



Research Article

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I Really Want to Learn New Things! Children's Perspectives on Educational Transition

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to analyze how the process of educational transition is perceived by a group of children attending Preschool and Primary School, considering their expectations, fears, and experiences. Methodologically, this exploratory research was based on the collection of information through a conversational interview to 16 children in kindergarten and a questionnaire survey, with open and closed questions, to 35 children in basic education who attend a Portuguese School, in the Azores Archipelago. The data collected were analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively. The results obtained corroborate what is referenced in the specialty bibliography, showing that children, in general, manifest positive and encouraging feelings towards the transition process between preschool and primary education, even though, simultaneously, they may feel some fear or discomfort towards the unknown. These results should be considered in the light of the pedagogical intervention that Preschool educators and Primary School teachers should develop to build a coherent and continuous process.

Keywords: educational transition, preschool education, primary education, children's perspectives

1. Introduction

Throughout life, the human being goes through successive moments of transition between contexts, situations, stages, which, in some cases more than others, can be lived with some tranquility or, on the contrary, with apprehension and fear of the new and unknown. These moments, which are also part of their school life, when successful are an added value for the child's personal, social, and educational development and will guarantee continuity in his/her growth and learning. These educational transition processes, being shared and lived by several actors - parents, kindergarten educators, primary teachers, and children-, are particularly relevant for children, who are confronted, along their path, with successive changes of school, classroom, teacher, friends, situations that are

not always properly monitored and worked (Sousa & Santos, 2021), and that may trigger fears and anxiety.

Therefore, this paper aims to uncover the perspective of a group of pre-school and primary school children about educational transition, in an attempt to understand to what point it represents a positive or negative moment in the lives of these children. Because we intend to access the children's way of thinking, methodologically the study was built on the basis of a conversational interview for younger children and a questionnaire survey for older children (Quivy & Campenhoudt, 1998), which allowed us to understand how the former perspectives their transition to the upcoming primary education and how the latter look at that transition sometime after having experienced it.

Thus, after a theoretical contextualization of the study, focusing on the most recent investigations that have been developed in this field, the paper presents the methodological issues that guided the research, as well as the presentation and analysis of the results obtained.

The main aim of this study is to give voice to the children, analyzing the way they look at and experience these processes of educational transition, data that will allow pre-school educators, primary teachers, and families to think of better strategies of pedagogical intervention that will guarantee a continuity between the two levels, which is intended to be articulated, coherent and smooth.

2. Theoretical Background of the Study

From birth, the child is confronted with several situations that imply transitions. Within this range of transitions, the first one takes place very early on, when the child starts nursery. Subsequently, there are many transitions that will take place in the child's school and personal life, starting with the transition to early childhood education, to basic education, to university, to professional life, among others. As Inês Sim-Sim (2010, p.111) states, these transition periods are usually emotionally charged and associated with "...periods of expectation, stress, and fears [which] always imply the loss and separation from something known and, simultaneously, the integration into a new and unknown context, involving the fear of what is strange, the abandonment of established routines".

Because these transition processes in children's lives, particularly in the educational context, may have consequences for the success of their school and educational path (Ahtolaa, Silinskas, Poikonenc, Kontoniemi, Niemi & Nurmi, 2011; Mirkhil, 2010), this has been a topic that has received growing interest from researchers in recent decades (Needham & Ülküer, 2020), in order to better understand how obstacles and fears are overcome and how teachers and families become involved and participate in a positive way, leading to smoother transitions, as Yeboah (2002) states. Knowing that these are important moments in the personal, social, and school life of children, we cannot ignore that they are also important for parents and teachers who accompany them, as pointed out by studies such as Petriwskyj, Thorpe and Taylor (2005, in Vasconcelos, 2015), which refers to their relevance even for the adult's life.

Although these horizontal and vertical transitions may occur at different moments and in different contexts in the lives of children and in their school career, they are particularly important at the moment of transition between early childhood education and primary education, as these are two contexts with very different characteristics and requirements. This change of educational context, as Sim-Sim (2010) points out, on the one hand, leads the child to leave kindergarten, a space that he or she knows well, where he or she acts with ease and security and which is, by excellence, dedicated to play; it also leads the child to change his or her routines and leave behind the reference figure of the preschool teacher. At the same time, entry into primary education implies the adoption of new behaviors and attitudes, which may lead to a greater degree of personal, social, and school demands on their part. This entry into primary education, seen by many of those involved as synonymous with new and increased responsibilities, involves responding to a set of demands, as a result of a curriculum that is imposed, and an adaptation to a new social reality.

All these situations, which translate into change of spaces, times and people are, in many cases,

reasons for great concern, anxieties, fears and expectations for all those involved in the educational action. Children, educators, teachers, and families are simultaneously interested protagonists and attentive observers of a complex process that, in some cases, does not receive the best responses in terms of pedagogical intervention (Sousa & Santos, 2021).

Specifically, with regard to children, they are the "main protagonists of the action", who see the process as a passage to the "world of the grown-ups, in which they will learn "new things" (Vale, 2019), knowing, as Chan (2012) points out, that their expectations are influenced by adults, parents and educators/teachers, referring us, once again, to the need to look at the process as a whole.

In general, children show a positive and encouraging feeling towards the educational transition, however, at the same time, the unknown brings with it some discomfort, stress, fear, and anxiety (Tomásio, 2019; Eskelä-Haapanen, Lerkkanen, Rasku-Puttonen & Poikkeus, 2017). For many children, moving from early childhood education to primary education means being more grown-up and learning to do adult "things" (Formosinho, Machado & Passos, 2016), in a more optimistic perspective and, even when "... the majority of children were positive about these aspects of school and did not change their feelings, ... a minority were persistently negative" (Harrison & Murray, 2015, p.79).

Reveals the study by Eskelä-Haapanen, Lerkkanen, Rasku-Puttonen & Poikkeus (2017, p.1446) that, in general, positive feelings towards transition are "centred on maintaining and making friendships, and that children possessed both negative and positive expectations about their relationship with their future teacher", and also that "Children anticipated new learning experiences and were eager to meet more challenging tasks". In particular, keeping the child in the same friendship group seems to be a relevant factor for a smooth transition (Eskelä-Haapanen et al., 2017).

On the other hand, Wong's (2015) study points to stress factors that are indicated by children during the transition to school. The results show that children generally make accurate predictions about less positive things that they consider might happen during the transition, such as inability to meet teachers' expectations regarding learning, to act in accordance with the rules or to resolve conflicts.

In any case, Einarsdóttir (2011) points out that children have the experience, knowledge, and capacity to reflect on both their play experience and transition to primary education and their voices should be heard throughout this process. In this sense, the pedagogical proposal must involve discussing their fears and expectations, building a positive perspective towards transition, strengthening learning, and promoting better and stronger relationships among peers, between children and educators, and between children and the school environment (Babić, 2017; Castro, Ezquerra & Argos, 2012; Einarsdóttir, 2011; Eskelä-Haapanen et al., 2017).

In short, it is up to educators, teachers, and respective institutions to articulate curricula and action strategies in order to avoid the "shock" of change on the child. In addition, the articulation of the role of parents and educators, valuing the child and their perceptions about the process, can reduce the impact that the transition causes in children's lives, thus giving them the greatest possible comfort and security to accept this new stage, so important in their school and personal life (Nogueira, 2016), because as Beers (2018, p.1) points out "positive experiences with transitions can help children adjust to new contexts and build resilience for future transitions", over and above what "Children's positive start to primary school has been linked to better outcomes for them as students, including improved academic achievement and social competence" (Jónsdóttir, Valgarðsdóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2016, p. 156).

In this sense, the present study seeks to understand what are the positive and negative aspects identified by children who are going to move from preschool to primary education and, at the same time, listen to the voice of children who have already done so, in an attempt to understand whether these expectations were well founded or not.

3. Methodological Options

3.1 Data collection instruments

With regard to the children in Preschool education, in order to understand their way of thinking about the transition from one educational cycle to the next, we used the conversational interview as the methodological strategy that best suited the age group in question. This interview consisted of an informal conversation with the children about this issue, essentially seeking to understand their expectations, perceptions, fears and anxieties regarding this very important process in their school career. For data collection, audio recordings were used to record all the information provided by the children which was later transcribed and analyzed using content analysis as a strategy that allowed for an inductive analysis, i.e., with categories that emerged from the data obtained (Bardin, 1979).

In order to collect information from the primary school students, 35 questionnaire surveys were carried out, considering that their writing skills were already sufficiently developed. The aim of this questionnaire was to analyze the children's perceptions about their experiences in the 1st year of schooling and about the transition process they had previously experienced.

The questionnaire was composed of 5 closed questions, quantitatively analyzed, and 5 open questions whose information was analyzed using the content analysis technique, which collected information regarding the way children remembered the transition process (positive aspects, fears, and expectations).

As mentioned by Quivy and Campenhout (1998), the questionnaire is an instrument that allows asking respondents a set of questions about specific aspects of their lives, "(...) seeking opinions, expectations, knowledge or awareness of an event or problem, or about any other point that interests researchers" (p. 188).

A qualitative approach was used to analyse the open-ended questions, using the content analysis technique (Bardin, 1979). For the closed-ended questions, the data collected were analysed in a quantitative way, through descriptive statistics.

In order to collect the information in both contexts, the ethical issues inherent to it were respected, therefore a request for authorization was made to the parents so that the children could participate.

3.2 Characterization of Participants

A total of 51 children participated in this study, 16 attended pre-school education and 35 attended the primary education.

Regarding the children in Pre-school Education, 50% of the participants (8 children) were 5 years old, 31% (5 children) were 4 years old and the remaining 19% (3 children) were 6 years old. Of the total number of children, 69% (11 children) were female and 31% (5 children) were male.

Of the primary school children, their ages ranged from 8 to 10 years old, distributed as follows: 60% of the respondents (21 students) were 8 years old, 26% (9 students) were 9 years old and the remaining 14% (5 students) were 10 years old. Of the 35 respondents, 57% were male (20 students) and 43% were female (15 students).

4. Results - Children's Perspectives on Educational Transitions

4.1 The perspective of children in preschool education

Regarding the informal conversation we had with the kindergarten children, three questions were asked which sought, above all, to understand the perspective they had in relation to the transition from Pre-school Education to Primary School.

Having analyzed the answers given by the children, we identified two subcategories of analysis.

The first one refers to the knowledge that they reveal having about the primary education and about what is done and learned there. In this subcategory, we organized the information inductively and obtained four dimensions of analysis: (1) the fact that they will have a new teacher; (2) meeting older colleagues; (3) the way the learning process will take place; and (4) the differences they find between Pre-school and Primary School. The second subcategory is related to the children's feelings regarding the transition and the reasons justifying these feelings.

With regard to knowledge about the primary education, the children in pre-school education mentioned, firstly, the fact that they will have a new teacher as one of the aspects that will mark the transition - "we are going to have a new teacher". They also pointed out the fact of moving to a class with older children - "I know that I'm going to a class with older children", and of leaving behind their younger colleagues - "I'm going to leave ... some friends who are younger than me".

One of the dimensions that gained more indicators is the one related to the learning processes that will take place in the primary education. For most of the children, the transition to the primary education implies the learning of new contents, as is registered in their words:

- "In 1st year we will learn to read and write".
- "We will work with numbers".
- "I'm going to learn to read, write and do math".

In addition to what they will learn, children think about the kind of work they will do in Primary School, which, as a rule, is related to learning and is of a different nature - "I'm going to write a lot"; "We're going to sit for longer"; "We're going to have homework". This type of work is also associated with greater intensity, because, according to the children "we're going to work a lot", and the way work is done - "they (primary school students) already work alone".

This transition also reflects significant differences between one context and another, most of which are associated with play.

Thus, for some children, moving from preschool to primary school means playing less: "We will only play in the playground", "We will no longer play in the house and garage", "We will no longer play in the classroom" or "We will only play during class breaks". For others, it means no longer doing certain activities that they enjoy: "We won't be able to listen to stories anymore," or "We won't be able to sing the good morning songs anymore. For others still, there are several aspects that will be different, even if they don't know how to specify them: "We're going to do things that we don't do here" or "I know we're going to stop doing a lot of things.

All these aspects, as well as the process itself, lead to different feelings for the children.

For most children, the transition is seen as positive, for two reasons.

The first, because it implies new learning:

- "I really want to go to 1st grade; I really want to learn new things".
- "I want to go to 1st grade, because I am very curious to learn how to read".
- "I want to go to the 1st grade; I want to learn to write and do math".

The second, because it carries underlying the idea of being more grown up:

- "I'm very happy to be going around the grown-ups."
- "I'd rather go to 1st grade, because I'm already grown up!".
- "I want to go, because I want to be big!"
- "I want to go to the grown-up room, to do jobs like they do".

However, the transition represents, for some children, a negative feeling, because they are leaving "their" preschool teacher - "I'm not very happy, because I wanted to continue with my preschool teacher" or "I don't want to go, because I don't want to leave my preschool teacher!", or because the intensity and demands of the work means new challenges, perhaps of greater responsibility - "I don't want to go, because I'll have homework!

Finally, one child expressed dual feelings about the transition, saying: "I feel good and bad, because I want to stay with my preschool teacher, but I also want to learn things from big people".

4.2 The perspective of primary school children

The questionnaire started by asking the students whether they remembered entering the 1st year of primary school.

A large majority (71% - 25 students) answered yes, that they still remembered entering the 1st year, while 29% (10 students) did not remember this transition, which may lead us to infer that the transition to the 1st year of schooling was somehow remarkable for most students.

We then wanted to find out what the 25 students who answered affirmatively to the previous question remembered. Most of the answers reveal memories related to people, as can be seen in Graph 1. Most of them remember the new friends they made with the transition (15 occurrences). They also remember their new teacher (11 occurrences), meeting their old friends (4 occurrences), and there are also those who remember not knowing anyone (2 occurrences):

- "I remember meeting the new teacher".
- "I met my new classmates".
- "I remember seeing familiar friends from the preschool again".
- "I remember I didn't know anyone".

Memories related to spaces were also recorded, in particular, the new school (6 occurrences) and the new classroom (5 occurrences), as is evident in the following excerpts:

- "I met the school" or "I saw the whole school".
- "and I saw the new classroom".

With regard to activities, the children mainly remembered playing (6 occurrences):

- "I remember playing".
- "I remember I played in the playground".

And because these transitions are also made of fears, as described above, for two of the children this process brings about more negative memories:

- "I remember crying on the first day of school".
- "I remember I cried a lot".

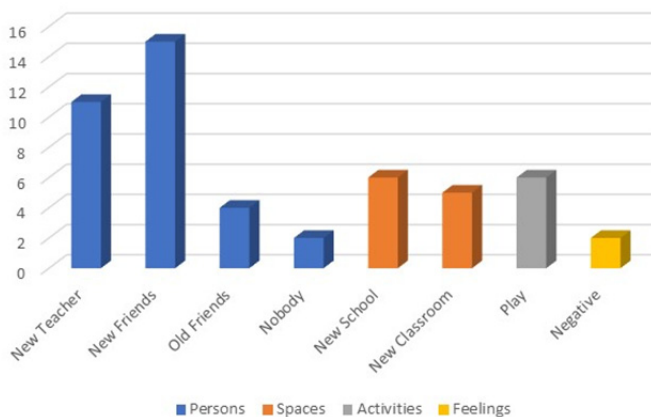


Figure 1 : Memories on entering the 1st year of Primary School

When asked whether they already knew the school before the transition to the primary education, more than half of the students, i.e., 57% (20 students), reported not knowing it beforehand. These results allow us to infer that most of the students made the transition between these two educational cycles by changing school. As regards the 43% (15 students) who said they already knew the

educational context of the primary education beforehand, this was due to the fact that they had attended Pre-school Education in the same school.

The students who mentioned that they did not know the school were asked to identify the person who introduced them to the new school. Of the twenty students who responded, 10 (50%) mentioned that it was their new teacher who introduced them to the school. However, a considerable percentage of students (35% - 7 students) answered that it was their parents and/or relatives who showed them the new school. These data are not at all surprising, as the help of families has been increasingly requested by educational professionals in the transition process of their students.

Next, we tried to understand what memories they had about the activities they performed in Pre-School Education. Taking into account the answers shown in Graph 2, we can point out that, in general, the students have many memories regarding a diverse set of activities and tasks they performed in Pre-School Education.

From their answers, four main dimensions of analysis emerge: (1) the people they remembered; (2) the activities they performed; (3) the spaces where they performed the activities; and (4) the learning that were most representative.

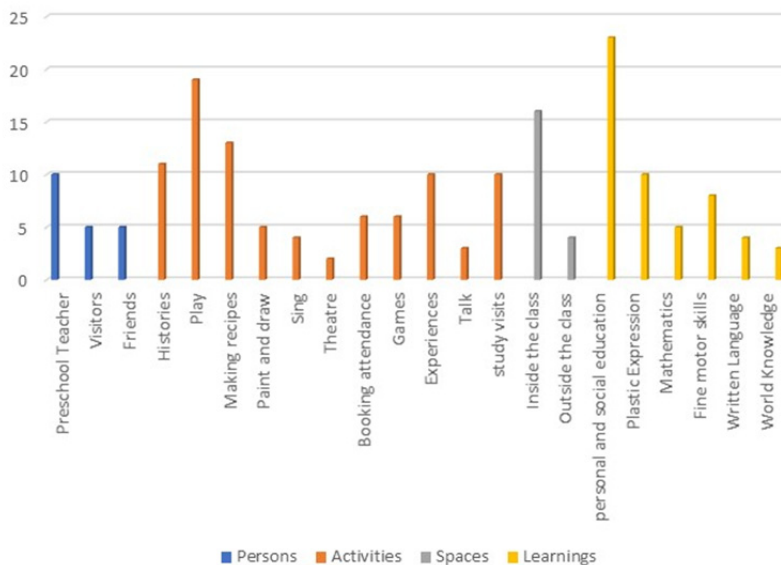


Figure 2: Memories about the preschool

In relation to the people they remembered, the preschool teacher was the most mentioned, having had 10 occurrences, followed, with the same number of occurrences each (5), by friends and visits received in the classroom:

- "The educator told stories..."
- I remember playing with friends in the classroom".
- I remember people coming into our room to talk about things".

In addition to people, this group of students also remembered the activities they performed in pre-school education, in particular playing, with 19 occurrences - "I remember playing in the room" or "I played with friends in the room and in the playground".

They also remembered the following activities:

- Making recipes (13 occurrences).

- Listening to stories told by the teacher (11 occurrences).
- Doing experiments (10 occurrences).
- Making study visits (10 occurrences).
- Marking attendance (6 occurrences).
- Playing several games (6 occurrences).
- Painting and drawing (5 occurrences).
- Singing (4 occurrences).
- Talking (3 occurrences).
- Doing drama/theatre (2 occurrences).

They also remembered the spaces where they played and worked, highlighting, specifically, the classroom and classroom areas (16 occurrences) and the playground (4 occurrences):

- "I played in the little house and the garage".
- "I remember playing in the classroom spaces".
- "I played with my friends in the classroom and in the playground".

When asked about the fact that in Primary School they can no longer do the same things, the students were very clear in their answers. In this sense, 56% (19 students), stated that in the Primary School context they can no longer do the same activities as in preschool, because they are already grown up and have new responsibilities. In addition, 10 students (26%) pointed out that the 1st year is more demanding than preschool, as there is another type of work and other rules of being in the classroom.

Finally, 18% of the students (6) stated that, since they are in another more advanced educational context, they must learn new "things", which they did not do in Preschool Education, namely: learning to read, write, perform numerical operations, among other tasks that will be fundamental for a consistent and smooth transition from primary to the 2nd Cycle of Basic Education.

Their memories also include a set of learning experiences that they refer to as having been carried out in early childhood education. Among the set of learning experiences, those related to Personal and Social Education stand out, with 23 occurrences, and which relate to the construction of their autonomy and responsibility, with the ability to share and work alone and with respect for others, as we can see in their speeches:

- "I learned to respect my colleagues and to share toys".
- "Doing the works by myself...".
- "I learned to be responsible with my works...".

Besides the development of their Personal and Social Education, the students remember having learnt something:

- In the field of plastic expression (10 occurrences) - "I learned to draw".
- In fine motor skills (8 occurrences) - "I learned to hold a pencil well".
- In mathematics (5 occurrences) - "I learned the numbers up to 10...".
- In the written language domain (4 occurrences) - "I learned ... to make the name".
- In the area of world knowledge (3 occurrences) - "I learned things about the planets".

Equally remarkable were the learnings that took place in the 1st year of primary education, particularly those inherent to the area of Portuguese language. Learning handwritten letters was the option most selected by the respondents, with a percentage of 23% (24 students), followed by learning to read, with 21% of the answers (22 students), and writing, with 18% of the students (19 answers) indicating having learnt to write. Also, for 17 students, or 16%, the option that best expresses the learning achieved during the 1st year is mainly to sit longer at their desk. Finally, it should be noted that the learning related to the area of Mathematics was the least considered by the students, with 13 of them (12%) stating that they had learnt numbers and 10 (10%) having learnt how to carry out mathematical operations.

Finally, the students were asked to rank from 1 to 7 a set of situations that they considered to be the main changes occurring between pre-school and primary school. The answers should be marked according to their level of importance, 1 being the most important and 7 the least important.

In this context, looking at the extreme ranges of the scale shown in table 1 (1 and 2 as most important and 6 and 7 as least important), we find that the lack of help in the cafeteria for lunch, the arrangement of desks in the classroom (individual worktables) and moving to another school were considered as the least important changes.

Table 1: Main changes between pre-school and primary school from the perspective of primary school students

<i>Main changes</i>	<i>Importance</i>				<i>Importance</i>			
	+ important				- important			
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Lunch aid is no longer available	3	2	2	4	2	10	11	
There are more assignments in primary than in pre-school	4	11	8	4	3	4	0	
There is homework in Primary	13	10	3	1	5	1	1	
At primary school you only play in the playground	6	1	6	11	5	0	5	
The arrangement of the tables (individual worktables)	1	2	9	8	7	4	3	
Have a new teacher	5	5	4	5	10	3	2	
Moving to another school	2	3	2	1	2	12	12	

The most important changes for the students are those related to the workload - there being more work in the classroom and more homework, the fact of only being able to play in the playground and having a new teacher. The question concerning only being able to play at the playground, in spite of having had more answers in the situations considered most important, presents a high number of answers in the central tendency option (4), which leads us to think that it may not be one of the most or least important, but that it represents a midpoint in the level of importance for these children, which must be considered.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Focusing on the children's outcomes, when we listen to the preschool children, we see that transition for them is a change that in general is not a negative situation. The preschool children know a few things about the primary school and how it works, in particular about having a new teacher, about meeting new friends and they know about the learning processes that are going to take place, in particular those related to reading and writing and counting and calculation. They also know about the rules of the classroom, in particular, that they should be quieter and that they will have fewer opportunities to play. These results coincide with those presented by Einarsdottir (2003), in a study of the same nature. Despite all these novelties in the children's lives, these situations, in this particular group, do not seem to be worthy of major negative feelings, and there is a generalized idea that the transition will mean positive gains in the children's lives. Even so, we were confronted with some fears, particularly due to the change of the security figure (the preschool teacher) and the more demanding nature of the work to be developed, as indicated by Harrison and Murray (2015).

Regarding the students of the primary education, the memories that the vast majority have coincide with the expectations of the children in preschool education, i.e., they remember the new teacher, the new friends, and the new school. And when comparing the memories about the preschool education with the work they develop in primary school, also here the playing emerges as a common element, less frequent in primary school and very much signaled as a "good" memory of the

preschool education. The primary school children still remember their teacher, the stories she told, other activities, visits, and the spaces where they played. Similarly to what the preschool children feel as tasks they will develop in the primary school, the primary school students corroborate the idea that at this educational level they can no longer do the same things they did before and that the transition was positive because it allowed them to learn to read, write and do mathematical operations, areas that are also highlighted by the children who participated in the study of Einarsdóttir (2010). They have other good memories of preschool education, highlighting the learning achieved in the area of personal and social education, particularly those related to the construction of their autonomy and responsibility, the ability to share and work alone and respect for others.

All these data on the conceptions of preschool and primary school children corroborate what is reported by researchers in this area, who point out that children generally express positive and encouraging feelings towards the process (Eskelä-Haapanen, Lerkkanen, Rasku-Puttonen & Poikkeus, 2017; Tomásio, 2019), even if, simultaneously, they may feel some fear or discomfort towards the unknown (Harrison & Murray, 2015).

However, we cannot help but reflect on the fact that almost 60% of primary school children indicate that they had not known school before transition. Knowing that a well-structured, continued, and smooth transition is a determining factor for a successful transition and for a better academic and social path of children (Jónsdóttir, Valgarðsdóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2016), there is still a long way to go for this to be a truly enriching process for children. This situation is directly related to the results of the studies of Santos (2015) or Sousa and Santos (2021), who reported discontinuities or even absences in the transition educational practices between the two educational contexts.

In this sense, and seeking to understand in depth this reality, particularly in the Autonomous Region of the Azores, it becomes fundamental to resume this research in the near future, in order to include a larger number of participants, allowing a wider view of the situation, particularly in early childhood education, which, apart from being key, requires overcoming the difficulties inherent to data collection with young children. This perspective of broadening the research should also include parents, who, as Serra (2004) states, constitute an essential basis for the smooth transition process, thus mitigating the children's uncertainties and fears and valuing the transition to school of the older children, and for deepening the studies that have been carried out with educators and teachers (Santos, 2015; Sousa & Santos, 2021).

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