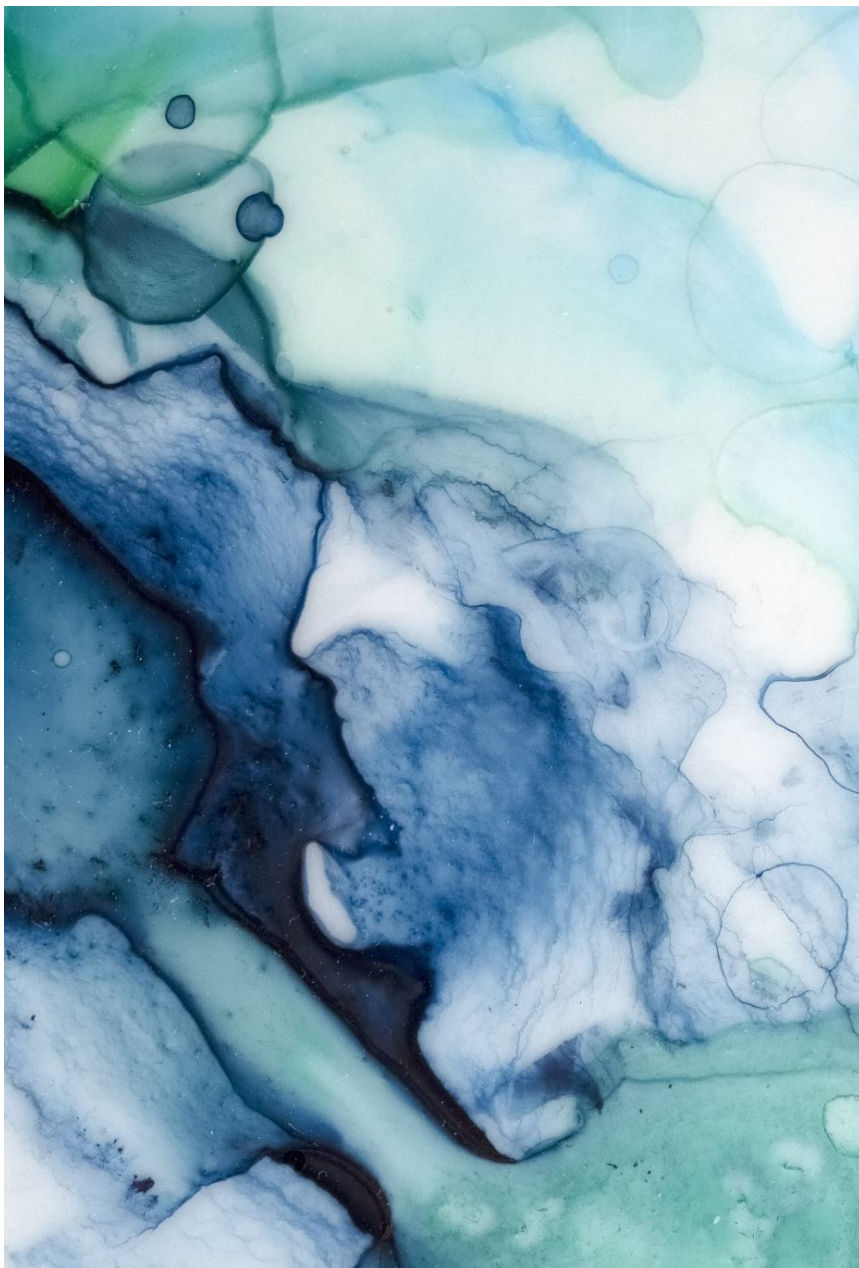Early childhood education during a global pandemic: Perspectives from Quebec, Switzerland, and Portugal
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Parent and preschool teachers' perceptions of the transition to school during the Covid-19 pandemic in Québec

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PLAN

INTRODUCTION

- The first transitions to school mark, for most children and their families, the beginning of a **relational history** established between them and school (Regional working group on school transition, 2018)

- The transition does not correspond to the triggering event, but to this **process of passing** from one state to another.

THE TRANSITION TO SCHOOL IN QUEBEC

In Quebec, the Ministry of Family regulates and oversees early childhood education and care (ECEC) programs for children ages 0-5.

In Quebec, preschool education refers to *kindergarten*.

Kindergarten attendance is not compulsory

The Ministry of Education is responsible for preschool and primary school programs.

Preschool education forms a cycle that extends over two years.

however, the majority of Quebec families send their children to five-year-old kindergarten (Statistics Canada, 2018)

The children who attend are between 4 and 6 years old.

TRANSITION PRACTICES

- Research has shown the importance of **implementing strategies that allow children and their families** to experience harmonious transitions (Ballam et al., 2017; Dockett & Perry, 2015)

- Transition practices are defined as **activities planned and organized by different actors**, one of their objectives is to develop relationships of mutual trust with families (Athola et al., 2016).

  - *For example : visits to the class the child is going to attend, information, participation of the children and their parents in activities organized by the school (e.g. a picnic) , meetings or sharing of information between the daycare center and the school, etc.*

COLLABORATIVE PRACTICES

- From the Finnish perspective, « transition practices » is defined as **collaboration in times of transition.**

- Collaboration between parents and teachers is associated with **better communication and greater trust** (Dockett & Perry, 2001; Kraft-Sayre & Pianta, 2000).

- Encouraging parent engagement during the transition to school can help parents **reduce their stress** (Malsch, Green, & Kothari, 2011).

TRANSITION DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS

- The Covid-19 pandemic can be described as **a period of "crisis »**
  - *In a sociological sense, crisis is an "[…] anomic situation of disturbances ultimately affecting the social system as a whole" (Ferry, 2014, p.52)*

- During the Covid-19 pandemic, many infection control measures **limited contacts and social interactions between actors** (Heikkilä et al. 2020)

- The stress induced by the pandemic and the fear of contamination in schools **reduced attendance, availability and the ability to collaborate** (INSPQ, 2020)

COVID-19 EFFECTS – BEFORE THE ENTRY TO SCHOOL

Spring 2020

- **Closure of ECEC and schools : C**hildren stayed home with their parents
    - The closure of schools forced teachers to review their teaching practices (Duval et al., 2020)

- **Transition practices** usually experienced in the Spring **were canceled** or **redesigned**

- Efforts were made to **adapt current practices to meet health standards** (Ruel et al., 2020).

COVID-19 EFFECTS - DURING THE ENTRY TO SCHOOL

Fall 2020

- Distancing instruction have been announced by the government
  - Bubble-classes was created

- Teachers must wear individual protection equipment
  - Mask and visors

- Some institutions favor virtual school
  - Teachers had to teach remotely, even to preschoolers.

SEVERAL ADJUSTMENTS

The new measures may have been **destabilizing** for some children and their families.

- For example, in some Quebec schools, children did not know their regular teacher at the start of the school year (Bilodeau, 2020)

Concerns were also perceived among teachers

- In Scotland, a survey of 30,000 teachers showed that 66% of participants were anxious about going back to school in times of crisis
- They did not believe that mitigating factors to the crisis were put in place in their school (Hepburn, 2020)

RESEARCH AIMS

Documenting parents and preschool teachers' perceptions of the transition to school during the Covid-19 pandemic in Québec

PARADIGM, METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

- Data were collected in Autumn, 2020.

- Participants had access to the questionnaire online.

- The questionnaire was divided into 5 sections:
  1. Participant characteristics (e.g. socio-demographic data)
  2. The transition practices put in place
  3. **The relationships between the actors**
  4. Perceived facilitators
  5. Perceived challenges

PARTICIPANTS

- **110 teachers** : 2 men and 108 women
  - 21 in 4-year-old kindergarten
  - 89 in 5-year-old kindergarten
  - Teachers had, on average, 13 years of teaching experience

- **295 parents** : 279 mothers, 13 fathers, 3 « others »
  - Average age = 35.51 years

TRANSITION ACTIVITIES AND SCHOOL ENTRY IN THE COVID CONTEXT

- Some teachers maintained the activities they did before (pre-Covid) by **adjusting** them (e.g. visiting the class on *Zoom*), while others simply canceled their transition activities
  - if transition activities were maintained, the fear of contagion may have limited the participation of the actors concerned (INSPQ, 2020)

- **Disparities were observed** in the way children were received in class
  - For example, in some classes, children started kindergarten entirely online, while other teachers welcomed children face-to-face, dividing them into small groups.

TRANSITION ACTIVITIES IMPLEMENTED ACCORDING TO THE TEACHERS AND PARENTS

Transition activities	Teachers	Parents
Receive a welcome letter from the school before the start of the school year	93,4%	95,5%
Upon registration of the child, delivery of documentation to help the parent prepare the child for school entry	81,6%	76,9%
Invitation to a meeting (in person or virtual) before the start of the school year	71,1%	78,5%
Familiarization period where the parent could be present with the child during certain times in the classroom	48,7%	51,2%
Invitation to visit the school/class before the start of the school year	46,1%	43,8%
Strategies to make the child feel welcome (e.g. personalization of cubby)	32,9%	76,6%
Meeting between the child and the teacher (in person or virtual) before the start of the school year	28,9%	44,2%
Discussion time with the teacher (in person or virtual) in order to explain the habits and needs of the child	**23,7%**	**33,5%**

TEACHER-PARENT RELATIONSHIP

- According to teachers, only a quarter of them (23.4%) organized discussion times with parents (in person or virtual)

- According to parents, 35,5% of participants mentioned being invited to meetings with teachers

- These data show a **challenge related to relationships and communication between parents and teachers**, especially the implementation of transition practices personalized to their needs and realities.

TEACHER-PARENT RELATIONSHIP

PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS

- The majority of parents mentioned that communication was a challenge, particularly due to :
  - **the lack of information provided to parents**
  - **conflicting communications provided by the school and the government**
  - **the lack of feedback given by the teacher due to limited opportunities for face-to-face meetings.**

- ✓ *"It is difficult for parents not to have as much follow-up as at daycare"*
- ✓ *"it is difficult not to have access to the class, not to be able to accompany the child and meet the teacher."*

TEACHER-PARENT RELATIONSHIP

TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS

- More than half of teachers believe that **their relationship with parents changed** due to the pandemic situation

- According to them, it was more difficult to reach parents in the context of the pandemic, in particular because of social and physical distancing.
  - ✓ *"It was impossible to enter the school at the start of the school year, so there was an impact on the relationship of trust"*
  - ✓ *"Difficult not to meet the parents, feeling of loneliness"*
  - ✓ *"Difficult to create a bond, longer and difficult to communicate"*

- A third of teachers believe that **communication between them and parents was a major challenge** during the transition to school

DISCUSSION - TEACHER-PARENT RELATIONSHIPS

- Due to the pandemic situation, a "normal" parent-teacher relationship was not created
  - *Contact reduction directives restricted access to schools and reduced opportunities to develop a relationship of trust with different actors and parents (INSPQ, 2020)*

- Søe, Schad & Psouni (2023) argue that distance between parents and teachers creates distance between teachers and children
  - *If the distancing complicated the parent-teacher relationship, it could also have had a negative impact on the child-staff relationship.*

DISCUSSION – PERCEPTIONS ABOUT DOCUMENTATION AND INFORMATION

- Most of the participants (teacher and parents) say they sent/received **information before the child entered school**

    - Welcome letter from the school before the start of the school year (+/= 93% of participants)

    - Submission of documents when registering the child in kindergarten (+/= 76% of participants)

DISCUSSION – DOCUMENTATION AND INFORMATION

- During the Covid-19 crisis, **documentation focused primarily on protective measures to limit the risk of transmission of COVID-19**, and less on sharing information to support the transition (INSPQ, 2020)
  - *and less on the actions necessary to establish a harmonious climate that facilitates the transition to school*

CHALLENGES IN TEACHER-PARENT RELATIONSHIPS

BEFORE THE COVID PANDEMIC

Conus (2017) argued that transition practices **tend to be normalizing**; they are rarely individualized or adjusted to the needs of children and their families;

Yet, studies have shown the importance of implementing and scaling up **individualized transition practices** (Petrakos & Lehrer, 2011; Wildenger & McIntyre, 2011)

One-way information approaches (e.g. information sent to parents) do not necessarily promote relationships between the different actors.

CHALLENGES BEFORE THE COVID PANDEMIC

- Despite the numerous communication practices shown by Petrakos and Lehrer (2011), most **parents reported disappointment with the lack of information** about what their child was doing in school and about their progress;

- In her thesis, Lehrer (2018) found that establishing **two-way and power-sharing relationships** between staff and parents at school were challenges;

- Other research suggests that **parents do not feel that their opinions or ideas are welcomed or heard** by teachers (Barbaris, 2008; Dockett et al., 2011; Doucet, 2008; Van Laere et al, 2018).

HOW PROMOTE TWO-WAY COLLABORATION PRACTICES ?

- Perceive parents as **experts and partners**;

- Promote practices that invite parents to **ask questions** and **share both concerns and ideas**;

- Promote practices that invite parents to **share information about their children**;

- Promote opportunities for parents and family members to **participate in school life**;

- **(Re)Consider the goals of report cards** and other evaluation practices.

CONCLUSION

- The Covid-19 pandemic appears to have **exacerbated some of the challenges** that were always present with regards to relationships with families during the transition to school;

- More research is needed **on creative solutions put in place during this time**, and sustainable practices that challenge the professional-parent hierarchy during educational transitions.

THANK YOU !

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SCAN ME

Qualité des
contextes éducatifs
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