

## **How do the interests of different actors shape the transitions of children with delinquent behavior between educational settings: school front line specialists' perspective**

**Research Overview.** The transition of children with delinquent behavior between educational settings reflects an interplay of interests among actors: from policymakers prioritizing accountability and efficiency, to the children navigating environments. Frontline school specialists occupy positions where they mediate these competing interests directly, exercising judgment to support transitions.

**Purpose.** To reveal, from the perspective of frontline school specialists —teachers, social workers, psychologists, etc.—, how the interests of different actors shape underlying logic of transitions for children displaying delinquent behavior.

**Methods.** This abstract presents preliminary insights from an ongoing grounded theory study. The data is derived from in-depth interviews with various school frontline specialists, including social workers, psychologists, teachers, etc. from different regions of Lithuania. This research No P-EDU-23-14 is co-funded by the European Union (the project „Breakthrough in Educational Research“ No 10-044-P-0001) under the 1st April 2025 Agreement with the Research Council of Lithuania RCOL) and the 15th April 2025 Joint Activity Agreement with Vilnius University.”

**Results.** Delinquent behavior—such as truancy, aggression, substance use, bullying, etc.—usually triggers an institutional response. The data reveal a wide range of responses, including routine classroom management measures, situational decisions, parental involvement, and support from social pedagogues, psychologists, and other specialists. Alongside these measures, schools also introduce changes in the psychosocial environment and learning setting—for example, transferring a student to another class or a calmer environment, shifting to remote learning, or changing schools. The analysis suggests that such transitions are usually not the first response to problematic behavior, but a later-stage intervention. They tend to be considered when schools conclude that earlier, simpler measures are no longer sufficient, and that the existing environment can no longer manage, contain, or adequately respond to the child's behavior. Transitions become more likely when the child's behavior begins to threaten the safety of other children or teachers; when the relationship with the current class or teacher breaks down and the child is no longer accepted in that environment; when mental health or broader functioning crisis makes the normal school routine unbearable; or when the child is seen as needing a more clearly structured, more controlled, or otherwise better adapted environment than the current school can offer.

From this perspective, transitions should not be understood as isolated administrative decisions, but as multilayered social processes in which different actors participate and unequal interests intersect. These processes involve not only the child, whose behavior often triggers the transition, but also peers, parents, teachers, support professionals, and school administration.

According to frontline school specialists, although official discourse frequently emphasizes the child's well-being, empirical material shows that in practice the interests of schools and teachers in managing difficult situations often take precedence. As a result, the child's emotional, psychological, and individual educational interests may remain insufficiently recognized or only partially addressed. This tension becomes visible in a typology of transitions based on the status granted to the child's interests.

- **interest-ignoring transitions**, driven mainly by goals of restoring control, attendance, or discipline.

- **neutral transitions**, in which the child's interests are not openly denied but do not become the actual basis for decision-making.
- **interest-considering transitions**, where the child's needs are acknowledged but balanced against the safety of others, teachers' capacities, parental pressure, and administrative concerns.
- **interest-responsive transitions**, in which the child becomes an active participant and their voice is heard directly or through intermediaries.
- Finally, **preventive transitions**, aimed at anticipating difficulties early and preventing escalation, appear in the data more as an aspiration than as common practice.

An important finding is that support specialists may view a change of environment itself as a success if the current setting no longer meets the child's needs. Some noted that after leaving the present school, "a completely different life begins," referring to cases in which transfer to another educational model, such as a youth school, significantly improved both academic performance and behavior. Teachers, however, more often view success as something that should be achieved within the current setting, partly because relocation is frequently not a realistic option.

The cases also show that transitions are typically oriented toward specific groups of child interests:

- restoring basic stability and safety;
- ensuring psychological protection in the context of mental health difficulties;
- reducing stress and overload;
- restructuring relationships around belonging and acceptance;
- protecting others in situations of crisis and institutional exhaustion.

Overall, transitions cannot be adequately understood by looking only at the child's interests. Other actors' interests initiate decisions, shape the form of transition, and provide it with institutional legitimacy. Thus, transitions function as mechanisms for rebalancing competing interests: when control and safety dominate, they become more exclusionary; when organized around the child's voice and well-being, they can become supportive and transformative.