

# The importance of support in transition periods during education for children with disabilities: The contribution of the Circle of Friends

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Šenjug Užarević, Vedrana; Krampač-Grljušić, Aleksandra; Lisak Šegota, Natalija

Source / Izvornik: **Didactic challenges IV Futures studies in education: Conference proceedings, 2023, 556 - 569**

Conference paper / Rad u zborniku

Publication status / Verzija rada: **Published version / Objavljena verzija rada (izdavačev PDF)**

Permanent link / Trajna poveznica: <https://um.nsk.hr/um:nbn:hr:158:330013>

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Download date / Datum preuzimanja: **2024-07-17**



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# Didactic Challenges

## CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

### International Conference Didactic Challenges IV

Futures Studies in Education

Osijek, 26th – 27th May 2022

Editors:

Sohail Inayatullah

Snježana Dubovicki

Anica Bilić



Sveučilište Josipa Jurja Strossmayera u Osijeku  
**Fakultet za odgojne  
i obrazovne znanosti**  
OBRAZUJEMO (ZA) BUDUĆNOST



Conference Proceedings co-published by Croatian Academy of  
Sciences and Arts, Center for Scientific Work in Vinkovci, Croatia

*Publisher:*

Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek  
Faculty of Education, Osijek, Croatia

*Co-publisher:*

Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts, The Center for Scientific Work in Vinkovci

*For the publisher:*

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April, 2023

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*Layout and Printing:* Studio HS internet d.o.o. Osijek

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Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek



The approval for the publication of this proceedings was given by the Senate of the Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek at the 8. session held on June 6 2023 under the number: 8/23.

ISBN 978-953-8371-15-8

CIP record is available in the computer catalogue of the City and University Library in Osijek under number 150806096.

Print run: 250

# THE IMPORTANCE OF SUPPORT IN TRANSITION PERIODS DURING EDUCATION FOR CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES: THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE CIRCLE OF FRIENDS

Preliminary communication

UDK: 373.29:376.1

**Vedrana Šenjig Užarević<sup>1</sup>, Aleksandra Krampač-Grljušić<sup>2</sup>,  
Natalija Lisak Šegota<sup>3</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Science and Education, State Scholarships and Student Support Service,  
Zagreb, Republic of Croatia

<sup>2</sup> Elementary school Ljudevit Gaj, Osijek, Republic of Croatia

<sup>3</sup> Faculty of Education and Rehabilitation Sciences, University of Osijek, Republic of Croatia

## Abstract

The transition periods during school years are one of the most important life experiences for students with disabilities for the future course of their lives.

Based on this fact, support during the transition period from early education (preschool) to primary school, from classroom to subject teaching, from primary to secondary school (and beyond) play an extremely important role in creating a positive atmosphere of acceptance and inclusion, academic achievement, social interactions, support network, and personal growth and development of the child. In the case of children with disabilities, the specifics of their functioning, the need for adaptations and ensuring accessibility of the educational environment make quality and systematic support even more important for successful transitions.

The aim of this article is to present a model for supporting children with disabilities in transition periods. This model represents a personally oriented support planning and is interested in the child's strengths and needs for support and adjustments. It also addresses the social acceptance and inclusion of children with disabilities. Circles of Friends is a modern support model that aims to include peers in a network of support and friendships. With an overview of important steps and requirements for the implementation of the Circle of Friends as one of the models of support in the transition periods during education for children with disabilities, this paper offers suggestions for a successful transition period. Emphasis was placed on the importance of documentation in the transition process, the key stakeholders and their roles, the stages of transition planning, systematic monitoring and evaluation of the inclusion process and the child's progress, as well as the development of further goals and activities in line with the concept of educational inclusion.

**Keywords:** transition periods, children with disabilities, support, Circle of Friends

## Planning support in transition periods within the education system

A transition can be defined as a change from one position, stage, system or environment to another (Riches, 1996). Transitions from one stage or phase of life to another are significant life events for individuals, especially for people with disabilities. This is because significant life events and factors that influence them represent the specifics of the social context that determines the opportunities and support and thus the quality of life of people with disabilities (Priestley, 2001). In terms of education, the most common transitions that school age students face are the transition from pre-school to primary school, the transition from classroom to subject teaching and the transition from primary to secondary school (Perry & Dockett, 2006; Strnadova & Cumming, 2014). The transition between classroom and subject teaching is particularly specific to our education system, while in other countries' education system there are also transitions from lower to higher levels of primary education, but they are named differently.

Each of these transitions places very specific demands on students and their families, as well as teachers and professionals (Strnadova et al., 2016). It is important to plan the whole process well, define clear roles, specific tasks and responsibilities, and call for cooperation and respect for all important persons from the education system as well as from the life of students.

One of the primary goals of the school is to help students plan and prepare for the rest of their lives. This planning and preparation is especially important for students with disabilities (Kellems et al., 2010).

When it comes to children with disabilities, it is important to think about the needs of the child when planning for transition and to consider the importance of adaptations and accessibility in the education system and to create an individualization for the child.

Previous studies suggest that children with disabilities do not have significantly worse transition experiences than children without disabilities (Evangelou et al., 2008), but they are certainly a more vulnerable group and it is more likely that transition experiences are shaped by a specific context (Barners-Holmes et al., 2013). According to the authors Barners-Homes et al. (2013), these specific experiences can be related to lower achievement, poorer self-image, problems in social relationships, difficulties in accepting oneself, which seriously affects the whole transition process and leads to increased stress and anxiety in students with disabilities.

Support from family and friends plays an extremely important role in preventing and reducing these feelings and other possible negative experiences, especially during the transition from classroom to subject teaching and from primary to secondary school (Curson et al., 2019).

Taking into account the specific experiences of students with disabilities, research on support in transition process states that students with disabilities can experience

long-term positive effects when support is systematic and involves teachers, peers, family members and community members (Kohler et al., 2017; Riches, 1996).

These findings highlight the importance of a holistic approach that includes all key stakeholders in transition. Key stakeholders include students, families and professionals working together to plan students' successful educational pathways.

Transition planning should be an ongoing dynamic process that helps the student achieve his or her long-term goals (Kellems & Morningstar, 2010). The following chapter introduces the theoretical concept of systematic support planning, describes the factors that contribute to transition and suggests specific activities that should be undertaken when planning and implementing support during transition periods.

According to authors Kohler et al. (2017), systematic support planning during transition is considered an organised structure with five different domains. These five broad areas are: (a) student-centred planning, (b) student development, (c) inter-agency collaboration, (d) family involvement, and (e) programme structure. Within each area, the ways and procedures to support students, the curriculum that promotes student development, and the positive school climate are elaborated in detail. Family involvement focuses on cultural relevance, empowerment and family preparation.

A study by Test et al. (2009) identified 16 predictors associated with better post-school outcomes. Some of these are mainstream education engagement, parental engagement, self-determination, social skills development, peer support, and planned and organized transition programmes. These findings support planning for transitions.

In all transitions—from pre-school to primary education, from classroom to subject teaching and from primary to secondary school, the experience of transition, as well as the child's development, are influenced by a range of factors that need to be taken into account and are related to all key stakeholders involved in providing support during transition periods.

Factors to consider when planning support during transition include: the child's characteristics, supportive relationships and initiatives (from parents and professionals), and the rights, services and educational practices that the education system implements.

The child's personal characteristics contribute to the adaptation to the new situation, so that the child can show the characteristics of adaptability and is resourceful, interested in social contacts, communicative and motivated in new situations. Parents who are committed to their children become support for their children, giving them security and protection, and even in situations of change, the trust that parents develop can make a strong positive contribution. Equally important is a quality and supportive relationship between professionals and parents. When these relationships are supportive, trusting and cooperative, the process of transition between systems becomes less demanding and therefore more successful. Finally, the overall experience of transition is influenced by the systematic conditions provided by the educa-

tion system. This refers to whether or not the system provides the legal and legislative conditions, the material and personnel conditions for support during transition process, and whether or not the principles of inclusion are applied in educational practice. The application of the principle of inclusion would mean respecting the diversity and acceptance of every pupil, regardless of the basis of diversity, and a willingness to adapt and support.

When planning specific activities to support transition, it is important to think about the specific roles and involvement of all keypersons: students, teachers, parents and professionals. Involving students means giving them the opportunity to play an active role in what is important to them personally, what they want to achieve and what kind of support they need and from whom. Only the child and his/her characteristics and needs are taken into account. The role of the educator and teacher is to describe the experiences of socialisation and inclusion, the individualisation processes, the programmes implemented and the outcomes achieved for the student, and to make suggestions for further support (O'Kane & Murphy, 2016).

Parents are important partners because they can be a source of valuable information about the child, his/her functioning, needs and specifics of life circumstances and the overall context in which the child and family are on a daily basis. The specific roles of parents throughout the process, most often highlighted by authors in the literature, include filling in data about the child and family, home and community experiences, how the child is functioning and what support needs they identify (O'Kane & Murphy, 2016; ERO, 2015; QCCA, 2015; CCEA, 2014; Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2009). In addition, parents can express their own thoughts about the child's strengths and behaviours and point out what would be useful to help the child adapt and fit into the new environment.

Teams of experts are the basis of cooperation, which is achieved through the exchange of information and transdisciplinary work. When it comes to children with disabilities, the role of the special needs professional and his/her cooperation with other members of the professional team is extremely important. Together they should ensure that all relevant information is systematically collected and shared, that support meets the child's individual needs, that strengths are promoted and that progress is systematically assessed. Strengths are understood as a child's intellectual, physical and interpersonal skills and abilities, interests and motivation for activities (O'Kane & Murphy, 2016). The child's learning and development is assessed with particular reference to the child's strengths and interests, teaching and learning approaches and support needed (O'Kane & Murphy, 2016). For this purpose, a document is created to plan and monitor the child's learning and development goals achieved. Learning outcomes for the child, but also teaching goals for the system, include: the development of a strong identity for the child, the child's connection to the environment and sense of contribution to the community, the development of a sense of well-being and a confident and engaged child (O'Kane & Murphy, 2016). The summary of the above benefits

is also presented in the form of a portfolio that is transferred from system to system or from a lower to a higher level.

To ensure that the process described is orderly and continuous, it is important to have bylaws that provide transparency in implementation and reduce confusion about the roles and responsibilities in the transmission of information from system to system and the development of a plan and programme to support the child.

In transition support, communication between systems is crucial and should be comprehensive, planned and two-way with clear objectives. This includes communication between professionals and between professionals and parents, as well as information sharing and joint planning of support during all transitions.

Research has shown that the transition phase between classroom and subject teaching and between primary and secondary school is particularly sensitive for students (Frey et al., 2009; Langenkamp, 2009; Smith et al., 2008; Akos, 2006). While the first fundamental transition, from preschool to primary school, is the basis for further planning, if it is well prepared and implemented, further transitions and support for pupils are greatly facilitated.

The transition from classroom teaching to subject teaching is considered an important crossroads as students move from a 'lower class' to a higher class', from a small number to a large number of teachers with higher expectations in terms of independence and level of teacher support and academic achievement. Among peers who worry about being socially accepted, significant changes occur, often leading to a loss of self-confidence and a decline in academic performance (Akos, 2006; Frey et al., 2009).

Peers play an important role in middle childhood (Hartup, 1996), so we can speak of social and academic milestones for students (Smith et al., 2008; Langenkamp, 2009). For all students, and especially for children with disabilities, a stimulating environment with peers, acceptance and a sense of belonging play an extremely important role in academic success, emotional development and a positive self-image (Vranjican et al., 2019; Krampač-Grljušić, 2015). The benefits of friendships include emotional security, a positive self-image, satisfaction, social competence, the satisfaction of intimacy needs and the adoption of prosocial behavioural norms (Rys & Bear, 1997; Klarin, 2000).

Friendship has been identified as an important factor contributing to quality of life, emotional development and short-term and long-term adaptations in children's social lives (Berndt, 2002; Macrone et al., 2015) and consists of providing opportunities to learn social skills, promoting social comparison and developing feelings of 'group belonging' (Macrone et al., 2015).

For children with disabilities, this transition is particularly challenging as academic demands increase significantly and students come into contact with a variety of subject teachers. Children with disabilities also have difficulty making friends



and have few peers with whom they can make friends (Saenz, 2003). Longitudinal research (Vasta et al., 2005) confirms that children do not outgrow their difficulties in peer relationships. A child with disabilities becomes more withdrawn, silent, shy (Saenz, 2003; Žic Ralić, 2010), socialises less with peers, is more likely to be rejected by peers, is more lonely, has fewer friends (Saenz, 2003) and seeks friends on his/her own (Turnball et al., 2000; Saenz, 2003). Yet children with disabilities are not without friends (Vaugh et al., 2001; Saenz, 2003). Most children with disabilities manage to have at least one friendship (Wendelborg & Kvello, 2010). Isolation and rejection can affect a disabled child's self-perception, while acceptance and friendship enable them to contribute to their community (Whitaker et al., 1998). The findings of previous studies confirm that "involved" students with disabilities are often rejected by students in the mainstream classroom and are unable to form positive relationships with their peers (Stainback & Stainback, 1990; Kamps et al., 1997, according to Miller et al., 2003). However, research confirms that typical peers are willing to befriend students with disabilities and that friendships do exist between them (Han & Chadsey, 2004). When they attend regular schools that promote inclusion, they receive more social support and make more friendships that last longer (Wendelborg & Kvello, 2010).

There is a need to address the diverse needs of students in the education system. These include not only academic achievement, but also the promotion of socio-emotional learning, tolerance and acceptance of diversity, and students' personal growth and development. Programmes that promote socio-emotional development are still underrepresented in school settings and the importance of their development and implementation is constantly propagated (Cefai et al., 2018; Durlak et al., 2011). Considering the importance of support in the transition from class to subject teaching, the Circle of Friends method as a tool of person-centred planning can be valuable support for inclusion in the primary school system, but also in the transition from class to subject teaching and in the transition from primary school to secondary school.

### **Person-centred support planning and Circle of Friends methods**

Person-centred planning is a modern model of support for children with disabilities and persons with disabilities with the aim of improving the quality of their lives within the community in which they live (Krampač-Grljušić & Mihanović, 2010). Many teachers, researchers and policy makers agree that it is immensely important that students and parents participate in person-centred planning as well as transition planning (Cavendish et al., 2016). There are five basic steps for successful person-centred planning: (1) bring users together, set a time and place for planning and support strategies; (2) create a personal profile; (3) set the vision for the future; (4) plan specific activities and steps; and (5) support implementation and networking (Rasheed et al., 2006).

All personalised planning approaches focus first on the wishes and needs of the individual and recognise the importance of formal and informal support. They aim for

broad community participation and the achievement of priorities with a projection into the future (Robertson et al., 2007; Pearpoint et al., 1992). Person-centred planning is a long-term process based on family and community involvement because it creates natural support and collaboration (Cole et al., 2000; Lesički, 2011).

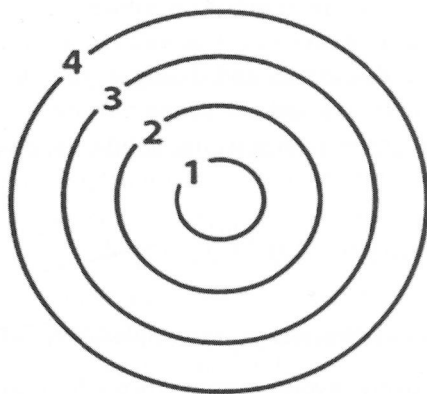
Schools should focus on the child, parents, peers and other important people in the child's life, develop children's personal and social skills and promote the attitude that services are created according to the real needs of the individual, which is also a way to complete the process (Morningstar et al., 2015).

Friendship circles as a technique of personally oriented planning are based on social and emotional learning and represent a modern model of support applied at the classroom level, giving teachers insight into students' social relationships (Pearpoint et al., 1997; Krampač-Grljušić, 2015). It enables experts to create a high-quality, individualised plan with the aim of learning new skills. By creating such support for the individual that is concrete and supportive, the possibility of quality transition planning is realised (Morninstar et al., 2015).

For this reason, schools like to use friendship circles to foster friendships and support students in transition (Miller et al., 2003; Hughes et al., 1999; Kampset et al., 1997; Hunt et al., 1996; Haring & Breen, 1992; Stainback & Stainback, 1990).

Authors Frederickson and Turner (2003) state that friendship circles can have a positive impact on students' social acceptance and contribute to the development of social skills by a) learning how to behave towards the student; b) helping the person at the centre of the circle to learn social skills; c) passing on positive examples to other peers and highlighting the student's positive qualities. Friendship circles are described as informal, flexible and open (Miller et al., 2003) and emphasise the strengths of the individual and their difficulties in the background.

The circle of friends process begins with an analysis of the student's social achievements, which provides a picture of the child's social life and the people in it. The number of social networks is determined with the help of the diagram of friendship circles (Krampač-Grljušić, 2015; Novak et al., 2001), in the centre of which is the observed student. Each of the four circles surrounding it indicates the nature or closeness of the relationship with the student at the centre. The first circle, closest to the centre, is called the circle of intimacy (trust, closeness). The second circle is the circle of friendship, the third circle of engagement and the fourth circle of exchange (Krampač-Grljušić, 2015). Throughout the process, students learn how friendships develop, recognise relationship values and work together to create circles of support for students in the class who need support in building relationships and friendships with others. Friendships with peers contribute to the child's quality of life, enhance the child's social development, provide social security, a sense of community and social support. The mentioned diagram of the Circle of Friends is also presented in Figure 1.



**Figure 1** The diagram of friendships circles (Novak et al., 2001):

1) the circle of intimacy, 2) circle of friendship, 3) circle of engagement and 4) circle of exchange.

Friendship circles as a modern model of support should find their place in the curricula of all educational institutions, even if it is more suitable for the period of transition from class to subject and from primary to secondary school.

Its implementation is simple and does not require additional financial, material or human resources. Below is an example of transition planning that follows and applies the steps of the Circle of Friends:

*1. Begin transition preparation in grades 4 and 8 to prepare for the transition to the technical classes and/or high school by introducing the Circle of Friends..*

Transition planning must start early enough to be successful. Goals must be realistic and begin no later than 4 grade of primary school (last year of classroom teaching). Starting with a conversation about friendship and a personal experience of friendship, students should complete a friendship circles map. This will give teachers an idea of the student's social network and their need for support in social relationships.

*2. Organise lessons with the class teacher with the aim of personal and social development of the students (development of social skills).*

In lessons with the class teacher, children must be actively involved in planning and students who do not have a rich social network must be continuously supported through the implementation of cross-curricular topics and/or interdisciplinary content related to personal and social development and social skills. Successful implementation of the lessons will result in students developing the following: Self-confidence and trust in their own abilities and identity; organisational skills in decision-making, goal-setting, problem-solving, planning and leadership; the ability to develop good

relationships with peers, to understand the position and opinion of other students in order to achieve wider acceptance in the school environment; cooperative learning; problem-solving through discussion and dialogue; the ability to recognise the consequences of their own actions and the actions of others; and the ability to accept the rules of cooperative group relationships, solidarity, polite behaviour, mutual aid and acceptance of diversity. By promoting students' personal and social development secondary difficulties such as peer violence, social isolation, behaviour disorders, depression and addictive behaviour can be prevented.

### *3. Involvement of the family in the implementation of the Circle of Friends.*

It is important to actively involve parents through quarterly meetings to support their child's transition work (Kellems & Morningstar, 2010). Parental perceptions of their child's acceptance in the classroom and perceptions of social networks (peer socialisation) and friendships influence their child's perceptions of friendship as well as their self-perceptions and personal development (Saenz, 2003). Parents can help strengthen their child's social skills and social network of relationships.

### *4. Students should have their own portfolio.*

The student portfolio should include a diagram of the Circle of Friends, photos of meeting activities, student characteristics, strengths and needs, peer relationship skills, problem solving skills, personal interests, leisure time, peer comments and activities. Such a portfolio can be an excellent tool for developing Individual Transition Programmes (ITP).

The education system has the task of promoting and monitoring the individual and social development of students, but this often remains at the declarative level. More attention needs to be paid to cooperation with teachers and the active involvement of parents and children. This example in particular shows the need for systematic planning and implementation of cross-curricular topics of personal (individual) and social development with the active and equal involvement of all those involved in the educational process.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, it is important to point out that in the transition periods, from one education system to another or in the transition from a lower to a higher education system, the collaboration between professionals, systematic observation of the child, support planning based on the child's needs and strengths and systematic notes or records are extremely important.

When implementing the personally oriented planning technique of Circles of Friends in transition, it is necessary to focus on the need to link social skills training

with the needs of the individual, the family and the various cultural factors (Greenberg et al., 2000). Due to the specific school climate and the special needs of students with disabilities and their peers, the programme should be developmentally appropriate for the age of the child and based on empirical evidence from prior systematic observation of students' needs and development (Grizenko et al., 2000; Whitted & Dupper, 2005).

Improving the education system and providing child-friendly services as well as the active participation of children are two of the four strategic goals of the National Strategy for the Rights of the Child in the Republic of Croatia for the period from 2014 to 2020 (Government of the Republic Croatia, 2015). The National Framework Curriculum for Early Childhood and Preschool Education (Ministry of Science and Education, 2015, p. 11) and National Framework for Primary Education (Ministry of Science and Education, 2017, p. 56) emphasises the importance of teaching personal and social development in the cross-curricular theme Personal and Social Development. This is important for students to recognise and critically evaluate their own and society's values as key factors in forming their opinions and actions. Consequently, this could influence the development of responsibility for one's own behaviour and life, a positive attitude towards others and constructive participation in society. Personal and social development enables students to develop communication, organisational and social skills and abilities, strengthen their self-esteem, acquire cooperation skills and develop mature attitudes towards others and themselves. It also enables them to develop the skills they need to express and fulfil their needs and preferences, assess their own abilities, make decisions and cooperate with others.

For the above reasons, it is necessary to pay more attention to the active and equal participation of all participants in the educational process, especially students.

In particular, contemporary conceptual considerations through the organisation of systematic support for children with disabilities and the application of the technique of personally oriented planning of the circle of friends in transitional periods are important. This technique is a promising programme for the personal and social development of students with disabilities, preventing consequential difficulties and involving students in decisions that affect them, giving them choices and including important people in their lives.

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