

Research

Transition Structures across Early Childhood Education and Care, School and After-School Care in the Faroe Islands: Documented Pathways and Potential Conditions for 5-7-Year-Olds' Continuity of Learning

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Abstract

This article maps and interprets transitions for 5–7-year-old children as organised and represented in municipal and policy documents across early childhood education and care, school and after-school care in the Faroe Islands. A qualitative document analysis of municipalities identified five distinct transition structures, ranging from simple daycare-to-school pathways to more complex routes involving pre- or preparatory classes and after-school care. Drawing on a bioecological perspective, the analysis shows how these documented structures vary in stability, coordination and exposure to different learning environments. Including after-school care in the mapping highlights how transition pathways extend across the whole school day and year, with horizontal and vertical shifts occurring not only at school entry but also within the year children turn six. When interpreted through the continuity framework, findings illustrate how municipal arrangements may support coherence through relational stability, shared pedagogical aims or play-based approaches or introduce risks of fragmentation if the purposes and practices of different settings are weakly aligned. References to play, often framed as a social or preparatory focus, reveal varying pedagogical orientations that shape children's opportunities for meaning-making and agency across settings.

The study contributes to research on early years transitions by providing a system-wide overview of how organisational diversity in a small, decentralised context shapes potential conditions for continuity of

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learning across early childhood education and care, school, and after-school care. It suggests that coherence depends not only on structural design but also on the quality of communication, collaboration and play-supportive practices that connect children's everyday environments.

Keywords

Faroe Islands, continuity of learning, educational transition structures, local governance, play, after-school care

Introduction

Transitions between early childhood education and care (ECEC), school and after-school care (ASC) mark one of the most significant phases in children's lives. These are not only changes of setting but processes that shape well-being, identity, and continuity of learning (Boylan et al., 2023; Brooker, 2008; Fabian & Dunlop, 2007; Peters, 2010). Research consistently links the quality and structure of transitions with children's well-being and educational progress (Dockett et al., 2017; Dunlop, 2017, 2021; OECD, 2017).

Against this backdrop, research on school readiness has come to dominate discussions, often framing transitions in terms of children's capacity to meet new institutional expectations. Nordic studies caution that such emphasis contributes to schoolification, where preschool practices increasingly mirror school structures at the expense of play and child-led learning (Ackesjö & Persson, 2019; Persson et al., 2022). International play research similarly argues that overly academic transition practices may reduce children's opportunities for exploratory, self-directed and socially meaningful learning through play (Fisher, 2011; Gray, 2017).

As discussed in Olsen (2026), bioecological and relational perspectives provide a lens for considering how these Nordic and international debates are expressed in the transition structures documented in municipal and policy sources. Rather than analysing individual children's lived experiences, this study explores how transitions for 5–7-year-olds are described and organised in these documents and interprets how such organisational arrangements might relate to conditions for continuity of learning.

Continuity is examined through the three interrelated dimensions of structure, development and context (Boyle et al., 2018). Structural continuity concerns the alignment of systems and curricula across ECEC, school, and ASC; developmental continuity refers to pedagogical links that connect children's previous experiences to new learning; and contextual continuity highlights the cultural, relational, and community conditions that frame these processes. This threefold framework guided the interpretation of the Faroese transition structures, clarifying how institutional arrangements may support or constrain coherence in learning and well-being.

The continuity approach enables the study to connect local policy design with broader theoretical debates about continuity of learning, play, and schoolification across the Nordic region. The purpose of the study was to map how transitions for 5–7-year-old children are organised and represented across all Faroese municipalities in municipal and policy documents and to categorise these arrangements into distinct transition structures. The study further aimed to interpret how these documented structures might relate to conditions for structural, developmental and contextual continuity of learning. By applying a bioecological perspective, it sought to illuminate how local governance and institutional configurations may shape coherence across ECEC, school, and ASC.

Research Question

How are transitions for 5–7-year-old children organised and represented across Faroese municipalities, and how can these documented structures be interpreted through the lenses of structural, developmental, and contextual continuity to understand their potential implications for continuity of learning?

Theoretical Background

This study applies a bioecological understanding of children's development, focusing on how children's transitions are shaped through interactions between person, process, context and time (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1994; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). This perspective is useful for examining how pathways across ECEC, school and ASC unfold across different settings and over time. Recent transition research further emphasises that children's well-being, participation and opportunities for continuity are shaped not only by individual transitions themselves but also by broader social and institutional conditions unfolding over time (Dunlop, 2021). This aligns with the chronosystem perspective adopted in the present study, where transitions are understood as processes shaped through timing, sequencing and repeated interactions across children's everyday environments. Transitions are influenced by multiple interconnected layers: the microsystem (home, ECEC, school, ASC), the mesosystem (links between these settings), the exosystem (municipal governance, labour markets, parental work hours), the macrosystem (Nordic welfare traditions and cultural values), and the chronosystem, where the timing, sequencing and duration of transitions shape children's opportunities for continuity across the year they turn six and enter school.

In the Faroese context, municipal responsibility for ECEC, school, and ASC illustrates exosystem influence, while Nordic ideals of equity and play reflect the macrosystem. Bronfenbrenner's model also allows a bi-directional understanding of development: children are viewed as active participants who both shape and respond to their environments through daily interactions (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). In this study, this bioecological understanding functions as a conceptual framework for interpreting how institutional structures may enable or constrain opportunities for participation, well-being, and learning across settings and sectors.

Continuity of learning is often viewed as supporting children's well-being and development during transitions (Boyle et al., 2018; Niesel & Griebel, 2005). At the same time, transitions also involve change and adaptation, meaning that continuity cannot always be fully maintained. Continuity may be viewed at three levels:

- Structural alignment of systems and curricula,
- Developmental pedagogies connecting prior experiences and
- Contextual attention to broader cultural conditions.

Weak continuity may disrupt children's self-confidence and sense of belonging, whereas strong links can foster resilience and engagement (Dockett & Einarsdóttir, 2017). At the same time, some degree of discontinuity may also support development by introducing children to new relationships, expectations and learning opportunities (Broström, 2005, 2019).

In Nordic debates, continuity is increasingly challenged by schoolification, which is viewed as limiting play and child-led learning (Ackesjö & Persson, 2019; Persson et al., 2022). This view positions continuity as something that emerges through the interaction between pedagogical practices and the wider organisation of children's daily worlds. Dencik's concept of socialisation platforms (1998, 1999, 2005) reinforces this perspective, showing how transitions reorganise the different platforms children participate in and thereby reshape relationships, expectations, and learning opportunities. These reorganisations carry implications for equity depending on how coherently platforms are

connected (Underwood et al., 2019). Here, equity is defined as ensuring that continuity across transitions affords all children fair, coherent and meaningful opportunities to participate, build relationships and engage in supportive learning experiences.

Recent research indicates that even young children may influence pedagogical cultures and institutional logic through participation (Binfield-Skøie & Menning, 2025). Scholars have described children as active agents who co-construct their transitions through interaction and meaning-making with peers and adults (Binfield-Skøie & Menning, 2025; Corsaro, 2005; Dockett & Perry, 2015; James & Prout, 2015; Revilla, 2024). Recent transition research also emphasises that children's perspectives may be silenced or constrained by institutional routines and power relations unless transition processes actively attend to children's voices and lived experiences (McNair, 2021). While this study does not directly examine children's lived experiences, these perspectives inform how the analysis interprets the potential for agency and participation within different municipality transition structures.

Play is central to these theoretical understandings of agency. It enables children to transfer familiar strategies, maintain peer relations, and negotiate new settings (Lillemyr et al., 2011; Pyle & Daniels, 2015; Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008). Research also suggests that children actively negotiate pedagogical cultures through play by interpreting and manoeuvring rules, expectations, relationships, and opportunities for participation within early years settings (Arnott, 2018). Fisher (2011) argues that playful pedagogies support continuity by enabling children to build connections between familiar early years experiences and emerging school expectations, while Gray (2017) emphasises the importance of self-directed play for children's social, emotional and cognitive development. When play is prioritised, continuity appears to be strengthened; when displaced by early academic expectations, it may be weakened (Babić, 2017).

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that transitions are dynamic, co-constructed processes situated within interconnected bioecological systems. Applying these ideas to document analysis allows for an interpretation of how structural arrangements and municipality priorities might create, support, or limit the pedagogical and relational conditions for continuity of learning across ECEC, school, and ASC.

The Faroese Context

The Faroe Islands, with its 54,858 inhabitants in July 2025 (Hagstovan, 2025), form part of the Nordic region. They comprise 18 islands and 29 municipalities, which vary considerably in size, geography, and resources. Each municipality organises its own ECEC, schools, and ASC, producing diverse transition structures. Rural municipalities may offer simpler pathways, while larger urban municipalities tend to provide more complex arrangements, sometimes involving multiple institutional shifts. These local variations constitute the basis for the transition structures identified in this study and are discussed further in the findings section. Such structural variations also appear to shape the spaces within which children enact agency, build relationships and negotiate continuity across home, ECEC, school and ASC.

Until the 1990s, relatively few children attended ECEC or ASC, with only around 30% enrolled in formal care, as most mothers were at home and children were cared for within the family. Since then, participation has increased dramatically, where most of the Faroese children enrol in ECEC,

and the majority also attend ASC after school hours, reflecting changing labour patterns and family life (Gaini, 2022; Nielsen, 2008).

Even though the Faroe Islands are part of the Nordic region, their context differs in several ways from other Nordic societies. While Faroese policies often draw on Nordic models, their implementation tends to be shaped by local conditions and traditions, sometimes with delays or adaptations (Phillips & Ochs, 2003; Steiner-Khamsi, 2012; Wood & Hedges, 2024).

It is therefore important to consider how these locally adapted systems may influence the organisation of early years transitions and the conditions for continuity of learning. In the small and decentralised Faroese education system, where each municipality designs its own provision, national policy frameworks interact closely with local traditions, community relationships and resource capacities. Analysing municipal and policy documents thus provides a way to map how these variations are formally represented and to interpret how such structural diversity might influence coherence across settings.

Method

Information on transitions for 5–7-year-old children was collected in August–September 2025 from all 29 Faroese municipalities. Each municipality was assigned a code (1–29) to support comparison. Sources included municipal websites, local policy documents, Ministry publications, and statistical data from Hagstova Føroya. A complete list of the municipal and national documents analysed in this study, including webpages and local policy materials, is available in Appendix 1 and Appendix 2. When information appeared incomplete, municipalities were contacted directly for clarification.

To enhance trustworthiness, triangulation combined online and direct sources (Denzin, 2009). Documents were treated as socially situated texts that reflect pedagogical and policy priorities rather than neutral descriptions (Fairclough, 2008). A qualitative document analysis combining categorical and interpretive strategies (Bowen, 2009; Morgan, 2022) allowed systematic comparison while remaining sensitive to contextual meaning.

Reflexivity was maintained throughout the process. The authors' positions as Faroese and Icelandic researchers offered contextual understanding but required continuous awareness of interpretive bias (Holmes, 2020; Spanger, 2012). Ethical considerations focused on the use of publicly available material. The study analysed municipal and national documents accessible online or provided by municipality institutions for clarification. No personal or identifiable data were collected, and therefore formal ethics board approval was not required. This approach aligns with ethical guidance for document-based research, which treats publicly available texts as social artefacts rather than personal data (Bowen, 2009; Denzin, 2009).

Although the study concentrates on institutional arrangements rather than children's direct voices, the analysis is guided by an understanding of children as active participants whose agency can shape how transitions are experienced. Reliability was supported through systematic coding, an audit trail, and selective double-coding of municipalities to check category stability. Details showing how institutional strings were assigned to transition structures (Ts1–Ts5) are included in Tables 1 and 2. Validity was strengthened through triangulation of data sources and theoretical grounding in the bioecological and relational framework (Patton, 2015).

Interpretations concerning potential implications for structural, developmental and contextual continuity are developed in the Discussion section. A complementary literature review helped situate the findings within international and Nordic debates on early years transitions. Searches across ERIC, Scopus, Google Scholar, and Faroese sources identified studies on context, continuity of learning, socialisation platforms and play (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014).

The findings presented below derive solely from the qualitative analysis of municipal and policy documents. They concern how transitions are described and organised in texts, rather than how they are enacted in everyday practice. Broader implications are considered in the discussion section.

Analysis: Mapping Transition Strings

First, municipal documents were mapped to identify how transitions between ECEC, school, and ASC were organised and structured. Codes were used for each institution/setting: DC = Daycare (5–6, mixed-age); PS = Preschool (5–6); PSCP = Preschool Class (within PS setting, year child turns 6); PSCA = Preschool Class (within ASC setting, year child turns 6); PTS = Preparatory Class (within school setting, year child turns 6); S = School (Grade 1 start at 7); ASC = After-School Care (the year child turns 6 or 7). Table 1. shows each municipality's provision for 5–7-year-olds represented as an "institutional string"—the ordered sequence of institutions children attend.

For example, a municipality with preschool → preschool class within ASC → school → ASC was classified "PS-PSCA-S-ASC", reflecting the presence of an intermediate, play-based preschool class before school entry. By contrast, where the preparatory class is located within the school, the institutional string was classified as "PS-PTS-ASC-S", because it introduces a formal school environment a year earlier. The combined interpretive coding process is displayed in Table 1 and follows recommendations in qualitative document analysis, where textual patterns are transformed into analytical categories (Bowen, 2009; Morgan, 2022).

Code	Municipality	Institutional string for 5-7 years olds
1	Fugloyar municipality	No children
2	Viðareiðis municipality	DC-S-ASC
3	Hvannasunds municipality	PS-S-ASC
4	Klaksvíkar municipality	PS-PSCP-S-ASC, DC-S (Kalsoy)
5	Kunoyar municipality	PS-PSCP-S-ASC
6	Fuglafjaraðar municipality	PS-PSCA-S-ASC
7	Eystur municipality	PS-PTS and ASC-S
8	Nes municipality	PS-PSCA in ASC-S-ASC
9	Runavíkar municipality	PS-PTS and ASC-S
10	Sjóvar municipality	PS-PSCA-S-ASC
11	Eiðis municipality	PS-PTS and ASC-S
12	Sunda municipality	PS-PSCP-S-ASC
13	Kvívíkar municipality	PS-S-ASC
14	Vestmanna municipality	PS-PSCA-S-ASC
15	Vága municipality	PS-PSCP-S-ASC
16	Sørvágs municipality	PS-PSCP-S-ASC
17	Sands municipality	PS-S-ASC
18	Skopunar municipality	PS-S-ASC
19	Skálavíkar municipality	PS-S-ASC
20	Húsavíkar municipality	PS-S-ASC
21	Skúvoyar municipality	No children
22	Hvalbiar municipality	PS-S-ASC
23	Tvøroyrar municipality	PS-PTS and ASC-S
24	Fámjin municipality	No children
25	Hovs municipality	PS-PTS and ASC-S
26	Porkeris municipality	DC-S

27	Vágs municipality	PS-PSCP-S-ASC
28	Sumbiar municipality	DC-PSC in DC-S-ASC
29	Tórshavnar municipality	PS-S-ASC, PS-PSCP-S-ASC, PS-PTS and ASC-S

Table 1 Coded analyses of transitions

Comparing these institutional strings revealed recurring configurations, which were grouped into five analytical transition structures (Ts1–Ts5). Table 2 presents the distribution of these structures across municipalities, showing how they differ in complexity and coordination.

Transition structures	Number of municipalities	Municipality codes
Ts1	2	4, 26
Ts2	1	2
Ts3	8	3, 13, 17, 18,19, 20, 22, 29
Ts4	12	4, 5, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14, 15, 16, 27, 28, 29
Ts5	6	7, 9, 11, 23, 25, 29

Table 2 Distribution of transition structures across municipalities

The patterns described above and visualised in the two tables represent the documented organisational structures of transitions for 5–7-year-olds across Faroese municipalities.

Descriptive Results

The five identified transition structures range from simple to complex, involving varying degrees of institutional change. Across all documents, homes were implicitly treated as the daily start and endpoint for transitions, even though they were not formally listed in the data. The analysis drew on 29 municipal documents describing local ECEC, school and ASC arrangements (see Appendix 1 and Appendix 2 for the complete list of sources).

Ts1 represents the simplest pattern, found in two municipalities (Table 2). Children attend small, mixed-age daycare groups of 4 to 5 children (ages 0–6) before starting Grade 1 at age seven (Starvsfelagið og Kommunala Arbeiðsgevarafelagið, 2024, §13). Institutional descriptions indicate that the children sometimes join age-homogeneous gatherings with peers from other daycare groups, organised in shared facilities for play and activities. After school, children go home rather than to ASC (Porkeris kommuna, 2025).

Ts2, found in one municipality (Table 2), extends this pattern by including ASC. Municipal documents describe this as involving four daily settings of daycare, school, ASC and home, thus introducing a horizontal transition to ASC when children start school (Viðareiðis kommuna, 2025).

Ts3, identified in eight municipalities (Table 2), is characterised in documents as involving nursery and preschool before Grade 1, followed by ASC (Hvalbiar kommuna, 2025; Tórshavnar kommuna, 2025). Preschools are described as larger and more structured, supporting age-based learning groups of up to 20 children (Barna- og útbúgvingarmálaráðið, 2000).

Ts4, found in 12 municipalities, is the most common structure (Table 2) and includes what municipalities refer to as a preschool class the year the child turns six, situated either within preschool or ASC settings (Nes kommuna, 2025). These classes are described as aiming to prepare children socially and academically for school through play-based learning (Sóljugarður, 2025; Vága kommuna, 2025).

Ts5, present in six municipalities, is portrayed as the most complex structure. At age six, children are described as moving from preschool to a preparatory class within the school and simultaneously begin ASC (Barna- og útbúgvingarmálaráðið, 2013; Eystur kommuna, 2025). After one year, they transition again to Grade 1. This structure includes multiple vertical and horizontal transitions within the same year that the child turns six.

Interpretation through Structural, Developmental and Contextual Continuity

Building on the five transition structures identified in the document analysis, this section explores how these documented arrangements might relate to conditions for structural, developmental and contextual continuity of learning. As the study examines institutional descriptions rather than children's lived experiences, the aim is not to infer how transitions unfold in practice. Instead, the continuity framework is used to consider what kinds of coherence or discontinuity are suggested by the ways municipalities organise and represent transitions for 5–7-year-olds.

Across the municipalities, the documented transition structures appear to form a broad continuum from simpler to more complex pathways. These variations seem linked to differences in municipality size, governance arrangements, and pedagogical framing. When viewed through a bioecological perspective, these differences may reflect variation in mesosystem connections between ECEC, school, ASC, and home, as well as exosystem conditions such as local governance and resource allocation. At the same time, research emphasises that children's participation and play can influence how institutional arrangements are interpreted in everyday practice (Binfield-Skøie & Menning, 2025; Ukkonen-Mikkola, 2025). This highlights that the documented structures represent only one layer of the broader bioecological context shaping transitions.

From an agency-oriented perspective, these transition structures can also be understood as shaping the "rooms for action" available to children as they negotiate change. Research on peer cultures and participation suggests that children actively co-construct transitions by carrying familiar practices, relationships, and play narratives into new settings (Binfield-Skøie & Menning, 2025; Corsaro, 2005; James & Prout, 2015). Different structures may therefore afford different possibilities for sustaining peer networks, transferring strategies and engaging in sustained interactions with peers and adults across settings, indicating that continuity is produced not only by institutional arrangements but also by children's own meaning-making and participation.

In this respect, ASC emerges in the documents as a potentially important, yet unevenly articulated, arena for continuity. In simpler structures such as Ts2, ASC appears as an additional horizontal setting that extends the school day, while in more complex structures such as Ts4 and Ts5 it becomes part of a densely layered institutional year when children turn six. How ASC is positioned, whether primarily as leisure provision, care or learning support, it may influence the extent to which it functions as a bridge connecting children's experiences across ECEC and school, or as a further point of fragmentation requiring coordination.

Interpreted through the three dimensions of continuity proposed by Boyle et al. (2018), the findings raise reflective questions about how coherence across settings may be created or constrained. From this perspective, the documented transition structures can be viewed as shaping the conditions under which educators, leaders, and families can enact continuity practices, even though this study does not directly observe such practices or their underlying practice architectures. The municipal documents themselves do not indicate whether more or fewer transitions inherently support continuity. Rather, they suggest that the quality of cross-sector collaboration, pedagogical alignment, sustained relationships and opportunities for participation may matter more than the number of institutional steps children encounter.

Structural continuity

Simpler pathways such as Ts1–Ts2 appear to emphasise relational stability and limited organisational change. These features may support strong structural continuity but may also limit exposure to diverse peer groups or school-like routines (Stanek, 2011). More complex structures such as Ts3–Ts5 broaden children's learning environments and offer differentiated steps toward school. Yet their multiple transitions may introduce points at which coherence needs to be actively maintained (Dockett & Einarsdóttir, 2017). Rather than a straightforward linear pattern, the documents suggest that different structures may support different aspects of continuity in different ways. From a bioecological perspective, structural continuity is therefore not a simple function of the number of institutional moves but depends on how organisational arrangements support stable proximal processes, overlapping staff, shared routines and sustained communication over time.

Developmental continuity

The documents also differ in how they describe pedagogical aims. Simpler structures highlight informal play and relational familiarity, whereas more complex ones refer to play-based preparatory activities in the year children turn six (Broström, 2019; Vága kommuna, 2025). Nordic research warns that if readiness expectations dominate transition practices, opportunities for play and socio-emotional development may become constrained (Ackesjö & Persson, 2019; Babić, 2017; Persson et al., 2022). This concern aligns with Fisher's (2011) argument that transitions to school should preserve playful pedagogies that support children's confidence, agency and meaning-making across settings. Although the study cannot assess how these tensions unfold in practice, the variations in how pedagogical purposes are framed raise questions about how developmental continuity is envisioned across different structures. In the Faroese context, ASC may be particularly significant here: where ASC maintains a recognisably playful and relational pedagogy that connects with children's experiences in ECEC and school, it may extend developmental continuity across the whole day; where its aims and practices are weakly linked to those of other settings, it risks becoming a parallel track with limited pedagogical connection.

Contextual continuity

Differences between municipalities also appear to shape the contextual conditions surrounding transitions. In small communities, close family and community networks may help maintain coherence, whereas larger municipalities provide broader socialisation platforms (Dencik, 1999, 2005) that may expand children's relational worlds. However, greater institutional scale may also require more coordination to avoid fragmentation. These contextual features are intertwined with children's experiences of care, emotional security, and well-being: continuity is likely to be strengthened where stable relationships with trusted adults and peers carry across settings and weakened where transitions entail repeated breaks in key attachments. These patterns reflect exosystem and macrosystem influences (Bronfenbrenner, 1994) and align with research emphasising how institutional conditions and inequalities shape children's transition experiences over time (Dunlop, 2021).

Play, referenced in several municipal descriptions of the transition year, is frequently portrayed as a pedagogical focus when children turn six. While the documents do not reveal how play is enacted in practice, their emphasis suggests some recognition of its potential bridging role between ECEC, school and ASC. Research indicates that play can support continuity by enabling children to carry familiar strategies and relationships into new contexts (Lillemyr et al., 2011; Pyle & Danniels, 2015; Pyle et al., 2017; Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008). Conversely, when readiness discourses overshadow play, children's agency and opportunities for meaning-making may become constrained (Dockett et al., 2017; Recchia & Bently, 2015). Although this study cannot determine how play functions in practice within each structure, the varied emphasis on play in the documents offers a thought-provoking indication of differing pedagogical orientations across municipalities.

Taken together, these interpretations suggest that the documented transition structures may shape different potential conditions for continuity of learning across ECEC, school, and ASC. While the organisational differences mapped in this study provide important insights, they also raise further questions about how coherence is constructed, negotiated, or challenged within Faroese municipalities – a question that future research involving educators', parents', and children's perspectives could explore more fully. These interpretive insights form a basis for considering broader implications for policy, practice and future research, particularly in a decentralised system where organisational diversity is concurrently a resource and a source of potential fragmentation.

Implications for Policy, Practice, and Research

The Faroese case suggests that continuity of learning is unlikely to be ensured by structural design alone and may depend on deliberate coordination across ECEC, school, and ASC. Interpreting the documented structures in light of the literature points to three broad priorities for policy, practice, and further inquiry.

First, *cross-sector routines* appear crucial. In structures such as Ts3–Ts5, where children move between several institutions and professional teams, joint planning, shared transition procedures, and mutual information flow could help make continuity visible to children and families. In addition to routines among professionals, involving children in the design and review of transition activities, such as identifying what helps them feel prepared, secure, and welcomed, acknowledges their role as active contributors to transition processes (Boylan et al., 2023; Recchia & Bently, 2015). Examples

from other contexts include shared transition documents or portfolios to support pedagogical alignment (NCCA, 2016; OECD, 2017), co-organised visits between ECEC school staff and ASC (Victoria State Government, 2015) and agreed frameworks that clarify responsibilities for preparing and welcoming children across sectors (CMEC, 2021; NSW Department of Education, 2020). Developing comparable, context-sensitive routines in Faroese municipalities could strengthen coherence within and across the identified transition structures.

Second, *play as a pedagogical thread* warrants sustained attention. Municipal descriptions of preschool classes and preparatory years emphasise play-based learning, yet international debates warn that readiness discourses can gradually narrow the space for exploratory play and socio-emotional development (Ackesjö & Persson, 2019; Persson et al., 2022). Maintaining time and space for play across institutional boundaries—particularly in ASC, where play and leisure are often foregrounded—may support developmental coherence by allowing children to carry familiar strategies, interests, and relationships into new environments. Rather than making ASC more like school, policy could support recognition of the different but complementary forms of learning that play can enable in each setting (Boylan et al., 2023). From a sociological and bioecological perspective, play is not only a pedagogical tool but a strategy through which children themselves create continuity, bringing familiar play activities, identities, and peer practices into new environments (Corsaro, 2005; Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008).

Third, *monitoring local variation* is important for equity. The mapping shows that children's transition pathways differ not only between municipalities but, in some cases, within them. Systematic mapping and periodic review of transition structures, including attention to how ASC is integrated, could help identify patterns that may advantage or disadvantage particular groups of children, such as those with additional support needs, minority-language children, or those living in small rural communities. Recent international research highlights how variation in governance and provision can shape inequities during transitions (CMEC, 2021; European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2025). Such monitoring could inform targeted support where structures are particularly complex or where coordination mechanisms are weak. Monitoring could therefore combine structural mapping with educators', parents' and children's accounts of how transitions are experienced, making visible where particular groups encounter barriers to full participation (Underwood et al., 2019).

These priorities underscore the value of intentional, play-supportive, and context-sensitive approaches that acknowledge both institutional coordination and children's potential contributions to their own learning.

Strengths and Limitations

A key strength of this study lies in its comprehensive mapping of transition structures across all 29 Faroese municipalities, offering an initial system-wide overview of how pathways for 5–7-year-olds are formally organised for the whole nation. By including ECEC, school and ASC, the analysis goes beyond the frequently examined preschool–school connection and incorporates horizontal transitions that shape children's daily lives. Combining municipal policy documents, legislative texts, and local information provides a comparative perspective on how continuity of learning may be shaped by structural and contextual variation in a small, decentralised education system. The

integration of bioecological, relational, and pedagogical frameworks adds theoretical depth, enabling analysis that connects local governance and institutional design to children's everyday learning conditions. The use of triangulation and systematic coding, including the construction of institutional strings and analytical transition structures (Ts1–Ts5), contributes to methodological rigour and transparency (Patton, 2015).

At the same time, the document-based design introduces several limitations. Findings depend on the quality and completeness of publicly available sources. Some municipalities offer detailed pedagogical information, whereas others provide minimal descriptions, leading to uneven depth across cases. Local practice may differ from formal policy documentation, creating a possible gap between intended and enacted transitions. Moreover, the analysis represents a snapshot of transition structures as they were described in 2025; municipal arrangements, ASC provision and national regulations may change over time, potentially altering transition strings and their distribution. Informal practices such as flexible use of ASC, overlapping staff roles or family-based care are only partially visible in the documents and may play a significant role in shaping children's experiences. Finally, the continuity framework applied in this study has largely been developed in relation to transitions between ECEC and school; while it provides a useful heuristic for interpreting ASC, specific conceptual work on continuity in after-school settings remains limited. The absence of educators', parents' and children's direct perspectives further restricts insight into how transition structures are experienced in practice. This absence is particularly significant given the theoretical stance adopted in the study, which views children as active participants who shape transitions through their everyday interactions and meaning-making (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007; Corsaro, 2005). Future research could therefore benefit from combining document analysis with participatory and longitudinal methods to explore how policy frameworks are implemented and enacted in everyday educational transitions.

Conclusion

This study set out to map and interpret how transitions for 5–7-year-old children are described and organised across Faroese municipalities, using municipal and policy documents to identify system-wide patterns in the organisation of ECEC, school and ASC. In doing so, the study answered how transitions are documented across Faroese municipalities and how these structures can be understood in terms of structural, developmental and contextual continuity. The analysis identified five distinct transition structures that vary in complexity and degree of coordination, reflecting how local governance and institutional design shape children's pathways across educational settings. In a small and decentralised system such as the Faroese environment, these variations highlight the interaction between national policy ideals and local capacities, traditions and resources.

Viewed through a bioecological perspective, the findings suggest that continuity of learning depends not only on the number or sequence of transitions but also on the quality of alignment, communication and repeated interactions between institutions over time. From a bioecological and sociological perspective, continuity of learning is co-constructed by institutional arrangements, professional practices and children's own participation and peer relationships. Simpler structures may foster close relationships and emotional stability, while more complex pathways can extend children's social and learning environments but may also introduce discontinuities unless pedagogical aims are clearly coordinated. Mentions of play in some municipal descriptions indicate

an awareness of its bridging role between ECEC, school and ASC, although its practical enactment cannot be determined from documents alone.

Taken together, these findings imply that organisational diversity can both enrich and challenge coherence in children's early learning trajectories. The Faroese case illustrates that organising transitions as coherent pathways requires sustained attention to governance, professional collaboration and the status of play and care across ECEC, school and ASC, rather than reliance on structural design alone. For policymakers and practitioners, this underscores the importance of dialogue between sectors, attention to local variations, and sustained recognition of play as a pedagogical thread that supports children's sense of well-being and agency. Future research would therefore benefit from combining document analysis with the perspectives of educators, families, and children themselves to understand how policy structures are lived in everyday practice and how continuity of learning is jointly constructed by children and adults across transitions.

Ethics and Consent

The data that support the findings in this study do not involve human subjects, human material, or human data. Therefore, no ethics approval or consent was required.

Data Availability Statement

The data analysed in this study consist of publicly available municipal and policy documents, supplemented by clarification from municipalities where necessary. A list of the documents and webpages consulted is provided in Appendices 1 and 2.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

Author Contributions

Sonja Olsen: Conceptualization, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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