Evaluation of TOY for Inclusion in Slovakia

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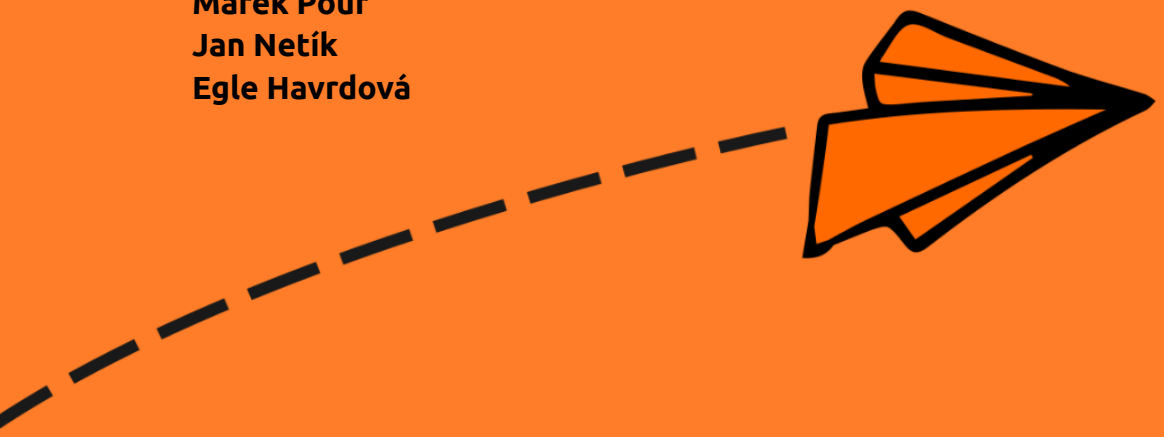

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FOR INCLUSION

International Child Development Initiatives

Theirworld

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1 Introduction

TOY for Inclusion is an approach developed by the International Child Development Initiatives (ICDI) with funding from the European Commission, in collaboration with the **International Step-by-Step Association** network. The development of this approach included contributions from member organizations such as the **Developmental Research Center for Pedagogical Initiatives Step by Step in Slovenia**, **Open Academy Step by Step in Croatia**, **Centre for Education Initiatives in Latvia**, **Wide Open School in Slovakia**, **Centre for Innovation in the Early Years in Belgium**, **Associazione 21 Luglio in Italy**, and **Partners Hungary Foundation**.

The initiative focuses on inclusive, community-based activities that support play, learning, and socialization for young children aged 0 to 10 and their families. TOY for Inclusion Play Hubs provide nonformal learning environments where children and families engage in unstructured play-based education. These hubs serve as spaces for intergenerational interaction, social inclusion, and active participation, making learning accessible to diverse individuals beyond traditional school systems (ISSA, 2020).

The TOY for Inclusion model for early childhood development focuses on providing toys and creating inclusive, adaptable, and accessible environments for all children. By 2030, TOY for Inclusion is set to provide: "...accessible, high-quality, inclusive ECEC and play-based activities for 50,000 children, especially those from marginalized backgrounds, including migrants, refugees, Roma, children with disabilities, and children with fewer opportunities, from 12 European countries through Play Hubs embedded in schools, public libraries, and non-formal educational settings." (ISSA, 2020).

Previous evaluation of TOY for Inclusion related projects (TOY to Share, Play to Care evaluation 2019–2021; Urban et al., 2021) emphasized the contextual nature of Play Hubs – a shared goal of reaching out to marginalized young children can serve as an important aspect of the sustainability of the activities. Qualitative analysis of focus groups with 30 individuals – children, parents and professionals further emphasizes the need to "have a place" where it is possible for families and children to meet:

> "The Play Hub [is seen] as nonformal, inclusive, community-based that encourages participation in early childhood educational activities... equally for parents as it is for children…" (Urban et al., 2021)

In light of previous efforts, and to complement the previous findings, the current evaluation primarily focuses on the topic of school readiness in terms of transitioning from kindergarten to elementary school level and what contribution the Slovakian ECEC PlayHubs make to supporting children's transition experience

to elementary school. Therefore, the school readiness transition—the shift from kindergarten to primary school—is the central theme of this evaluation.

The school readiness transition is widely recognized as a critical developmental phase in early childhood education (Fink et al., 2019; Puccioni, 2015). Children face new demands and social environments that shape their growth and development; they need to adapt to more structured schedules and formal learning, which requires increased focus and self-regulation. Research shows that socioemotional support plays a crucial role in helping children adjust successfully to these changes (Pianta & Cox, 1999; Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2004).

The initial research questions include:

1) How do Play Hub coordinators and staff define and perceive the concept of "transition" in the context of early childhood development and Play Hubs?
2) What specific strategies are used to prepare children for formal ECEC and primary education within the Play Hub? How effective are these strategies perceived to be by different stakeholders?
3) What processes are in place facilitating smooth transitions from Play Hubs to formal ECEC and primary education? What are the challenges and successes reported in these processes?
4) How well does the TOY for Inclusion approach align with current municipal priorities?

The evaluation, conducted by the Schola Empirica team for ICDI, examines the specific case of Slovakia during Autumn 2024. The study was done through contacts gathered and authorized by WOS (Škola dokorán).

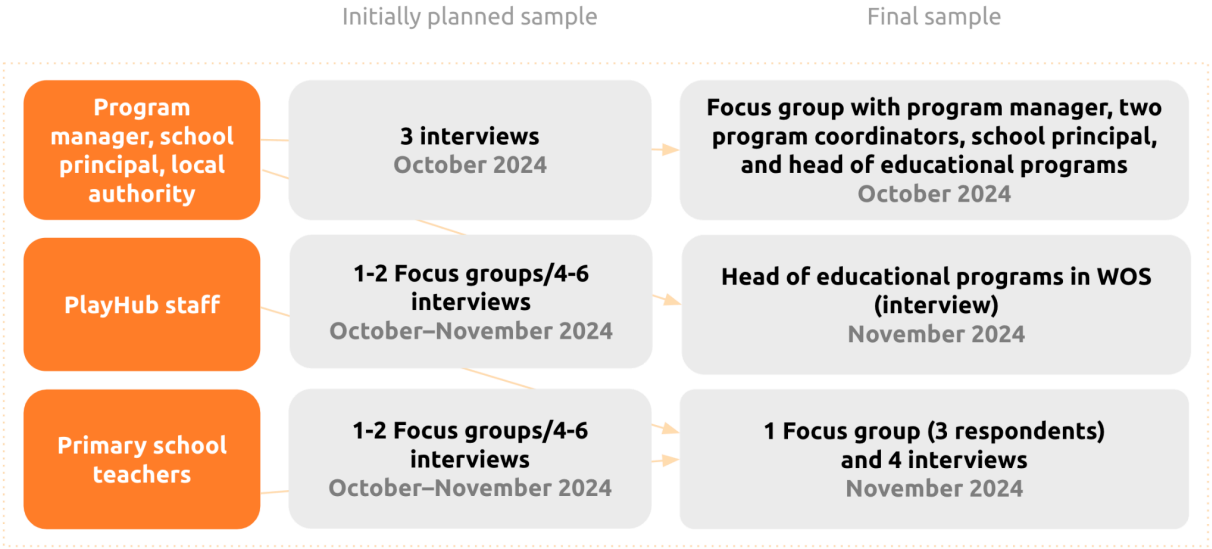
Evaluation background

Specifically, the evaluation explores how (1) Play Hub coordinators and staff define and perceive the concept of "transition" within the context of early childhood development and Play Hubs, shedding light on their understanding and interpretation. The qualitative approach allows for examining (2) the specific strategies employed within Play Hubs to prepare children for formal early childhood education and care and primary education, providing evidence on the effectiveness of these strategies as perceived by various stakeholders. Lastly, it evaluates the processes in place – enabling factors and barriers – in smooth transitioning from Play Hubs to formal ECEC and primary education, identifying reported challenges and successes in these processes.

2 Methodology

The **qualitative evaluation** builds on desk research of the previous TOY for inclusion evaluation projects, including the scoping literature review of the developmental aspects of transitioning from nonformal to formal education. The main methods used are, however, focus groups and individual interviews with school coordinators and teachers, and representatives of WOS (Škola dokorán).

In detail, the sample of interviewees and focus group participants consists of **12 people** in different – sometimes multiple roles. The interviewees include: (a) Program manager and program coordinators of the project in Slovakia, two school principals, head of educational programs in WOS (b) four teachers directly involved in the functioning of Play Hubs and (c) five Play Hub coordinators in different roles.



Respondents were contacted in cooperation with partners from WOS (Škola dokorán). However, the sample of respondents for the evaluation was later adjusted to align with a predefined set of contacts authorized by WOS (Škola dokorán). This meant that the teachers selected for the focus group and additional interviews **were preselected** by WOS, making the sampling process nonrandom. Adjustments were also necessary regarding the involvement of local authorities' representatives. Instead of a planned Local Authority interview, an alternative respondent was selected by WOS/ICDI: A leading expert on educational programs in early childhood care and development was included due to his relevant expertise and familiarity with the topic of transitions from nonformal to formal education.

The PlayHub and TOY for Inclusion projects encompass a wide range of facets, addressing diverse needs within communities. These initiatives are designed to

provide inclusive educational and social spaces, with a strong focus on marginalized Roma communities and Ukrainian refugee populations. While these groups face distinct challenges—such as cultural and linguistic barriers or the socio-economic disadvantages of marginalized communities—**the current evaluation does not investigate** the **differences in how PlayHub activities address specific populations through specific projects**. Instead, the evaluation focuses on the broader aspects of transitioning from nonformal to formal education through PlayHubs, offering insights that apply to all participating groups without delving into the nuances of their unique circumstances.

The results are based on a combination of **thematic analysis** (Braun & Clarke, 2022) of the qualitative data and desk research. The thematic analysis involved identifying recurring patterns and themes from qualitative data – interviews (average duration of 54 minutes) and focus groups (average duration of 64 minutes) conducted by one facilitator between 14th October and 28th November 2024 (see example scenario in Annex). The desk research further supported this process by providing contextual understanding through the review of relevant literature. Together, these methods ensure a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing transitions in early childhood education and the role of Play Hubs in this process.

The presented information contains direct quotations from Play Hub staff – coordinators and related teachers or principals, members of the WOS team including WOS expert. The quotes within the qualitative analysis are described by the ID of the focus group or interview, and the following number designates a specific segment of coded in MaxQDA24 for possible additional data analysis (e.g. A12: 56). For focus group (IDs: A1–A5 and A5), there is no segment designated as the focus group and expert interview were analyzed separately.

	Respondent ID
Focus group: Program manager, program coordinators, school principal, head of educational programs in WOS	**A1–5**
Interviews: PlayHub staff and teachers	**A6, A7, A8, A12**
Focus group: Teachers and PlayHub staff	**A9-A11**

Due to the agreement between facilitators of Schola Empirica and respondents: the results are anonymized – no specific information is provided on the respondents within the report. The answers were automatically **translated into**

English using OpenAI tools. And although edited with regard to their initial meaning – it is possible that the quotations slightly deviate from the original Slovak.

3 Findings

3.1 Background information about Play Hubs

The PlayHub staff and teachers in the focus groups and interviews were from three PlayHubs located in Prešovský and Košický region. The schools hosting Play Hubs reflect a diverse range of sizes and demographics. One school reported an enrollment of approximately 280–300 students across grades 1–9 and a gymnasium, while another suburban school noted a significant decrease around four years ago before the school management had changed, with current numbers around 350–400 students. Play Hubs—as described by the respondents—have played a pivotal role in responding to crises, such as an influx of Ukrainian refugees, where classroom sizes in one school increased from 18 to 46 students within a week of the war's outbreak.

Operationally, before the end of funding by UNICEF and Porticus, Play Hubs were **typically available for eight hours daily**, from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., ensuring consistent access for children and their families. These spaces included a rather broad age range, including preschoolers as young as three and students up to 12 years old. Additionally, Play Hubs were equipped with furniture, toys, and Montessori materials, often funded in cooperation with WOS and external organizations like UNICEF. After the funding period, some Play Hubs **continued to function in a reduced capacity**, relying mostly on the materials and toys provided and the commitment of staff and volunteers.

Play Hubs rely on a diverse team of coordinators, teachers, and other employees (volunteers, assistants) to provide comprehensive support for children and families. Coordinators take on leadership roles, organizing activities, managing partnerships with local institutions, and ensuring day-to-day operations. Cooperating teachers facilitate workshops, help with homeworks, and foster connections between parents, children, and the community. Staff are financed **temporarily by project funding**.

Volunteers, including members of local and refugee communities, play a crucial supporting role. They assist in running creative workshops, organizing language courses, and offering nonformal counseling to parents and children. For example, in one school, a volunteer with Ukrainian background provided essential language and cultural support for refugee families. This collective effort ensures that Play Hubs serve as inclusive, dynamic spaces for learning and community building.

Play Hubs studied as a part of the evaluation are often situated in convenient locations maximizing accessibility and proximity to other institutions, based in **primary schools**. One school is located near the city center, providing easy access

to cultural and recreational facilities. Another school, situated in a residential area, benefits from close proximity to a kindergarten, enabling strong collaboration between institutions. Integration of Play Hubs into schools has been described as a key enabler of their success. **By placing the hubs in schools, costs are minimized**, and collaboration between Play Hub staff and school educators is facilitated. Teachers use these spaces to conduct workshops, help with homework, and run extracurricular activities. They often connect those spaces to Školský klub in terms of facilities but also in terms of functioning. In Slovakia, "Školský klub detí" (ŠKD) is an after-school program designed for primary school children, typically from grades 1 to 4. It serves as childcare and educational support outside of regular school hours, offering a structured yet relaxed environment for kids while their parents are at work.

3.2 Understanding transitioning: Developmental, structural and policy perspectives

The following section examines how experts, relevant literature sources, teachers and Play Hub staff understand the concept of the transitioning, focusing on the school readiness transition from kindergarten to primary school. This critical developmental phase involves children adapting to new demands, structured schedules, and formal learning environments. In the following sections, we describe how:

(a) Teachers and Play Hub staff define and understand the transitioning phase and related aspects–How do Play Hub coordinators and staff define and perceive the concept of "transition" in the context of early childhood development and Play Hubs?
(b) What specific strategies teachers and staff understand are used by Play Hubs–What specific strategies are used to prepare children for formal ECEC and primary education within the Play Hub?
(c) And to a certain extent and wider context: How well does the TOY for Inclusion approach align with current municipal priorities?

The qualitative insights are complemented by literature-based definitions and expert views providing a broader educational perspective on the transitioning phase. The structure flow is as follows: Working definitions and expert views on transitioning from nonformal to formal education are presented, including country-related political specifics, through aspects and perspectives of those directly involved – PlayHub coordinators and teachers.

Defining transition from preschool to school education

Transition or transitioning in an early childhood development refers to the process in which children **move from one educational setting or developmental stage to another**, such as from preschool to primary school. It encompasses developmental,

pedagogical, and professional continuity to ensure children's smooth adjustment to new environments, fostering academic and social success: "...a supportive and stress-free experience at this stage is likely to influence whether or not children can develop their full potential at school, academically and socially…" (Zgonec et al., 2022).

The continuity in the education process is a long-term studied aspect of education and the topic of transitioning in early childhood is not new: Research highlights the importance of elements like family partnerships and communication across people to define **continuity**. The need for family-centered approaches, addressing practitioner and parental concerns in accessible language, aligning teaching and learning approaches, and aligning the structure and environment of educational settings, seem vital (Mangione et al., 1998; Hayes, 2024). Ensuring structural and program consistency support children during the transition process, minimizing potential disruptions (Dunlop & Fabian, 2002). In addition, the **familiarity with the schooling environment before enrollment** is crucial, as significant differences between pre-school or home settings and primary school environments can hinder the child's adjustment, making strategies that bridge this gap essential for smoother transitions (Kakvoulis, 2003).

An important aspect of transitioning relevant for the current evaluation is that Slovakia has recently introduced a compulsory pre-primary year for children aged five in 2021, which serves as a formalized transition period before entry into primary school at six years of age. This move reflects the broader European trend of ensuring at least one year of mandatory early education to address school readiness and reduce disparities in access to early childhood education.

Based on current literature, we define transitioning and related process through three types of continuity that serve as a benchmark for further discussions on the topic of transitions, based on the study by Zgonec et al. (2022):

a. **Developmental continuity**
   Including activities that familiarize children with new environments, teachers, and peers, such as preschool visits to schools and reciprocal events;
   engagement of parents in the transition process through information sessions and collaborative meetings.

b. **Pedagogical continuity**
   Aligning teaching practices and learning environments between preschools and schools to ensure a seamless educational experience;
   incorporating child-centered approaches, active learning, and interactive classroom setups that cater to both individual and group needs.

c. **Professional continuity**
   Fostering collaboration and communication between preschool and school teachers to exchange information on children's learning needs and to design inclusive, supportive educational strategies;
   conducting joint professional development sessions to harmonize pedagogical approaches across educational stages (Zgonec et al., 2022).

The OECD (2017) defines that successful transitions depend on **developmental and overall continuity**, collaboration, developmental appropriateness, holistic support, and policy frameworks. These factors, when addressed cohesively, ensure that children adapt well to primary school, maintaining the positive developmental trajectory established in ECEC (OECD, 2017).

Expert views on transitioning from nonformal to formal education

According to the interviewed expert, the transitioning process from nonformal to formal education, as facilitated by Play Hubs, is grounded in theoretical principles of **child-centered education**, socialization, and skill development. By addressing linguistic and cultural barriers, fostering preacademic skills, and engaging families, Play Hubs create a supportive bridge to formal schooling. Despite the absence of specific transitioning objectives, the role of Play Hubs as a preparatory space seems evident and could be understood as an important part for improving school readiness and adaptability among children from diverse backgrounds:

> "...The Child Centered Approach, which was the foundation of the Step by Step program, naturally emerged in the Play Hub program as well, because it played a role in fostering inclusion by being open to the specific needs of the children who came there. In this sense, the Child Centered Approach, which we already had experience with through the Step by Step program, was naturally transferred into how we employed Play Hub staff and how they were expected to approach children..." (A5)

> "The Play Hub could serve as a bridge... supporting children's preparation for school readiness... (...) through play, through less formalized processes that are not part of the school system, where they are not exposed to evaluative processes and failures..." (A5)

An important aspect, as understood through the practical implementation of the Play Hub scheme in Slovakia, were **cultural differences**. While the original approach focused on addressing the challenges faced by socially disadvantaged groups such as Roma communities, the Ukrainian refugee children more often came from families with higher educational backgrounds, often with parents holding university degrees. This demographic difference required a shift in strategy, emphasizing linguistic inclusion over broader socio-economic support. The program evolved to prioritize integrating Ukrainian children into the Slovakian

educational and social environment by addressing language barriers and fostering cultural acclimatization:

> "…And then we started with the concept of doing this for Ukrainian refugees, for the children of those who are here in Slovakia, and this is quite different from the marginalized Roma community. We quickly realized, through communication, that we needed to change our approach, because this was not just about socially disadvantaged groups—most of these children came from families where the parents had university degrees (...) and the shift occurred in focusing on the language inclusion of Ukrainian children into the Slovak environment…" (A5)

According to the WOS expert, Play Hubs emphasize **early literacy**, as children engage in storytelling, and participate in dramatizations. These pre-academic skills prepare children for classroom activities. In the latter phase of the project, the cooperative activities brought together children from Slovak and Ukrainian backgrounds, culminating in thematic performances for parents that not only enhanced literacy and language skills but also fostered cultural integration and creativity:

> "…especially in the second half of the project, we had (...) play-based activities focused on developing reading skills, working with texts, dramatization, creating comics, and group cooperative work. Children came from both Slovak and Ukrainian backgrounds (...) the result of this was thematic performances for parents, which the children prepared themselves (...) based on reading books, the children then engaged in various activities that helped them develop their reading literacy and also improved their language skills." (A5)

The Play Hub experience introduces children to **social structures and routines** similar to those they will encounter in schools. Activities such as group work, reading, and cooperative projects develop social skills and acclimatize children to the expectations of formal education. Familiarizing children with school environments through Play Hub activities allows children to experience aspects of formal schooling, such as structured activities and group interactions, in a less intimidating, more flexible environment. While Play Hubs are not explicitly designed to formalize education, their structure naturally bridges nonformal and formal education by aligning with the developmental needs of preschool-age children:

> "A Play Hub located at a school is a very good place, as parents learn to come there and find a space for their children's self-realization (...) this is a very good thing because it familiarizes them with the school environment. It's also very beneficial that, before starting formal education, the children are

already familiar with the environment—it's not foreign to them because they are used to coming there…" (A5)

Play Hubs also engage parents in the transitioning process by providing a space for collaboration and communication. Parents are encouraged to observe and participate in activities, fostering a shared understanding of educational goals and methods. This family-centered approach strengthens the support system for children during the transitioning from nonformal to formal education.

Policy and politically related aspects of Play Hub activities in Slovakia

Early childhood development and the transition from nonformal to formal education carry policy and politically related implications. While nonformal educational initiatives like Play Hubs can aim to bridge gaps in access and readiness for formal education, they face challenges rooted in rigid regulatory frameworks, limited integration into national curricula, and varying levels of political support. Understanding these connotations is crucial to recognizing the systemic barriers and opportunities that influence early childhood development:

- In Slovakia, early childhood education is centralized, with the state primarily recognizing formal institutions like kindergartens. Efforts to diversify educational opportunities through nonformal mechanisms, such as Play Hubs, can face a certain resistance due to a slightly rigid regulatory frameworks

- Although local authorities traditionally played their role in staffing and funding preschool education, there is a recent shift transferring responsibility for kindergartens to the state, which leads to a certain minimization of municipal involvement. This change further reduces local flexibility

- Social inequalities, particularly among marginalized groups such as Roma communities and refugee populations, influence preschool involvement. Broader systemic challenges, such as inadequate funding and limited legislative support for nonformal education, constrain their scalability and impact

- Political openness to innovation in education varies by administration. For example, the adoption of alternative methods, such as the Step by Step program, succeeded during politically favorable periods but stalled when administrations were less supportive. This underscores the dependence of early childhood education reforms on the prevailing political landscape

Key developmental aspects in children development linked to transitioning

Involved coordinators and primary school teachers identified several key aspects connected to transitioning from kindergarten or nonformal education to primary schools. Those aspects would be connected with **general understanding of healthy development of children**: the (a) importance of literacy and language proficiency, (b) social and emotional readiness, (c) physical readiness and aspects connected to hygiene, (d) familiarity with the school environment, (e) importance of play, (f) providing open, safe space for children, and especially for those coming from the refugee backgrounds, allowing them for successful (g) language and cultural integration.

More attitude-based understanding of the transitioning phase of children would include: (h) specific-and-already-taken action steps with regard to perceptions of Play Hubs being (i) complementary to activities of kindergarten and primary schools, (j) focus on direct communication and (k) work with parents especially from marginalized communities.

Analysis-wise, the presented set of themes is a merge of practical understanding of the role of PlayHubs in transitioning as identified by interviewees, and their ideas on what are relevant, crucial aspects of transitioning.

Literacy and language proficiency

Teachers and PlayHub staff put a strong emphasis on fostering early reading skills and a positive relationship with books and learning. Teachers actively integrate activities centered on reading literacy, such as group reading sessions where children explore book covers, discuss stories, and analyze texts together. These activities are supported by centrally provided books specifically tailored to the developmental stage of the children, as well as dedicated training on reading literacy provided by Škola dokorán. This structured approach builds children's literacy skills while cultivating their enthusiasm for books and learning in general, laying a foundation for a lifelong positive attitude toward education.

In addition to reading, basic knowledge of letters, early math concepts, and logical thinking are identified as critical components of literacy. Activities encourage children to recognize and name objects, and form a foundational understanding of mathematics and language:

> "…we received books centrally, perfectly suited for the children's age, and we worked on reading and literacy skills. Often, we would sit in a circle, read together, look at the book cover, analyze the book, and we even had a whole training session on literacy and books from Škola dokorán. From that, we developed various activities. So, this is very important—to ensure children develop a positive relationship with books and, more generally, with school." (A12: 56)

> "…to have some basic knowledge of mathematics, to know something about letters, to build a connection to these subjects, to develop logical thinking, and to name certain things." (A6: 49)

Another key area of focus is overcoming language barriers, especially for children from refugee populations. Ukrainian children, for example, often enter PlayHubs with limited or no proficiency in Slovak, creating significant challenges in communication and classroom engagement. A respondent emphasized:

> "We see the difficulty when children can't understand the teacher or their peers. Language skills are critical, but they need more structured support to build these skills before they enter formal schooling." (A5)

Social and emotional readiness

Social readiness understood by teachers and Play Hub staff means a child's ability to build relationships, navigate group dynamics, and resolve conflicts. Teachers and staff emphasized the importance of fostering friendships and social interactions among children, even when they come from diverse backgrounds and nationalities. Such experiences enable children to handle conflicts with friends and adapt more seamlessly to the social environment of primary school. By entering school with stronger social connections and the ability to resolve interpersonal challenges, children are better prepared for the demands of formal education:

> "…friendships were formed there; the children, despite coming from different backgrounds, always found a way to connect and get along. Children from various environments and nationalities gained social contacts, and as a result, they were better socially prepared when they entered primary school." (A8: 44)

> "…to be able to cope with challenges and resolve conflicts with a friend." (A6: 49)

Emotional readiness was identified as another important aspect of transitioning. Teachers and staff highlighted the importance of children being emotionally resilient. Teachers and staff highlighted the need for children to develop self-regulation skills, enabling them to handle challenges. This readiness helps children adapt to the structured and often demanding environment of primary school, fostering a sense of independence and confidence in their ability to navigate new situations.

> "…to be emotionally mature, that is an important thing." (A6: 49)

Hygiene and physical readiness

Physical readiness and hygiene are stressed as other fundamental aspects of transitioning, focusing on a child's ability to manage basic self-care and physical independence. Teachers emphasize the importance of children being able to eat independently, be toilet-trained, dress themselves, and put on their shoes. These foundational skills are expected to develop by the age of three and are considered essential for a smooth transition into structured educational settings.

Equally important are habits that promote physical health and wellbeing. Limiting screen time and encouraging active play are seen as critical for a child's physical development and overall health. By supporting these basic skills and habits, children are better prepared to adapt to the demands of school life, creating a strong foundation for their growth and learning:

> "…to eat independently, have diapers, dress themselves, put on shoes—these are the basic things; the rest comes gradually. By around three years of age, when they start coming in." (A6: 47)

> "…these are important things (...) for parents to know that in order for a child to be healthy, they need to develop basic habits. They should know that movement is very important for children and that they should spend as little time as possible on computers." (A6: 43)

Familiarity with the school environment

Familiarity with the school premises is another strategy in supporting a smooth transition for children entering primary education. Teachers emphasize the importance of allowing preschool children to visit and explore the school environment before officially starting. This exposure helps them feel comfortable about the new setting. In cases where schools are separate from municipal school clusters, such as independent schools located in residential areas, efforts are made to collaborate with nearby kindergartens:

> "…for example, the preschool children came into an environment they already knew because they had been to the Play Hub, so they were familiar with the school setting and knew where they would later start school." (A8: 34)

> "…we are a school, and while city schools are combined, we are an independent school located on a housing estate. On this estate, there is one public kindergarten, and children from this kindergarten usually come to us in the first grade. Of course, we cooperate with them because we want as many children as possible to come to us, and we want them to visit beforehand, get to know the environment, and meet the teachers." (A8: 51)

The importance of play

Playing with toys is recognized as an essential component of early childhood development. It is important that children, from a young age up to around six years, learn not only how to play with toys but to reinforce the habits connected to play. This structured approach to play also aids in establishing routines and behaviors that support children's readiness for formal education, making play a foundational aspect of their development:

> "…children know how to play with toys, which is also an important thing. From the youngest age, up to around six years, they should not only know how to take toys but also how to put them away, rotate them, and play with them properly. Some tools are didactic (...) so the children were able to learn faster and develop these habits earlier." (A6: 53)

Safe space especially for children and parents from refugee background

Teachers and coordinators play a crucial role in providing safe and inclusive spaces that support children during the transitioning phase, particularly those from vulnerable backgrounds, such as refugee children. These spaces are designed to be welcoming and protective, creating an environment where children feel secure and supported. For refugee children **who may not have access to other educational opportunities**, Additionally, Play Hubs provide spaces where children can engage with their mothers, fostering strong parent-child bonds and offering a supportive environment for families:

> "…we are actively cooperating with the team supporting Ukrainians, and mothers with small children come here from time to time. Some of these children are not ready to attend kindergartens, and for them, the Play Hub was their only form of kindergarten. This was also beneficial because kindergarten teachers brought their creative activities, showcasing what they do. These demonstrations, meetings, and workshops were at a high professional level, and thanks to the Play Hub and everything that happened there..." (A9–11: 65)

Integration

Integration is an ongoing process that encompasses language acquisition, adaptation to new environments. For Ukrainian children and their families, Play Hubs serve as spaces to support language integration for both children and parents, helping them alike to communicate effectively and engage with the educational system. Beyond language, integration extends to becoming familiar with the social and cultural environment of the community and actively participating in joint activities:

> "…it is essentially always an integration process—language, education, and language itself. We are talking about Ukrainian children, but also adults.

> Secondly, it's about integration into the environment, and thirdly, participation in shared activities." (A9–11: 48)

Play Hubs as complementary to kindergarten and primary schools, with emphasis on cooperation with parents

Informal support provided by Play Hubs is a vital complement to kindergarten and primary school, addressing gaps and enhancing the educational experience for children and families. Children who might otherwise stay at home are encouraged to participate in activities that prepare them for formal education, while their mothers are given time to pursue work or other responsibilities. Play Hubs also offer unique features that differentiate them from traditional educational institutions. The availability of modern extracurricular activities creates a welcoming and stimulating environment for children. Unlike kindergartens, where parental engagement might be limited to occasional consultations, Play Hubs create a voluntary, flexible environment that naturally encourages parental involvement. Parents can visit Play Hubs with their children or even come alone to discuss concerns, build relationships, or simply socialize:

> "…showing the school is one thing, but showing extracurricular activities—especially those with modern toys, handmade toys, and where everything is completely different (...) that works, and the cooperation functions well because of it. As a result, children transitioned to our school." (A9–11: 63)

> "I like how it complements working with parents. In the Play Hub, there is a lot of cooperation with parents, and I think the Play Hub can complement kindergarten. (...) What's great about the Play Hub is that parents are present there. In a regular kindergarten, I might see the children three times a year. When we call parents in for a consultation or something extra, they often say, 'Could you handle this yourselves?' In the Play Hub, it's voluntary—they come in their free time, call other parents, and they can even come without their children, just to chat." (A6: 85)

The importance of offering spaces where children can engage with their mothers was noted as a supportive measure, particularly for younger children or those from vulnerable backgrounds. This aspect, though secondary, helps strengthen parent-child bonds during the transitioning phase.

Workshops and activities directly focused on transitioning

Workshops and activities focused on transitioning play a critical role in preparing children and their families for the shift to primary school. These workshops provide insights for parents, helping them understand the developmental milestones their children need to reach and how early education supports these goals. By addressing practical and developmental aspects of the transitioning phase, these

workshops empower families with the knowledge and tools needed to support their children effectively:

> "…this was focused on parents. We had a situation (...) where Roma parents were not sending their children to kindergarten; they would go straight to school, and those children (...) were not ready for school. They were tearful, emotionally unsettled, so I decided to focus on this, to explain to parents why it's beneficial to send their children to kindergarten. As I mentioned, a few years ago, we had a meeting with a psychologist, and after that, more children started coming to kindergarten, even to earlier classes, not just the preschool class. (...) The goal was to help parents understand how important it is for their children to participate." (A6: 29)

Structural factors: The role of ECEC Play Hub activities

The following themes were identified through interviews and discussions with teachers and PlayHub coordinators. Their perspectives describe the various roles PlayHubs play in supporting children, families, and communities. From creating safe and inclusive environments to offering flexible, child-centered activities, bridging gaps between formal education and nonformal learning.

PlayHub as a general set-up, safe space and TOY Library

PlayHub's dual role as a toy library and a safe space is at the core of its perceived impact by teachers and Play Hub coordinators. Acting as a toy library, it provides access to high-quality, educational toys that support learning and development for children of various ages. This resource fosters creativity and exploration while offering a reliable environment for children and families. As a safe space, PlayHub ensures a welcoming and protective environment, allowing children and parents to feel secure and supported. This is especially crucial for vulnerable populations, such as refugee families, as it facilitates a sense of belonging and community.

> "…not every day and hour was covered by a program; they could play freely there, and the responsibility for the child was on the parent—it wasn't a place where the mother could leave the child and we would take care of them." (A8: 24)

> "…they had everything available, books, materials, cars, balls, and they were taken care of; financially, it was secure." (A8: 30)

> "…they come for the first time, but then they want to talk more about what they're experiencing, so sometimes when we had something prepared (...), it often turned into something completely different—this is my experience." (A6: 27)

PlayHub's flexible structure allows it to work as a general space rather than a set of rigidly prescribed activities. This adaptability encourages creativity, innovation, and

responsiveness to the unique needs of the community. Children and families can engage in activities tailored to their interests and developmental needs, enhancing the overall impact and inclusivity of the space:

> "...what is essential in the program is that they meet, that there is communication, creativity, collaboration, yes, and children of any age, whether purely Ukrainian children, Roma children, or our children with special needs, always prioritize socialization. They work together to create something, establish contact, encourage one another, step out of their comfort zones, and thereby make the transition easier when moving on to primary school." (A9–11: 50)

> "It is an excellent space for carrying out any activities. Considering that we are very creative beings, we continuously focused on creative workshops and activities—sewing, tie-dyeing t-shirts, creating various models. We even had a beautiful event where the entire school participated, including many Ukrainian children, in a traditional fashion show featuring recycled materials. It was a wonderful event, and we could utilize this space for meeting and creating." (A9–11: 15)

Space for community building

A related theme is the emphasis on community building. Play Hubs provide a space where community members can come together, foster relationships, and share their difficulties. Activities often extend beyond children's education, including community events and initiatives that strengthen social bonds and promote collective growth. PlayHub offers diverse spaces for activities that cater to different interests and developmental needs. These include spaces for creative activities, reading, and experiential learning. By accommodating a wide range of activities, PlayHub enables children and families to explore their interests:

> "Children build relationships among themselves, across age groups. Essentially, they formed connections with one another—both younger and older children were able to connect. This is very beneficial for fostering relationships and community." (A6: 81)

> "...the children spend their free time meaningfully, fully engaging in activities. We aim to create activities that interest them so they don't have to resort to using their phones or rushing home to turn on the TV. Instead, we are all together, talking and spending time." (A12: 50)

> "We designed it to accommodate all age groups, so even preschoolers can come. More often, we have children aged 6–10, and we strive to ensure that both a six-year-old and a ten-year-old feel comfortable." (A12: 48)

Activities naturally intertwine with those of Školský klub

Important aspect of the Play Hubs in school settings is that in those settings, PlayHubs often integrate their activities with those of Školský klub, enhancing the connection between formal education and nonformal learning. This intertwining ensures that children benefit from an educational experience bridging the gap between structured school programs and PlayHub's flexible offerings. On the other hand, this connection can blur the distinction between Play Hub and Školský Klub:

> "...those who attended the school club also went to the Play Hub. And it was great because the children mixed; there were always different groups of kids interacting. I think it was a good thing." (A8: 61)

> "...I organized various activities, and then the children used them as part of the school club. In the afternoons, we also had activities..." (A6: 4)

Consultancy and involvement of parents

PlayHub provides counselling and peer parent support, empowering them to engage actively in their children's development. Activities involve parents in the afternoon, creating opportunities to participate in workshops. This involvement strengthens the parent-child bond and fosters a community of engaged caregivers. For many families, especially those facing uncertainty about housing, employment, and their children's future, PlayHub served as a refuge where parents could connect with others, share experiences, and find emotional support in a safe and understanding environment:

> "...completely nonformal, mothers would call us, write to us, especially in the beginning. They were looking for housing, asking for other activities for their children, or wanted their daughter or son to continue swimming lessons, so we helped them find specific things. We called it personal consultations. There were so many, we didn't even count them. It was daily—someone always had a question." (A12: 34)

> "...we also taught them at the crisis center how to arrange documents, how to go to the authorities, and we employed them. I ran a project to help them (...) where we employed Ukrainians at the school, and they earned money through the labor office. We really tried to help them in every way." (A8: 69)

> "...those mothers with children, when they came here, they didn't even know where they would live, what would happen to them, whether they'd have a job, or how they'd provide for their children. I think that both at the crisis center and here at our school in the Play Hub, they found a kind of refuge where they truly had a space to talk with other mothers, share experiences, and feel supported." (A8: 69)

Workshops, events, and donor-related activities

PlayHub provides a diverse range of creative and experiential activities that introduce them to the school environment in an engaging and welcoming way. For instance, educators create theatrical performances in a playful, fairytale setting to help preschool children imagine what school life might look like. These performances foster communication between children, teachers, and school leadership, making the transition to school feel exciting and approachable. Additionally, PlayHub offers extracurricular activities such as sewing and cooking workshops. These activities emphasize hands-on, creative learning, allowing children and parents to explore their talents and develop practical skills:

> "...my colleague and I run a creative group called Krea, where we also put on little theater performances. We always try to use a playful, fairytale-like setting to introduce preschool children to school life and show them what school can look like. It's a sweet message for them. Through this theater, there is communication between the school director, the children, and the teachers, and then the children come to us. It also includes presenting the Play Hub." (A9–11: 64)

> "We have a dedicated space in the kitchen with sewing machines, and one of our colleagues runs a workshop where children learn to sew and cook. These are extracurricular activities we are capable of offering—not just in the direct educational process where children are expected to sit in desks and learn Slovak or math—but we engage them in creative activities like cooking and baking. We consider this to be a vital part of their development." (A9–11: 73)

PlayHubs' alignment with donor initiatives enables it to sustain and expand its offerings. Additionally, its openness to visits from children of different age groups ensures accessibility and inclusivity, making it a resource for a broader community:

> "...when we had specific topics assigned by UNICEF, we carried them out." (A12: 30)

> "...even in the Play Hub, our school collaborates on Erasmus projects, and activities related to these projects were also conducted in this space." (A9–11: 16)

Therefore, the Play Hubs serve as spaces for implementing assigned topics from partners such as UNICEF and are also utilized for various meaningful initiatives, supporting educational and community-focused programs.

3.3 Enabling factors and barriers facilitating and hindering transitioning from nonformal to formal ECEC

The transition of children from nonformal education in Play Hubs to formal schooling is influenced by a combination of enabling factors and barriers. These factors shape not only the effectiveness, scalability, and sustainability of the initiatives but also their ability to support children, particularly those from marginalized communities and refugee backgrounds, in successfully integrating into formal education. Chapter 3.3 explores these factors in detail, providing insights into the opportunities and challenges of ensuring a smooth transition for children from Play Hubs to formal schooling. The specific research question is:

> What processes in place are the factors facilitating smooth transitions from Play Hubs to formal ECEC and primary education? What are the challenges and successes reported in these processes?

The qualitative insights are divided into the factors connected to the (a) Play Hub setting and set-up, (b) people related factors, and (c) networking and spontaneous dissemination of activities related to Play Hubs. The insights describe the perspectives of those directly involved – PlayHub coordinators and teachers. Although the study focused on transitioning, the enabling factors and barriers identified are largely not specific to this process.

Identified barriers: Overall setting and set-up of activities

The barriers in the overall setting and set-up of activities highlight the general challenges Play Hubs face in creating inclusive and engaging spaces, emphasizing the importance of adaptability, innovation, and infrastructure improvements to meet diverse needs. A barrier identified by some coordinators is the growing preference among children for electronic devices. This trend poses a challenge for Play Hubs, which aim to provide enriching experiences that captivate children's interest and draw them away from digital distractions. To address this, Play Hub staff emphasize the need for creative, dynamic activities that appeal to children across age groups:

> "Whether it's a computer, mobile phone, or television—most often the mobile phone—it's always necessary to motivate them. So yes, it's exactly about being prepared, not just for the child but also for the adult, and offering them as many options and activities as possible to engage their interest." (A9–11: 91)

> "I think we have challenges with this when they spend a lot of time on digital devices. I'm not completely against it, but there needs to be some boundaries." (A6: 43)

Physical access to Play Hubs can also present barriers, particularly for children with disabilities. In some cases, the Play Hub is located on the second floor without an accessible entrance, making it difficult for children with mobility challenges to participate. Staff recognize the need for more inclusive infrastructure to ensure all children can access Play Hub services comfortably:

> "Well, we had one situation when a child in a special wheelchair came in because they couldn't walk, and we don't have barrier-free access. Our Play Hub was on the first floor. That was the first time I thought that if the child were bigger or heavier, we wouldn't be able to get them upstairs, so perhaps this is an issue." (A8: 59)

Identified barriers: People related factors

Parents and their engagement

Parents and their engagement influence the success of Play Hub initiatives to a certain extent. Limited parental involvement and reliance on digital distractions such as phones or tablets can hinder children's development and socialization. Prolonged engagement with families is seen as important to overcome these challenges, especially in communities where consistent participation is not a norm. Additionally, cultural differences in parenting styles require staff to adapt activities and provide individualized approaches. For instance, Ukrainian children are noted to vary in temperament, requiring tailored strategies to engage both lively and withdrawn children:

> "Ultimately, it's about the parents. They don't spend enough time with their children… parents hand their children a phone or tablet, and then the children struggle to understand when I give them simple instructions." (A6: 65)

> "If the same parents came regularly, they would eventually develop a habit, but with Roma parents, if they attended regularly, not just for a year but over a longer period, it could lead to real changes." (A6: 71)

> "Ukrainian children are different in temperament… We had to show them it was okay, talk to them, and approach each child individually." (A12: 52)

Cultural differences and communication challenges

Cultural differences and communication challenges present another barrier in the implementation of PlayHubs, particularly in fostering integration among diverse groups. In retrospect, differences in cultural norms and sensitivities between Slovak and Ukrainian families could make interactions difficult. For instance, Ukrainian mothers could be hesitant to share their experiences due to trauma or uncertainty about how to express themselves, while Slovak mothers may refrain from engaging for fear of causing unintended emotional distress. Language

barriers further compound these challenges, making it difficult for families to connect naturally. Overcoming these obstacles required deliberate efforts, such as assigning assistants to facilitate communication and organizing joint activities to build trust and empathy:

> "And of course, I must mention another barrier, which is the interest of Slovak mothers in the experiences Ukrainian mothers have gone through. There is often a lack of sensitivity, where the boundary lies—what is too much, what is too little, when might I offend or make her cry by asking about the war, her husband, or whether I can even ask about these topics?" (A9–11: 93)

> "The problem is that, first of all, they couldn't communicate because of the language barrier. The Ukrainian mother is withdrawn because she is unsure how to express herself (...) organizing joint activities and gradually building those bridges." (A9–11: 89)

Enabling factors: Setting and set-up of activities

Enabling factors such as sustainable resources including the toys that were financed through the program, accessible infrastructure, and dynamic budgeting are described as important to ensure that PlayHubs provide meaningful, long-term support for children and their communities.

Toys stay – the long term effect after project funding ends
One of the significant enabling factors in PlayHub operations is the sustainability of resources, particularly toys and materials. Many PlayHubs benefit from initial investments that provide essential items such as books, building sets, and educational toys, which remain in use long after the formal projects conclude. This ensures that children continue to benefit from these resources over time, even in limited operational contexts:

> "At that time, a lot of resources were purchased—toys, essential materials (...) building sets, books, a couch (...) items wear out, so there is always something new to buy and replace." (A9–11: 36)

> "Exactly, they can still go there, although it's in a limited capacity (...) the room is there, equipped with books, toys, everything is still available, and the children can continue to use it." (A8: 67)

> "Children from the school still use it (...) but the kind of activities I used to do there, those are no longer happening." (A6: 10)

Accessibility and proximity to other educational institutions

The location and accessibility of PlayHubs are important aspect. PlayHubs situated in schools or near residential areas benefit from convenient transportation options, ensuring that families can easily reach the place. This is particularly important in fostering regular attendance and integration into the community. Hubs within schools also help children become familiar with educational environments, easing transitions to formal education:

> "The location of Play Hubs needs to be well-determined because (...) it is essential for them to be equipped and situated in places with high foot traffic; therefore, schools are the best option." (A9–11: 78)

> "And we are close to the housing estate, so accessibility is important—being reachable by bus, not in a remote area where the bus comes only once a day... to showcase the activities we worked on." (A9–11: 80)

Dynamic budgeting

Dynamic and flexible budgeting is another enabling factor that ensures the PlayHub can maintain high-quality activities and adapt to community needs. With regular financial support, PlayHubs can fund workshops, purchase materials, and introduce new activities to keep children and families engaged. Additional flexibility allows for continuous improvement and resource renewal:

> "Just like before, every month we received our salaries, and we had a monthly budget that we could use—for example, to fund workshops or to purchase specific items." (A12: 78)

> "If it were better funded, not so project-based (...) it could be developed further and made an integral part of schools." (A6: 67)

Enabling factors: People related factors

Parental engagement and consistency

Regular parental involvement, structured activities and individual parent-teacher interactions seem to foster collaboration and trust between parents and educators. These interactions address children's progress, behavior, and classroom dynamics, creating a supportive environment for learning. Consistent participation by parents and children reinforces engagement and helps form long-term habits that benefit both families and the PlayHub community. When families regularly attend activities, they enhance their commitment to PlayHub programs and creating a sense of continuity:

> "At our school, we have a parents' association (...) the principal gives a speech there (...) and then they can have individual consultations with class teachers." (A12: 70)

> "When it was regular, not just once or twice, but if parents attended these activities consistently—like baking sessions we organized—if this were a steady practice and the same parents came regularly, over time, they would develop a habit." (A6: 71)

Staff motivation and collaboration

Encouraging teachers and coordinators to adopt creative and voluntary approaches fosters a positive atmosphere that supports collaboration and innovation. Training sessions and professional networks further enhance this dynamic, allowing staff to share insights, exchange successful strategies, and address challenges. These collaborative efforts not only improve the quality of activities but also strengthen the sense of community among educators:

> "We cannot force them into anything; we have to understand that (...) motivation, motivation is the alpha and omega, it's essential to encourage collaboration and build good relationships." (A9–11: 86)

> "We had excellent consultations and training sessions where we exchanged insights—for example, we shared how we did things in locations like X or Y (...). We became friends as teams, calling and writing to each other to share what worked well and what didn't." (A12: 43)

Informal support

The nonformal support provided by additional staff, such as educators from school clubs, plays a critical role in ensuring the smooth operation of PlayHubs. This assistance helps distribute responsibilities effectively and enables staff to manage activities efficiently. Combined with flexible management practices, such as adapting to the availability and needs of participants, nonformal support creates a resilient operational structure that sustains the PlayHub's effectiveness over time:

> "The teachers from the school club helped us a bit with supervision; we had it organized this way, and it worked well for us. We managed to coordinate it effectively." (A8: 57)

Enabling factors: Networking and information dissemination

Networking and effective communication seem to play an important role in the success of PlayHub activities. Establishing strong networks among staff, schools, and communities facilitates cooperation, the sharing of resources, and the creation of a cohesive environment that supports children and families. Informal channels, including refugee-related workers and parent networks, enhance the dissemination of information and encourage participation. Additionally, social media platforms and organized events act as tools to inform communities about PlayHub offerings.

Cooperation among workers and across different school levels

Collaboration across different school levels seems to be a major enabling factor. In such described scenarios, schools integrate activities between kindergartens, primary schools, and extracurricular centers to create a community-like environment. Teachers and volunteers work together on joint activities, fostering bonds between educators, children, and families. These cooperative efforts ensure that activities are varied and inclusive, strengthening relationships within the school ecosystem:

> "We have a large school campus, so we invite children from kindergartens to join us. Recently, my colleagues organized a performance for the children, and we also invited children from the kindergarten. They performed a play for the kindergarten, and I think our collaboration is quite diverse." (A8: 53)

> "Collaboration among teachers is certainly important. I know there was also a teacher who volunteered; we worked together and had some joint activities." (A6: 69)

Parents as information channels fostered by the use of social networks

Parents can also act as nonformal yet highly effective channels for spreading information about PlayHub activities. Word-of-mouth recommendations between families amplify participation and foster a sense of community. This grassroots communication method ensures that new families are continually introduced to PlayHub offerings:

> "Because parents know each other, they call one another—that's how it works. Parents who attend recommend it to other parents." (A6: 14)

Social media platforms and digital communication play a significant role in spreading awareness about PlayHub activities. By leveraging social networks, educators and staff can quickly share information with families and communities, ensuring broader outreach and engagement. These tools allow for real-time updates and personalized communication with target groups:

> "Social networks help with this; now everything is shared, we forwarded everything (...) so it could be quickly shared. And more people could be reached." (A9–11: 84)

Events as bonding activities

Organizing large-scale events and workshops serves as another strategy for networking and community building within PlayHubs. Such events provide opportunities for children from different classes or age groups to bond and collaborate, fostering a sense of unity and shared purpose:

> "There are many events we organize ourselves... for example, we have a beautiful atrium where we host an herbal workshop (...) where we continuously find ways to bring these children together." (A9–11: 69)

3.4 Perceived effectiveness of Play Hubs: Bridging generations amid financial uncertainty

The identified themes highlight the multi-dimensional impact of Play Hubs, not only in fostering generational connections and individualized approaches but also in addressing the challenges and successes of transitioning children into formal ECEC and primary education. While diverse activities enhance inclusivity and contribute to children's well-being, the transition process faces obstacles such as alignment with formal curricula and systemic barriers. At the same time, successes include strengthened community engagement and supportive learning environments that ease the shift into formal education. Together, these factors shape the holistic development of children and their communities.

Connecting different generations

One of the themes connected to Play Hubs – which is in line with the main focus of the Toy for Inclusion approach – is their ability to connect different generations. Play Hubs create an environment where children, parents, and older generations can interact naturally, fostering a sense of community and mutual support. The multi-generational approach makes the setting familiar and comforting, while also reinforcing family and community bonds. These connections act as a bridge, uniting diverse groups and promoting shared experiences:

> "...there is a connection across generations; it's not just focused on children but also on adults and older individuals... when they come from kindergarten, it resembles a child's room, and the environment feels natural to the children." (A9–11: 96)

Individualized approach

Play Hubs emphasize the importance of individualized approaches to children's learning and development. Teachers adapt their methods to suit each child's unique needs, recognizing that what works for one child may not work for another. This personalized attention not only respects individual differences but also facilitates visible progress, especially as children build new skills and confidence over time. Observing such developmental milestones is one of the most rewarding aspects for educators:

> "Children's behavior (...) every child is different, and each requires a different approach. I don't think it's realistic to have one method that works for all children (...) for example, when teaching how to tie shoelaces, I have

three children, and I need to explain and teach it to each of them differently." (A6: 59)

Consistent financial support as a key aspect

Financial resources are a crucial component for the successful operation of Play Hubs. Funding ensures access to professional training, necessary materials, and the ability to organize diverse activities. However, financial constraints remain a recurring challenge, particularly after the end of external funding cycles, such as those supported by organizations like UNICEF and Porticus. Involved teachers and Play Hub staff emphasize that adequate funding is indispensable for maintaining the professionalism and impact of PlayHub initiatives. Funding also plays a critical role in ensuring inclusivity, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Financial support allows for activities like theater visits or workshops, which might otherwise be inaccessible to some students due to costs. Respondents also highlight the need for flexible budgeting. This includes the renewal of materials and the organization of activities fostering community engagement and inclusion:

> "PlayHubs are purely project-funded, making sustainability a challenge once grants end. However, fundraising has allowed for continuity by securing new donors." (A1–5)

> "Funding for workshops is essential because we truly had workshops (...) every day, there was something thematic. And when we want to take students to the theater (...) there are students who don't have money." (A12: 80-82)

> "I think that without funding (...) if we didn't have the training, it wouldn't have been as professional…" (A12: 82)

4 Conclusions

The presented report explores the role of Play Hubs in facilitating transitions from early childhood education and care (ECEC) to primary education, focusing on the perspectives of Play Hub coordinators, staff, and program related stakeholders. The research was guided by three central questions: (a) How do Play Hub coordinators and staff define and perceive the concept of "transition" in the context of early childhood development and Play Hubs? (2) What specific strategies are used to prepare children for formal ECEC and primary education within the Play Hub? (3) How effective are these strategies perceived to be?

Initially, the evaluation plan included collecting data from some of the municipality representatives to gain insights into policy perspectives on transitioning and on the role of projects such as Play Hubs, including the alignment of such projects with municipal educational priorities. However, following discussions and an agreement between ICDI and WOS (Škola dokorán), it was decided to shift the emphasis to gathering WOS expert views on transition, including insights, processes, and challenges. The conclusions summarize the evaluation findings according to the research questions, including the theoretical underpinnings and understanding of the transition period by experts and literature:

- According to literature and experts, transition refers to the process of children moving between educational settings, such as preschool to primary school, emphasizing developmental, pedagogical, and professional continuity to ensure a smooth adjustment
- Effective transitions rely on continuity across developmental, pedagogical, and professional domains, including alignment of teaching practices, structured environments, and fostering collaboration among stakeholders
- Introduced in 2021, the mandatory pre-primary year for five-year-olds is one of the first steps to formalize smoother transitions from kindergarten to primary schools
- Although not their main aim, Play Hubs as seen by WOS experts can serve as bridges to formal education by familiarizing children with school environments, supporting early literacy and social skills, and offering less formalized, play-based learning processes
- Play Hubs encourage parental involvement through collaborative and family-centered approaches, creating shared understanding and strengthening support systems for children during transitions
- Play Hubs adapt to diverse needs, such as focusing on language inclusion for Ukrainian refugees or integrating marginalized Roma children, emphasizing the role of cultural and linguistic acclimatization in successful transitions
- Informal educational initiatives like Play Hubs face systemic challenges and variability in political support. Addressing these barriers seems important for scalability and long-term sustainability

How do Play Hub coordinators and staff define and perceive the concept of transition in the context of early childhood development and Play Hubs?

- Transitioning from kindergarten or nonformal education to primary school through Play Hubs practically involves activities fostering literacy, social and emotional readiness, physical readiness, and cultural integration. Play Hubs provide flexible environment that is able to facilitate these aspects, supporting both children and their families in navigating the transitioning phase
- Play Hubs emphasize literacy development by incorporating group reading sessions or storytelling. They also address the unique language challenges faced by refugee children, creating structured support for language acquisition
- Social readiness includes providing space for children to form relationships, navigate group dynamics, and resolve conflicts. Emotional resilience, including self-regulation, enables children to adapt to the structured environment of primary school confidently. Play Hubs can foster these skills through social interactions among children from diverse backgrounds
- Through Play Hubs, children are encouraged to develop basic hygiene or dressing. Physical health, supported by limiting screen time and promoting active play, is also a key focus
- Visiting school environments before formal enrollment can help bridging the gap between nonformal and formal education and make it more gradual, increasing the familiarity of children with the environment
- Play is central to child development and transitioning. Unstructured or structured play activities in Play Hubs promote learning, creativity, and social interaction while preparing children for the routines of formal schooling.
- Play Hubs create inclusive and secure environments for children present in no other educational institutions, particularly benefiting children from refugee or marginalized backgrounds
- Play Hubs have the potential to support integration by addressing language barriers, promoting cultural acclimatization, and encouraging joint activities that bring children and families together
- Play Hubs complement kindergartens and schools by filling potential gaps in parental engagement. Parents are encouraged to actively participate
- Some of the workshops in Play Hubs educate parents on the importance of early education and developmental milestones, Play Hub have the potential – therefore – to empower families to support their children effectively

The effectiveness of Play Hubs is influenced by multiple factors, which can be grouped into enabling and hindering aspects that are not specifically connected to transitioning, but are rather a part of general factors. These are categorized into

factors related to (a) the setting and set-up of activities, (b) people-related factors, and (c) networking and information dissemination:

- Long-term availability of educational toys and materials, even after project funding ends, supports continuous engagement and development for children
- Convenient locations in primary schools and near other educational institutions and residential areas promote attendance and help children and families integrate into the Play Hub community
- Flexible financial planning allows Play Hubs to adapt to community needs, introduce new activities, and maintain high-quality services
- On the other hand, children's reliance on electronic devices presents challenges for engaging them in meaningful, non-digital activities
- Lack of accessible infrastructure such as wheelchair-friendly entrances – when Play Hubs located in the second floor – limits participation for children with disabilities
- Regular parent-teacher interactions and structured activities promote collaboration. Consistent attendance reinforces positive habits for both children and parents
- Motivated and creative staff foster a positive environment, supported by professional development and knowledge-sharing networks
- Additional support from school staff and volunteers enhances operational efficiency and allows for better management of activities
- Inconsistent parental engagement and reliance on digital distractions can hinder children's development and participation in Play Hub activities
- Differences in cultural norms and language barriers between Slovak and Ukrainian families create obstacles to integration and collaboration
- Joint activities between kindergartens, primary schools, and Play Hubs build strong connections and provide varied experiences for children and families.
- Word-of-mouth recommendations among parents encourage participation and foster a sense of community
- Online platforms extend outreach, providing real-time updates and engaging families effectively
- Large-scale events and workshops bring families together, fostering collaboration and inclusivity

5 Recommendations

The findings from the evaluation of Play Hubs reveal a multifaceted approach to supporting children's transition from home and nonformal to formal educational settings, aligning with the theoretical and WOS expert-based criteria for successful transitions. Play Hubs in Slovakia seem to emphasize developmental continuity through – mostly providing space – but also activities that build social, emotional, and cognitive readiness, through literacy workshops or play. Familiarity with the school environment, achieved through coordinated visits and shared spaces potentially helps to mitigate adjustment challenges.

Pedagogical alignment is facilitated through the theoretical concept of the child-centered approach, and practically through organic collaboration between teachers, assistants and Play Hub volunteer staff, at least theoretically ensuring consistency in teaching practices across educational stages. Furthermore, professional continuity is evident in day-to-day communication between preschool and primary school teachers including those involved in the program, fostering at least a partially unified strategy for addressing diverse developmental needs. These findings align with Zgonec et al.'s (2022) emphasis on supportive environments that enable children to achieve their full potential both academically and socially.

However, barriers to transition persist, including disparities in parental engagement, language and cultural differences, and infrastructure limitations. These challenges highlight gaps in family involvement, which Play Hub workers partially address by integrating families into the educational process and providing nonformal support. Yet, inconsistencies in parental engagement often stem from factors beyond the control of both teachers and Play Hub staff, and are linked to parents' educational backgrounds and socioeconomic status (Arnold et al., 2019).

From the perspective of Play Hubs and schools, aligning teaching methods and structural practices with formal educational systems remains an area for further development. Compared to the criteria outlined by Mangione et al. (1998) and Kakvoulis (2003), Play Hubs effectively address the importance of continuity but face challenges in achieving systemic consistency. Their role as a bridging space between nonformal and formal education, particularly for marginalized communities and refugee populations, underscores their potential as a model for advancing transitional strategies while highlighting the need for continuous adaptation and policy support to overcome existing barriers:

Ensuring sustainability through stable financing

The findings underscore the importance of stable, long-term financing and a consistent conceptual framework for Play Hubs to ensure their sustainability and effectiveness in facilitating smooth transitions. Reliance on project-based funding creates uncertainties that limit the scalability and continuity of these initiatives,

hindering their ability to fully integrate into formal educational systems. A shift toward sustained financial support and embedding Play Hubs as a permanent part of early childhood education infrastructure would enable continuous improvement, long-term resource planning, and deeper community impact. Stable financing would also enhance the alignment of Play Hubs with developmental, pedagogical, and professional continuity criteria, ensuring they remain a reliable bridge for children transitioning into formal education.

Balancing Play Hub integration with school activities through heightened parental involvement

To maximize the impact of Play Hubs within schools, it seems useful to align the Play Hub activities closely with those of Školský klub while maintaining a distinct yet complementary focus. Integrating Play Hubs into the broader school ecosystem seems to encourage collaboration among educators and ensures a seamless experience for children transitioning between structured and nonformal learning environments. However, it is crucial to preserve the unique nature of Play Hub activities, such as creative workshops, play-based learning, and parental engagement, to enrich the overall educational support. Additionally, Play Hubs should remain accessible to parents – locating Play Hubs in spaces that are easy to reach, both within and outside school grounds, ensures regular attendance and broader community involvement. Coordinators and teachers should work together to design schedules and activities that do not only replace or provide spaces for pupils and their homeworks or to replace activities of Školský klub, but to foster a supportive, family-centered environment that complements formal education through heightened parental involvement.

Training Play Hub personnel in transitioning strategies

To ensure a smooth and effective transition from nonformal to formal education, it is recommended that Play Hub personnel including primary school teachers receive specialized training on key aspects of transitioning. This training should cover developmental, pedagogical, and professional continuity, equipping staff with the skills to support children as they navigate new environments and educational settings. Topics should include fostering school readiness, addressing social and emotional development, enhancing early literacy and language skills, and building strategies to bridge cultural and linguistic gaps, particularly for children from refugee or marginalized backgrounds. Additionally, training should emphasize collaboration with schools, kindergartens, and families, ensuring consistent teaching approaches and aligned expectations. This comprehensive preparation, including continuous mentoring and supervision, will enable Play Hub staff to act as facilitators, strengthening the connection between informal and formal education and supporting children’s academic and professional success in the future.

Aligning educational priorities through heightened policy communication

To enhance the sustainability and relevance of Play Hubs, it is essential to align their activities with national educational priorities through heightened communication with policymakers. Establishing robust channels for dialogue with political representatives ensures that Play Hubs are recognized as integral to the broader educational landscape and as valuable complements to formal education systems.

Such communication facilitates a shared understanding of the goals of early childhood education, allowing Play Hubs to better respond to state priorities while maintaining their core mission of supporting smooth transitions for children. Engaging policymakers also enables advocacy for consistent funding and program support, ensuring long-term viability. This proactive collaboration can address systemic challenges, such as resource allocation and curriculum coherence, while promoting the integration of nonformal educational practices into national frameworks. By fostering regular, meaningful communication with political stakeholders, Play Hubs can position themselves as contributors to advancing state educational goals.

6 Limitations and future directions

A significant limitation of the current findings is that **most of the identified factors and effects are self-reported** by Play Hub workers – WOS cooperating principals and teachers themselves. This reliance on insider perspectives limits the real-life validity of the conclusions, as they may reflect subjective views rather than objective outcomes. Additionally, the list of respondents was preauthorized, focusing on individuals closely involved with Play Hub operations which agreed to discuss the related topics. This approach provides valuable insights into the experiences and reflections of the core team but offers little understanding of the perceptions of external stakeholders, such as parents, community members, or representatives of state. To obtain a more comprehensive and balanced evaluation, further research should incorporate the perspectives of those outside the immediate circle of workers, ensuring a broader and more nuanced understanding of the impact and challenges of Play Hubs.

To address the limitations of the current findings, future research could take two complementary directions. First, a qualitative approach focused on state educational actors, such as policymakers and regional education authorities, could provide deeper insights into their perspectives on the transition period and its alignment with state priorities. Understanding how these stakeholders conceptualize and prioritize transitioning can inform strategies that better align Play Hub operations with broader educational frameworks. Second, quantitative methods could be employed to corroborate the current findings by gathering data from unrelated teachers outside the core team. This approach would provide an objective perspective on the most important aspects of transitioning and school readiness, strengthening the validity and generalizability of the reported effects and challenges.

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Annex: Example of an interview scenario – School principals

The scenario focuses on the (a) subjective understanding of the principal's role in supporting children in their transition from nonformal to formal education. Do principals (b) apply specific strategies to prepare children for formal education, and what would be the specific factors facilitating smooth transitions/what role does the PlayHub play in it?

1 Background information

1.1 PlayHub in your school:
/ How did it start?
/ How did the functioning of the PlayHub change in time?
1.2 How many children and parents do you attract?
1.3 What were the benefits and challenges so far?

2 Understanding Play Hubs

2.1 How do you define successful transitioning of children from informal preschool education to formal education/primary schools etc.?
/ What do you think is your role in it?
2.2 Do you use some formal definitions on transitioning from informal education to formal (school curricula, indicators of collaboration)?
2.3 What are the formal aspects of the curriculum alignment?
2.4 What specific strategies do you use to foster collaboration between you and preschool educators incl. PlayHub staff?

3 Enabling factors and barriers to successful transitions

3.1 What factors have enabled successful alignment of the curriculum between preschool and primary school stages in your experience?
3.2 What barriers have you encountered when trying to ensure a smooth transition and continuous development for children?
3.3 How do collaborative efforts between educators across different education levels impact the success of transitions?
3.4 What challenges do families face in supporting their children during transitions, and how can the project address these?
3.5 How does the project overcome cultural, linguistic, or logistical barriers that may hinder family involvement in transition processes?

4 Wrap-up and recommendations

4.1 Do you recognize the TOY4Incl approach as a practical solution to the challenges you face in fostering inclusivity in the classroom?
4.2 Is there sufficient funding or support available for implementing solutions like TOY4Incl in your school, or do you think adjustments are necessary?
4.3 How well does the TOY for Inclusion approach align with your school's current educational priorities and goals for early childhood development?