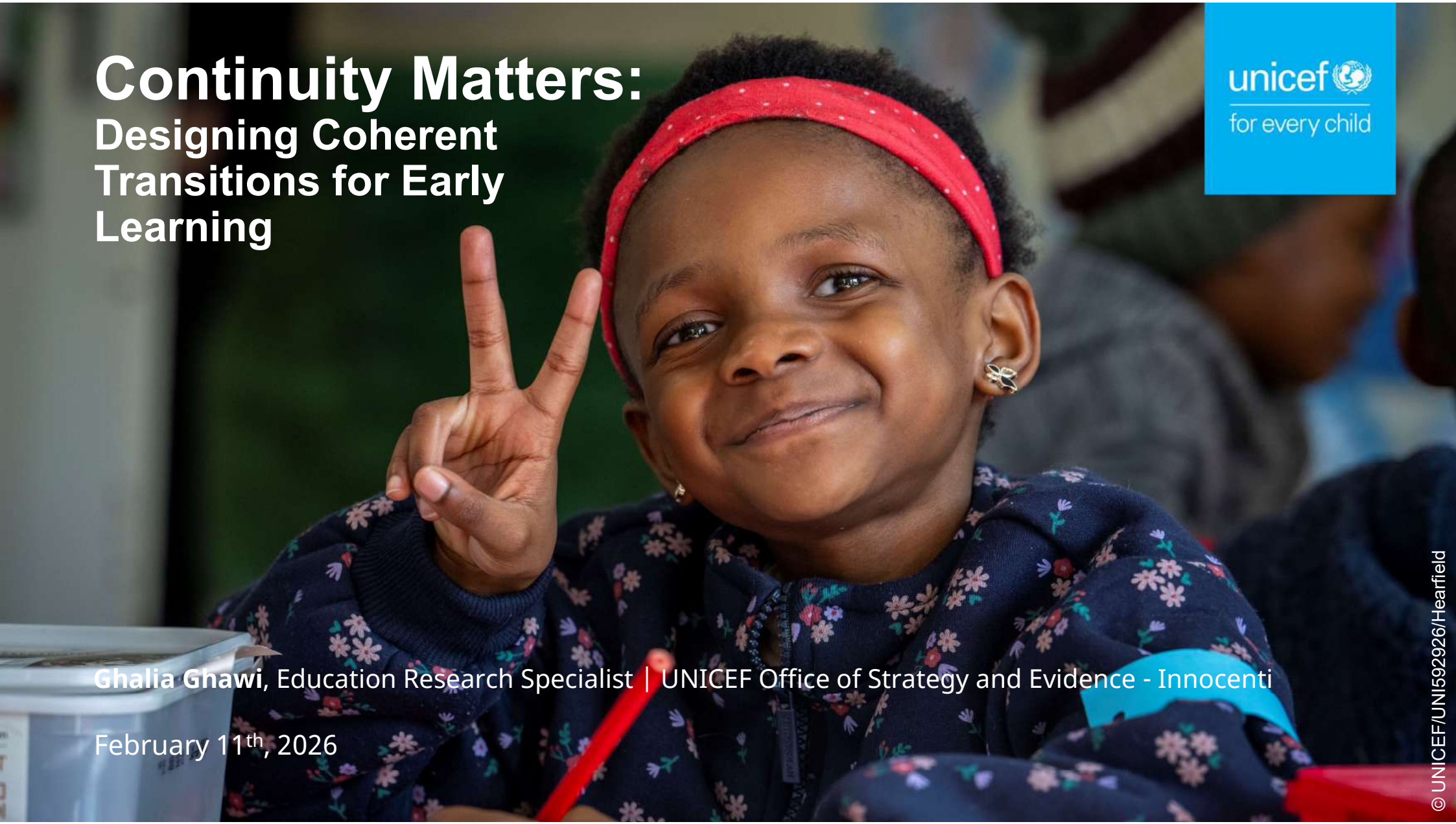


Continuity Matters:
Designing Coherent Transitions for Early Learning

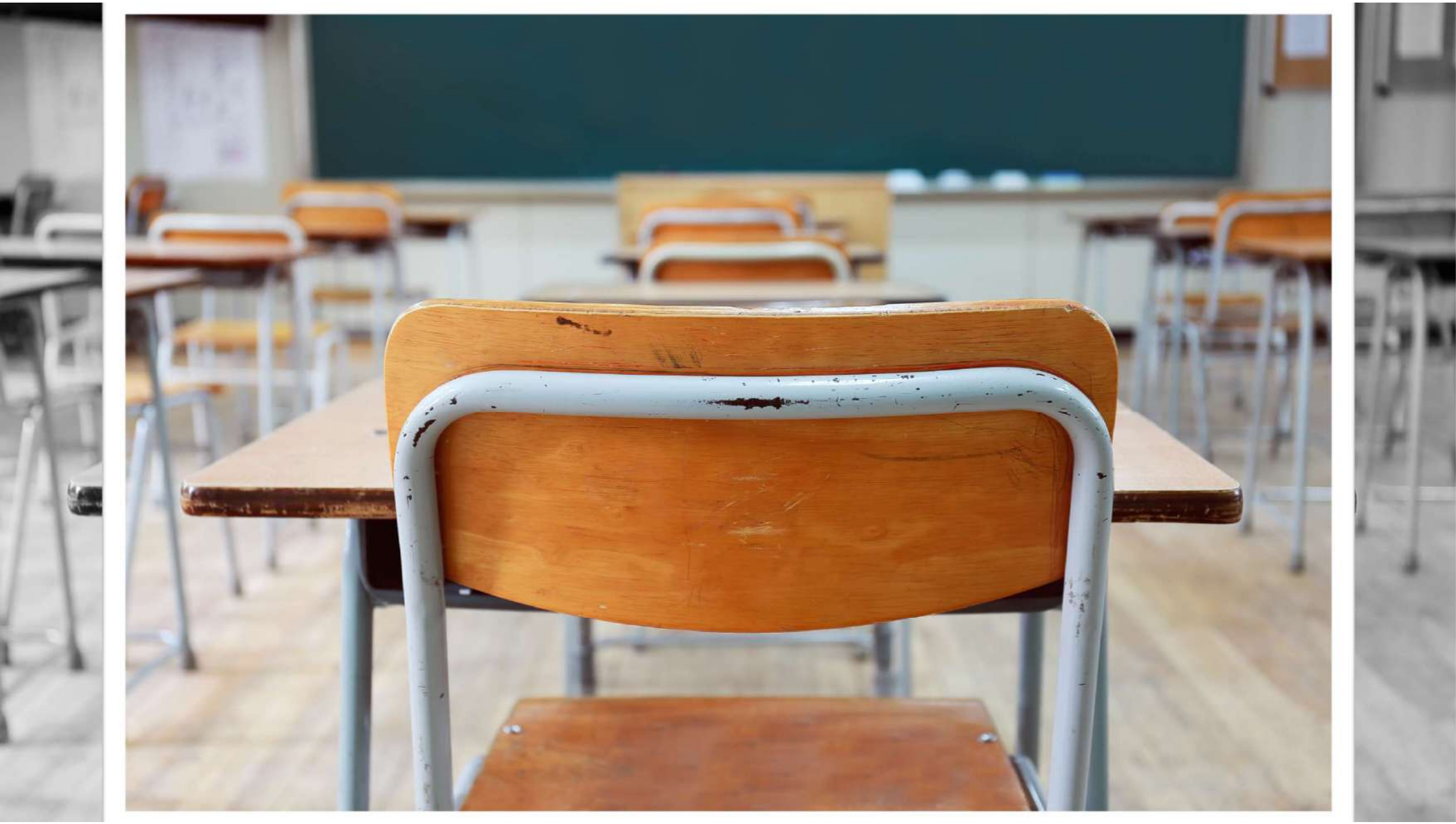
unicef
for every child

Ghalia Ghawi, Education Research Specialist | UNICEF Office of Strategy and Evidence - Innocenti

February 11th, 2026

© UNICEF/UNI592926/Hearfield





Children **don’t stop learning through play**

Yet, systems ask them to.



Agenda

The transition between pre-primary and primary education:

1. Its importance
2. Challenges to achieving a smooth transition
3. What can be done to support transitions
4. Examples of how this is being done in practice

Why does this transition matter?

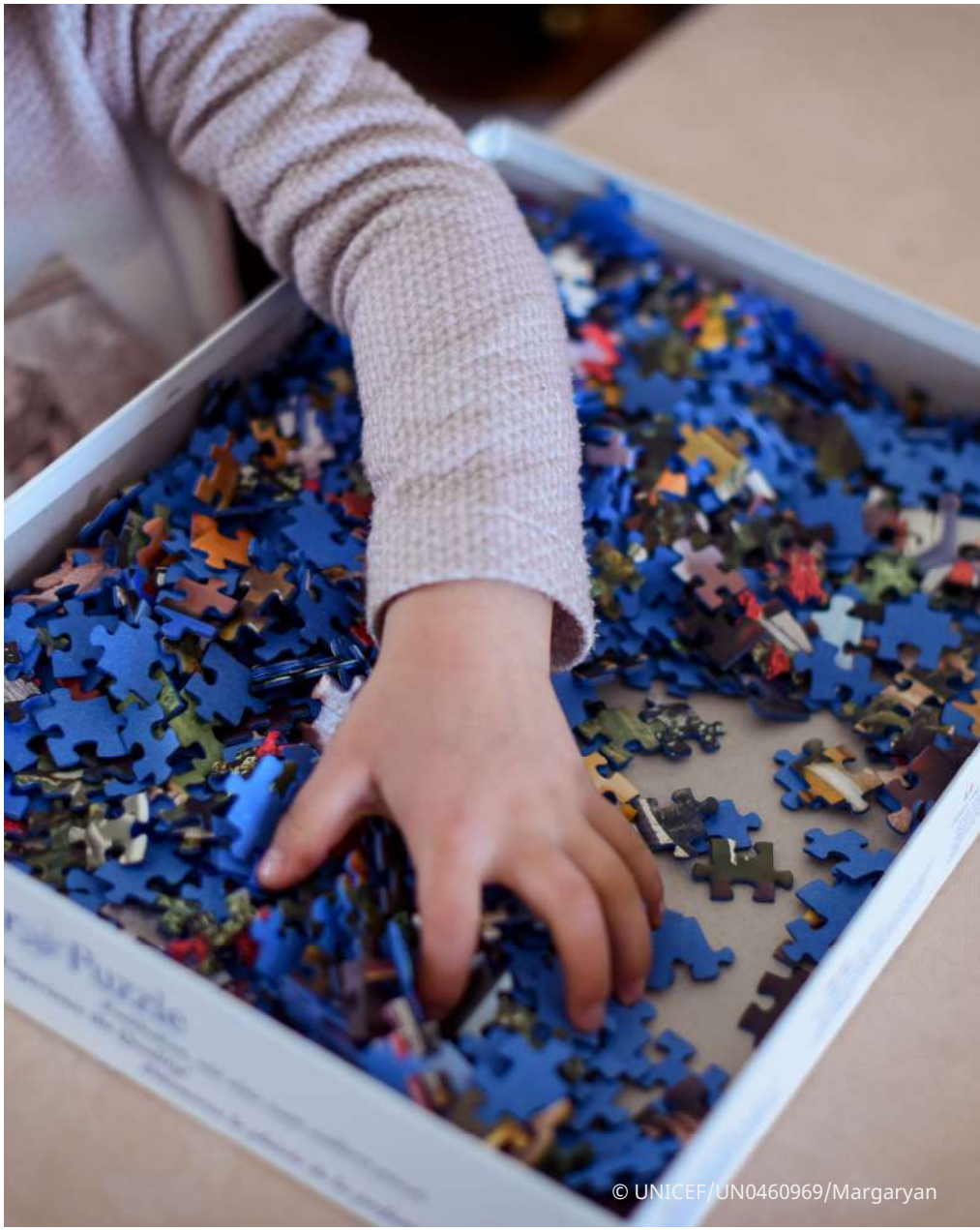
- Early childhood gains can fade or disappear if transitions to primary are poorly designed
- Children’s experiences during this transition predict later social, emotional, and learning outcomes
- Good transitions are especially beneficial for children from disadvantaged backgrounds



Ready children, or ready schools?

- Vast, robust evidence on the importance of developing children's school readiness for later academic success

- But the **school must also be prepared for the child** – an important piece of the transition puzzle



Why might these transitions fail?

- Prioritization of ‘schoolification’ of pre-primary; **responsibility is placed on the child and pre-school**
- Transitions are treated **as one-off** events, not a process
- **Structural barriers** limit cooperation across educational levels (e.g., different physical spaces, workforce work conditions)



How to make the transitions work?



What can be done to support transitions?



01

- Set shared learning goals across pre-primary and early primary.

- Curriculum frameworks can span ages 3–8 for continuity and alignment.

- Curriculum flexibility in primary.

02

Prolong children's exposure to play-based, imaginative learning, rather than formalizing learning approaches in pre-primary.

03

Performance measures for educators must be **adapted** in parallel to allow for play-based learning in early primary.



What can be done to support transitions?

Joint training and professional development opportunities for educators and head teachers at both levels.

Identify spaces for and encourage collaboration between pre-primary and primary educators, as well as parents.

Recognition of pre-primary workforce expertise and professionalizing the career pathway.

What can be done to support transitions?



Raise parents' awareness of:

- The importance of and challenges faced during the transition period.
- Their role during the transition process and how their role changes as their children progress across educational levels.
- The need for ongoing engagement with educators from pre-primary and primary.
- The benefits of play-based learning in pre-primary and primary.

What can be done to support transitions?



Indicators

Introduce **quality assurance indicators** on the quality of transition, with **accountability at both pre-primary and primary** levels.

Standardization

Set **standards on the information that should be shared between** educational levels, and how the information is shared to ensure safeguarding.

Monitoring

Monitor and regulate the quality of the transition, including what information is shared, collaboration between educational levels.

What can be done to support transitions?



01

Sub-national government to support transition and linkages between primary and pre-primary.

02

Use of dedicated transition coordinators, in the case of different ministries or accountabilities for each level.

03

Encourage integration of more pre-primary classrooms within the same premises as primary schools.

04

Planning for teacher time and resources to dedicate for transition efforts.

Countries where this is being done



- **Nordic countries, Wales**: play-based approaches and experiential learning extended into early primary
- **New Zealand**: learning approaches introduced in pre-primary are recognised and built on in primary

- **Slovenia, Sweden**: structured collaboration time between pre-primary and primary teachers
- **Morocco**: professionalization of pre-primary education teachers and professional alignment across levels

- **Australia:** initiative to support schools and parents and carers during the transition period
- **Denmark, UK and Wales**: transition plans shared with families and schools

- **Austria**: integrated campuses enabling shared planning
- **Malawi**: expansion of pre-primary in primary school buildings
- **Slovenia, Denmark**: have transition coordinators

Countries where this is being done



Viet Nam

The Ministry of Education and Training is rolling out a competency-based curriculum for primary school.

Learning through play has been identified as a key tool to achieving the objectives of the new curriculum.

Teacher and school leader training in play-based pedagogies for a holistic school reform.

Equipping local education officers with tools and methods on monitoring play-based implementation in primary.

Community-based outreach to parents to raise awareness on the benefits of play in primary.

A smooth transition from pre-primary to primary: key takeaways

1. Ensure that the child is ready for school and that the school ready for the child.
2. Alignment of curriculum, pedagogical approaches and teacher quality across both levels of education.
3. Treat the transition as an ongoing, dynamic process rooted in systemic change requiring coordination across all stakeholders and ministries involved.

List of selected references and key documents

- OECD (2017). *Starting Strong V: Transitions from Early Childhood Education and Care to Primary Education.*
- National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (Ireland). *Transitions: Refocusing Strategies for School and Early Childhood Education* (NCCA Research Report 19, 2020).
- UNICEF (2012). *School Readiness: A Conceptual Framework*.
- Griebel, W., & Niesel, R. (2006). *Co-constructing transition into kindergarten and school by children, parents and teachers*. In H. Fabian & A.-W. Dunlop (Eds.), *Informing Transitions in the Early Years: Research, Policy and Practice* (pp. 64–75). Open University Press / McGraw-Hill.
- Margetts, K. (2007). *Understanding and supporting children: Shaping transition practices.* In A.W. Dunlop & H. Fabian (Eds.), *Informing Transitions in the Early Years: Research, Policy and Practice* (pp. 107–119). Open University Press / McGraw-Hill.
- Dunlop, A.W. (2013). Curriculum and a Tool for Change in Transitions Practices. In Margetts, K., and Keinig, A. (Eds.), International Perspectives on Transition to School: Reconceptualising Beliefs, Policy and Practice. NY: Routledge
- UNICEF. (2020). *Build to Last: A Framework in Support of Universal Quality Pre-Primary Education*. United Nations Children's Fund, New York.


unicef
for every child
BASKETBALL
32
for every child,
learning
© UNICEF/UN0263645/Herwig