.817
A4. Participation in group activities	195	4.13	.681
A5. Self-confidence	195	4.27	.583
A6. Self-esteem	195	3.51	.819
A7. Autonomy	195	4.05	.731
A8. Control of emotions	195	4.29	.569
A9. Expression and recognition of emotions	195	4.10	.636
A10. Empathy	195	4.00	.788
A11. Ability to self-limit	195	4.03	.765
A12. Ability to focus	195	3.40	.798
A13. Ability to follow the program and rules of the nursery	195	3.60	.814
A14. Level of language development	195	3.80	.805
A15. Positive reaction to changes in the environment - Flexibility	195	3.21	.842
<b>B. Nursery environment</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std.</b>
B1. Building and material infrastructure	195	3.77	.935
B2. Number of children in the classroom	195	3.97	.890
B3. Friendly relationships with the ancillary members of staff (e.g.,	195	3.40	.968
B4. Trusting the educators	195	4.43	.817

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B5. Organized environment	195	4.21	.568
B6. Environment that encourages children to explore	195	4.13	.711
B7. Environment that promotes autonomy	195	2.90	.855
B8. Daily routine at the nursery	195	4.27	.583
B9. Environment that complies with the safety rules	195	3.19	.758
B10. Aesthetics of the environment	195	3.58	.831

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### 3.2 Correlations

Addressing the correlation between the social and demographic characteristics of the sample (gender, age, years of work experience, type of education degree,) and the statements A1-A15 and B1-B10, a statistically significant relationship emerges between the following variables:

#### 3.2.1 Gender

The gender of the nursery teachers and the self-confidence of the children ( $F = 34.251$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $sig. = 0.021$ ). The results illustrate that 69.2% of the female educators agree (Likert 4) that these characteristics are important for a smooth transition. On the other hand, 82.8% of the male educators neither agree nor disagree (Likert 3) with this statement.

The gender and the ability of children to self-limit ( $F = 22.677$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $sig. = 0.007$ ). More specifically, it seems that 80.3% of the female educators agree (Likert 4) that the ability to self-limit affects the child's successful transition. By contrast, 88.6% of the male educators neither agree nor disagree (Likert 3) with this statement.

Furthermore, there is a statistically significant relationship between the gender and the building and material infrastructure ( $F = 32.398$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $sig. = 0.001$ ). The results illustrate that 76.8% of the female educators agree (Likert 4) with the importance of this factor in the transition. However, 66.1% of the male educators neither agree nor disagree (Likert 3) with this statement.

#### 3.2.2 Age

The age of the sample and the ability to build friendly relationships with their classmates ( $F = 19.817$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $sig. = 0.019$ ). The results illustrate that 81.2% of the educators who are 51 years and older agree (Likert 4) with this statement. Also, 42.3% of the group between the ages of 31 and 40 and 53.5% of the group between the ages of 41 and 50 neither agree nor disagree (Likert 3). Finally, 30.6% of the educators between the ages of 20 and 30 disagree with this statement (Liker 2).

Between the age of the sample and the number of students in the class ( $F = 22.224$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $sig. = 0.035$ ). The results illustrate that 71.6% of educators who are 51 years and older agree (Likert 4) with this statement. Also, 44.1% of the group between the ages of 31 and 40,

50.2% of the group between the ages of 41 and 50 and 36.7% of the group between the ages of 20 and 30 neither agree nor disagree with this statement (Likert 3).

### 3.2.3 Years of Work Experience

There is a statistically significant relationship between the years of work experience of the sample and the friendly relationships with the ancillary members of staff ( $F = 26.394$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $sig. = 0.049$ ). The results illustrate that 79.1% of the educators with 0-6 years of work experience and 78.2% of the educators with 6-10 years disagree (Likert 2) with this statement. Also, 37.5% of the group with 11-20 years of work experience, 45.2% of the group with 21-30 years and 41.8% of the group with 30 years and more agree with this statement (Likert 4).

### 3.2.4 Type of Educational Qualification

The type of educational qualification and the ability of the child to resolve conflicts ( $F = 26.035$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $sig. = 0.038$ ). The results illustrate that 88.6% of the educators with vocational training disagree (Likert 2) with this statement. Also, 55.7% of the educators with a university degree and 52.3% of educators with a postgraduate degree agree with this statement (Likert 4).

The type of educational qualification and the ability of the child to follow the program and the rules of the nursery ( $F = 25.641$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $sig. = 0.042$ ). The results illustrate that 80.9% of the educators with vocational training disagree (Likert 2) with this statement. Also, 41.9% of the educators with a university degree and 56.7% of the educators with a postgraduate degree agree with this statement (Likert 4).

The type of educational degree and the level of the child's language development ( $F = 34.908$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $sig. = 0.003$ ). The results illustrate that 65.8% of the educators with vocational training disagree (Likert 2) with this statement. Also, 46.4% of the educators with a university degree neither agree nor disagree (Likert 3) and 59.3% of the educators with a postgraduate degree agree with this statement (Likert 4).

Finally, there is a statistically significant relationship between the type of educational qualification and the aesthetics of the environment ( $F = 29.835$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $sig. = 0.017$ ). The results illustrate that 58.3% of the educators with vocational training disagree (Likert 2) with this statement. Also, 44.2% of the educators with a university degree neither agree nor disagree (Likert 3) and 47.7% of the educators with a postgraduate degree agree with this statement (Likert 4).

## 4. Discussion

The analysis of the data confirms that the characteristics of the children under the age of 3 and the environment of the nursery can affect children's transition. In addition, the researchers' initial hypothesis that the social and demographic characteristics of the educators influence their views about the importance of transition factors is confirmed.

More specifically, regarding children's characteristics, the educators consider more important



the following skills-abilities: the ability to control emotions, self-confidence, participation in group activities, expression and recognition of emotions, cooperation with classmates, autonomy, self-limit and empathy.

Therefore, nursery teachers place more emphasis on developing the emotional and social skills of children under the age of 3. These findings are consistent with the previous research, which identified that children who had developed social and emotional skills and were able to cooperate with their classmates were more likely to have smooth transition (e.g., Bronson, 2000; Brooker, 2016; Dockett & Perry, 2004; Fabian, 2002).

According to the participants' responses, the skills related to language development, the ability to follow instructions and maintain attention without being distracted, seem to be less important. This finding, contrasts previous research (e.g., Viskovic, 2018; O'Kane, 2007) on the transition of children from kindergarten to primary school - since we do not have similar research on children under the age of 3. In research for kindergarten children, these factors are just as important as the emotional and social skills, which does not seem to be the case for children under the age of 3.

Regarding the environment (physical and social) of the nursery, educators place a greater importance on building trusting relationships between the child and the educator, the nursery routine, the organized environment and the environment that encourages the child to explore. On the contrary, the building and material infrastructure and the environment that promotes autonomy and follows the safety rules seem to be less important.

These findings are consistent with previous research (e.g., Margetts & Kienig, 2013; Silva et al., 2011; Rotenberg et al., 2008) stating that children who developed a relationship of trust with educators made more successful transitions and showed greater willingness to participate in classroom activities. Likewise, it is important for the environment of the kindergarten to be enriched with the appropriate stimuli, to motivate the child to explore and gradually to become familiar with the new environment (Germanos, 2015; Kakana, 2015).

Concerning the correlation between the social and demographic data of educators and their views on the factors that contribute to the smooth transition of children under the age of 3, it seems that there are differences between males and females.

For example, the female educators believe that the self-confidence, self-delimitation of children, the building and material infrastructure are very important factors in facilitating children's transition. On the contrary, male educators show a neutrality regarding the importance of these factors and consider them neither significant, nor insignificant.

However, it is important to emphasize that we cannot generalize the differences between male and female educators, because men are significantly fewer than women in the sample. This is because, similarly to international contexts in the Greek one as well, male nursery teachers are much fewer than the female ones. However, these differences are still worth mentioning and probably exploring in a subsequent qualitative study -with a small number of participants- where the right male-female ratio could be ensured.



Also, the research findings show differences between the age of the sample and the importance of the transition factors. Educators aged 51 and above consider that building friendly relationships between children, as well as the number of children in the classroom, are important factors. The other age groups declare neutrality for the above, except in the case of educators between the ages of 20 and 30, where the majority disagree about the importance of friendly relations. This finding may be justified from the early age of the educators and consequently the little working experience, since research evidence indicate that the development of friendships seems to help children's transition (Dockett & Perry, 2004; Fabian, 2002).

Another interesting finding is the correlation between the years of work experience and the statement whether the friendly relations with the ancillary members of staff may help children's smooth transition. As can be seen from the results of the study, nursery teachers with the fewest years of work experience (0-6 years) disagree with this statement, while all other groups agree. This finding may be justified because the longer one works in a professional environment, the more likely one is to feel that all employees are working as a team with a common goal, and therefore the involvement of the ancillary members of staff is also important.

Finally, the following differences are identified between the type of qualifications of the sample and their views. Firstly, the educators with vocational training consider that children's ability to resolve conflicts and to follow the program and rules of the nursery are not important factors for their transition. In contrast, educators with university degrees and educators with postgraduate degrees believe that these abilities may be important for the transition.

Secondly, educators with vocational training do not believe the level of language development of the child and the aesthetics of the nursery are important factors for children's transition. For the above statements, nursery teachers with a university degree declare neutrality, while educators with a postgraduate degree declare that they agree with their importance.

In other words, educators with a higher level of education seem to place more emphasis on the child's social skills than educators with a lower level of education.

In summary, the present study attempted to address the existing research gap in Greek research regarding the transition of children under the age of 3 from home to nursery. Some of the limitations of this study were the small number of male educators, the convenient sampling and also the fact that only the views of educators working in Attica were investigated. Nevertheless, useful conclusions emerged that may help nursery teachers to further develop their nurseries transition programme. However, this study's findings also add to the limited research regarding the transitions of this age group of children and the conclusions drawn could be a starting point for further research. Future researchers could for example, by using other research methods, explore transitions from children's perspectives in order to get a better understanding about children's under the age of 3 transition from home to nursery.

After all, we should not forget that the transition of a child from home to the nursery is his first attempt to interact with the social environment. Therefore, that transition is important to be successful, so that the child can feel autonomous, independent and have confidence in himself and his abilities.

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