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From Family to Kindergarten¹: A Common Experience in a Transition Perspective

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1. Question

Adaptation to the child's first entry into an institution outside the family (Kindergarten) has often been described as a crisis. Adaptation behaviour was observed and interpreted as stress reaction. Long term consequences for adaptation to further experiences (e.g. entry into school) have been stated. However, literature on entry into Kindergarten deals mostly with selective proposals and practical hints (e.g. Becker-Textor, 1993). No concept was found that was suitable for enhancing the multiple demands and expectations concerning children and parents as well as on the institution's side.

The question we try to answer is, if a perspective of transition can be transferred to the entry of children into a day care system that is taken from family development in family research. Day care system was the German "Kindergarten", what would mean nursery school, that is attended by children from 3 - 6, before they enter our school system.

2. Theoretical background

Prior studies either referred to attachment theory (Laewen, 1989) or to stress theory (Haebele & Wolf-Filsinger, 1986). We looked for a developmental perspective of adaptation to changes in life circumstances. Welzer (1991) - studying the social psychological problem of migration from former East to former Western Germany - defined transition as a "phase of intensified developmental demands". The Cowan's transition model (1991; Cowan et al., 1994) was designed to study family development, e.g. the birth of first child, divorce, remarriage and includes the perspectives of all family members (cf. Fthenakis, 1995 a-d). We consider this model to be helpful for the understanding of the child's and parents' adaptation in the process of family's interaction with child care institutions (Griebel & Niesel, 1996, 1998).

Transitions mean changes in identity, roles and relations.

Transition processes go along with strong emotions and stress. We found it important (a) to stress an ecological component, meaning commuting between two different systems - family

¹ In Germany "Kindergarten" (nursery school) is part of the social welfare system and not the education system. To distinguish this from the systems in other countries we use capital initials: Kindergarten and School.

and child care institution, so that we had to include the teacher's perspective as well and (b) to stress an aspect of Lazarus' stress theory: that it makes a difference for the subject, if adaptation demands are experienced as challenges.

The Kindergarten teacher as a professional guide for the family adapting to Kindergarten was our main topic.

3. Methods

- Questionnaires for Kindergarten teachers, representative for Bavaria, 133 questionnaires were returned (44 % of emission). 124 teachers had completed an additional part concerning the adaptation of a target child in the group (July 1995);
- parent interviews with 20 parents around the beginning (Sept./Oct.1995) and six months after entry of their first born child (Febr./March 1996);
- interviews with 11 new children in two Kindergarten groups, newcomers and elder children together (Nov. '95 - June '96) in small discussion groups;
- analysis of printed materials from 74 Kindergartens and enrolment questionnaires from 95 Kindergartens that teachers use to inform parents or to get information from parents.

4. Some selected results

New children in the group: groups have between 23 and 26 members; in the average the groups had a proportion of 40 % children in their first year of Kindergarten attendance, and among them about 4 to 5 three-year olds.

4.1 Difficult circumstances

Teachers clearly identify the beginning of a new year in Kindergarten with a with a newly combined group as a time with many demands. When asked which circumstances made their work especially difficult at that time, we found the following:

**Tab.1 Major demands on teacher during time of integration of new children
Statements by Kindergarten teachers**

"new" mothers cannot separate from their children	89%
too little information about individuality of new child	86 %
some new children keep too close contact to teacher and demand her attention	83 %
difficulties to meet different needs of "new" and "old" children	73 %
"new" children cannot separate from their mothers	69 %
parents in the beginning have vague or misleading expectations concerning pedagogical work in Kindergarten	64 %
too little information about family background of new children	57 %
new children do not have experience in being taken care of by persons other than parents	44%
too many tasks outside the group (e.g. administration work)	43 %

It seems important to us that from the teachers' perspective (1) feelings of parents play a role and (2) lack of information about child and family as well as (3) lack of information on the parent's side.

4.2 Exchange of information

It was of special interest in our study how exchange of information between Kindergarten and parents supports the pedagogical work of the teacher as well as the adaptation process of children and parents.

Tab.2 How do teachers and parents get to know each other? Admission procedures in Bavarian Kindergartens

Means	% of kindergartens
enrolment questionnaire	95 %
enrolment interview (formal and short)	90 %
talk about admission (before decision is made)	23 %
talk about admission (after decision is made)	36%
parents' evening of "new" parents	50 %
parents' evening of all parents	30 %

We then asked for procedures by which teachers make the adaptation to Kindergarten easier. These procedures also offer an opportunity to learn something about child and parents.

Tab. 3 Easing the transition

Procedure	% of Kindergartens		
	Yes	No	-
parents are allowed to accompany their child into the group room	97%	3%	0%
preliminary visits	91%	8%	1%
parents may are allowed to stay for some time with their children	80%	17%	3%
staggered entry	40%	44%	16%

It seems to be rather common that in the first days parents are allowed to accompany their child into the room and stay there for a while – but what does that mean in practice when alls new children - and their mothers come in a bunch?

So in many Kindergartens time seems short for exchange of information. We thought of different matters of interest and asked who would talk about them – teachers or parents?

Tab. 4 When teachers talk to parents for the first time: Who talks about what?

Themes	Percentage of Kindergartens	
	Teacher's initiative	Parent's initiative
educational approach	47 %	20 %
strange situation for child	46 %	17%
problems when child is brought in the morning	44 %	17%
daily routines in the institution	41 %	22%
unexpected behavior of child	34 %	17%
different views on education family/institution	32 %	26%
differences in adaptation process between children	30 %	25%
parents' rights	28 %	22%
offers for cooperation	26 %	22%
feelings of loss	20 %	28%
concerns about "co-educator"	12 %	32%

Topics relate to institutional care as well as to the children's behaviour and adaptation, topics concerning the psychological situation of the parents themselves are mentioned rather seldom and are brought up more often by parents than by teachers.

Teachers are aware the emotions of parents play a role but they seemingly hesitate to talk about personal matters with parents. Teachers seem to unaware of what the transition means

for parents although 90 % of teachers say that it makes their work more complicated that mothers of new children cannot easily separate from their children.

Teachers are aware that family background especially if critical life events (transitions in family development) are involved, are important for the understanding of a child's reaction during the adaptation process. How do teachers seek information about children and their families?

Tab. 5 Information about family transition context by source of information

child's experience	teacher is generally informed	enrolment questionnaire	enrolment talk	admission talk	informally
birth of a sibling	95 %	74 %	62 %	39 %	59 %
death of a closely related person	68 %	8 %	53 %	38 %	70 %
separation/divorce	92 %	68 %	68 %	39 %	59 %
new partnership, remarriage	79 %	35 %	49 %	41 %	68 %
parent takes up employment	96 %	72 %	64 %	39 %	55 %
parent loses job	60 %	22 %	45 %	34 %	62 %
child has experience with another person besides parents taking care	78 %	23 %	66 %	37 %	60 %
active participation of father in caretaking of child	45 %	5 %	39 %	32 %	60 %
child previously attended crèche, play group or other	79 %	27 %	63 %	32 %	48 %

Considering that many teachers say they know to little about the child and his/her family background and also considering that family transitions (critical life events) may effect

adaptation to Kindergarten, we see that teachers are probably experiencing a conflictual situation: They find it difficult to talk to parents about family questions as they are regarded to be of more private nature.

When teachers were asked for proposals to optimize admission procedures three quarters of these proposals referred to a better information exchange with parents.

4.3 Problems reported for children

“Target children” were 54 girls and 68 boys, 30 children younger than 4, 64 between 4 to five years, 28 5 years and older.

Teachers were asked for problems, that new children had and that they considered to be connected to the ongoing adaptation to Kindergarten. (Research on stress reactions within the first four weeks of Kindergarten (Wolf-Filsinger, 1984) and behaviour problems in general (Berger, 1986, 1997) has been reported before.)

For 67 children (54 %) some sort of problems was reported, that means, for a remarkable proportion of new children, even 35 weeks after entry problems were registered. Descriptions contained inadequate striving for dominance, some problems with group integration, keeping rules, shy or dominant behaviour, seeking the teachers’ presence, lack of keeping a level of effort with achievement demands.

These problems were below the seriousness of clinical symptoms and they others than short-term stress symptoms, as reported in observation studies.

We hypothesized that there should be no relations between age and sex of children and the fact, that problems for them were reported. The everyday belief that younger children were more prone to adaptation stress than older children and that boys cause more trouble than girls should not be relevant in connection with transition reactions. We could not find results that falsified our hypothesis.

Even those teachers who assumed a connection between age, sex and difficulties with adaptation to Kindergarten did not differ in their answers about problems of target children, nor did teachers who considered three year old children to be too young for entry into Kindergarten.

Quality of reported problems, lack of statistical relations to age and sex of children and the existing connection between time since entry and reports of problems seem to allow the conclusion, that these problems are coping reactions to transition into Kindergarten. This relates to single reports from pedagogical practice (e.g. Trummer, 1988). Therefore, adequate attention should be paid to the transition adaptation process of newcomers in Kindergarten.

4.4 The competent Kindergarten child

By what criteria do teachers consider the child's adaptation process to be completed?

129 teachers answered and all in all 334 criteria were named. We build the following categories ordered by percentages of children they were reported for:

Tab. 6 Teachers' criteria for completed adaptation for target children

Category	% of target children
Showing initiative and independent behaviour	23
social integration / adequate behaviour in group	23
positive emotional state	16
keeping rules	16
adequate separation behaviour	7
good relation with the teacher	5

It is of interest that separation behaviour, especially crying in the morning, which may cause stress for teachers as well, is of high qualitative meaning and often discussed in context of entry into Kindergarten, but of lesser quantitative incidence (cf. also observation studies: Blurton Jones & Leach, 1972; Wolf-Filsinger, 1984; Perry & Aoki, 1982; Schwarz & Wynn, 1971; Barry & Barry, 1974; McGrew, 1972a).

And it is also of interest, that terms in which teachers described demands on child and mother when the child starts to commute between two fields of socialisation, occurred to be rather atheoretical: "the child has to learn to get along without her/his mother", "the child must give up his/her relationship with the mother", the umbilical cord has to be cut", etc. The mentioned seldom to child-teacher relation as one criterion for a completed adaptation was mentioned only seldom.

4.5 Parents' perspective of the child's transition

Parent interviews gave us the following insights into parent's perspectives regarding their first child's transition to Kindergarten:

Expectations in regard to the Kindergarten revealed that development of social behaviour was regarded as far most important: The child shall be enabled to integrate into a peer group, accept limits and learn rules, get independent – and get ready for school. All parents were sure that these goals could not be achieved within the family in the same effective way. To some degree expectations seemed to be influenced by their self-evaluation of parental competencies, especially if they felt deficits in their own educational efforts. Parents also hoped for support for their parenting as they expected that their child by learning the rules in Kindergarten would also learn to behave better at home.

Things get even more complicated as many parents described their (first) child as being “very sensitive”, „maybe spoiled" or "used to have power in the family". Especially for boys, parents were afraid that they could behave in an age inappropriate way – “like a baby”, “crying a lot” - what probably means, they were afraid, their boys could not behave according to gender norms.

Expectations of those children who considered their child to be a rather “difficult child” were not so high. These parents said that they were content if there would be no criticism or complaints from the Kindergarten teacher.

This all means complex demands on education in Kindergarten. These expectations are hardly ever expressed to Kindergarten teachers and most parents had no clear idea of the contents and methods of Kindergarten pedagogy today.

Information exchange was important for evaluation of quality of teaching: with close exchange, parents evaluated e.g. that the teacher reacted very sensitively to their child. That means they talked more about the pedagogical matters while parents with little exchange talked more about observations of how beautiful little models or paintings were that children brought home or how much effort it must have taken teachers to prepare a Kindergarten social event. All in all the exchange of information between parents and teachers seemed to be critical for the evaluation of the adaptation process. According to parents’ reports they got information mostly by taking initiative themselves. Shy parents did not learn much.

Most children had experiences in a kind of day care outside the family: play groups, day-care mothers, or taken care by a woman of the social network on a more or less regular basis. That did not mean, that parents were sure how their children would react on Kindergarten entry. Kindergarten entry was regarded as having an outstanding significance.

The modalities of acceptance to Kindergarten related to the information given by the teachers: There was a broad range of offers to parents and children to get acquainted to the Kindergarten before entry, some institutions offering chances in a very differentiated and individualized way and others that appeared little "permeable" and more formal. Again, too much information given in one parent evening right after Kindergarten had started was regarded as stressful because of the quantity of information given appeared overwhelming and good written information was considered as helpful.

Parents mentioned great relief about the successful adaptation process - only retrospectively they had noticed that the entry into Kindergarten had meant a major emotional arousal for them.

In most families there occurred some problems from time to time in the morning. After Kindergarten, most children obviously need time to adapt to the home environment again. Some children were described to be exhausted, restless, in a bad mood. Presumably Kindergarten teachers hear about that rather seldom.

Parents did not mention that they felt like getting members of a group of Kindergarten parents, some showed a rather reserved attitude towards getting to know other parents there.

In no family Kindergarten entry was connected with a profound reorganisation of household work and schedules. Some mothers said that they are having more time for younger children only one mother planned to go back to work. (That might have been different if the youngest child in the family had been the target child.)

In some families family transitions had occurred close to Kindergarten entry: three families had moved to Munich a short time ago, one family had experienced a separation of parents, in one family two grown-up siblings from fathers first marriage had left the household. In all cases parents were concerned with possible complications in connection with Kindergarten entry of the child.

4.6 Conclusion

Taken together our findings show that the theoretical background of transition is an adequate model to describe the process of becoming a Kindergarten child and to understand the child's reactions during this process.

To summarize we describe what Kindergarten entry means in different areas of transitions:

Process

Adaptation to Kindergarten lasts longer than expected by teachers and parents. Parents do not expect a transition for themselves and acknowledge this only retrospectively.

Identity

The child experiences a qualitative shift in perception of self; he/she develops a feeling of new status - being a "competent Kindergarten child"

Role reorganisation

The child adds her/his role as Kindergarten child to her/his role as child in her/his family. Parents have to deal with expectations of teachers and other parents.

Reorganisation of relationships

The child develops new relationships with teachers and peers; relationships within the family change when the child gets more independent.
(Some) parents develop new relationships; relationship with the child changes

Commuting between two environments

The child adapts to new demands and to commuting. Parents see child before and after Kindergarten, teachers see child in group, see it "after and before family"; they exchange information.

Emotional arousal

After a time, a new emotional equilibrium appears.

Stress

Demands can be eased, coping strategies can be tried, and perspectives can change from "demands" to "challenges".

For the normative experience of entry into Kindergarten we think a transition perspective can help to stimulate development for the child and his/her family. It can help the Kindergarten staff to develop their professional work of guiding families through the transition process.

References