

## **Transition to schoolchild: What children tell about school and what they teach us**

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Theoretical background of our study on transition from German „Kindergarten“ to „School“ was a multiperspective transition approach of family development in a life-long perspective (Cowan, 1991; Griebel & Niesel, 1997, 1999, 2000, 2001). In this paper we report about children`s constructs and terms by which they articulate something they know about and expect from school. In connection with other results of our study we present heuristic qualitative reflections.

Methodologically, we collected information by questionnaires about first-born children (N = 162) from the perspectives of teachers in the nursery system (German „Kindergarten“ for 3- to 6-years-olds) and from their parents. For a smaller subsample of children (N = 27) we gathered longitudinal information through additional in-depth interviews with parents and from the children themselves by interviews at the end of Kindergarten, after three months and after six months in School. The interview data are „under construction“ by program „winMAX“ (Kuckartz, 1998, 1999).

Research questions referred to coping with entry into Kindergarten (retrospectively), preparation for School in Kindergarten and at home including „playing School“, child competencies and coping strategies, ways of cooperation of Kindergarten and School, expectations and experiences of parents, and additional transitions in the family biography.

We had interviewed the children according to our concept of transition – that means, transition happens in different areas: Identity, roles, relations, commuting between different settings; this process going along with strong emotions if not stress.

Analysing our interview data with winMAX we identified some concepts that were more often mentioned by children.

More or less detailed information centered around these concepts, emotions were connected with them. We would like to call them „pivot conceptions“ in children’s efforts to cope with transition to School.

We had not asked the children directly for central terms they associate with school like: „If you think of school – what is your idea?“ And neither did we ask the parents especially for these concepts.

We asked the children for their general expectations of school and their feelings about school. And some questions we put were more specific.

Such „pivot conceptions“ were learning, recess, reports and grades. Others were School teacher and homework and the first day in school.

### **So – what did they say? Interview examples**

#### About school and learning

t1 014 boy

„If you think of school now – are you looking forward to it or are you a little bit nervous?“

„I am looking forward.“

„And why?“

„There ich will finally learn to write.“

t1 016 girl

„What do you think of it? What is going to happen there?“

„Learning.“

„Aha – learning.“

„Yes, and learning to write.“

(„No more playing?“

„N-n.“

„Or do you still play then?“

„In recess you can still play a little bit.“

„And after recess?“

„Then school is going on.“)

t1 020 girl

„What do you think, what will be the best about it?“

„You can read already, write, calculate. But you think that learning will be great.“

„Yes, that will be very great.“

t1 027 boy

„Have you ever thought of what will be the best thing for you in school?“

„Reading, I believe, then I could read a story to my little brother in the evening.“

„And calculating – are you looking forward to that, too?“

„No – only to writing. ‚Mama‘ I can write already and ‚Papa‘. That will be great.“

For some children, learning means to learn to read and write, or to calculate. For some others learning happens as an somewhat mysterious activity apart from concrete reading or writing.

Apart from learning there is play. Play is not allowed during lessons, as well as eating or talking to each other. Learning is not forbidden in Kindergarten – but it is not mentioned by children, in their eyes learning is not typical for Kindergarten. Learning and play appear as binary oppositions that Kieran Egan has described as being typical for the child’s construction of narratives.

### School and recess

Beginning with the interviews, we did not ask for recess. Some children brought in the topic, and the interviewer later on also asked other children directly.

t1 033 girl

„You will like to go to school, or not?“

„Yes.“

„What do you think, what will be not so good? What could you think of?“

„Maybe recess, if some boys tease me.“

t1 038 girl

„What do you think about school – what will be the very best about it?“

„Recess.“

„I wouldn’t believe it! What is it then, recess!“

„When you eat your breakfast.“

„Is it that what you like? You have a little rest then, don’t you? You are not afraid of the boys, or are you?“

t1 042 girl

„And did you visit the schoolyard? Where the children have recess?“

„My friend is there also. I will always see her there.“

....

„What do you think will be the nicest thing about school?“

„In the schoolyard.“

„That’s what I believe! Recess always is the best!“

Interviews after three months in school showed their experiences with very detailed rules for recess: longer and shorter ones, inside and outside, depending on length and weather, talking, eating and playing, but not busting, problems with older boys. Recess seemed to be very meaningful for the children.

### School and reports and grades/marks

We addressed in a direct way children’s knowledge about a special feature of school culture: achievement comparison by grades and reports.

Linguistic connotations: report is „Zeugnis“ in German and is used specifically in context with school, other than the English term „report.“ Grades in Southern German is „Note“, which has a double meaning as grades or marks and as „notes“ in the context of music. That caused some misunderstandings for children who did not know precisely, what report and grades in school context are. The grades range from 1 to 6, 1 being the best. Actually children in Germany in the first two years at school do not get grades, and their reports do not give numbers according to their achievement, but describe in a short comment how children do in different fields including their social development. Half of the children knew before they came into school, what report and grades are, or had some idea about it, the other half of the children did not know.

t1 010 boy

„Do you know what a report is in school?“

„A what?“

„A report. Do you know what a report is, when you get grades (Noten) in school?“

„Grades yes, I know that. That is so notes, you have to play them with a flute or so.“

t1 019 boy

„Do you know, what a report is?“

„Do you know, what grades are, grades in school? I do not talk about notes to sing. What are grades?“

„I don't know.“

t1 023 girl

„And do you know for example, what a report is? When you get grades in school?“

„Oh yes, grades.“

„Do you know what that is?“

„Yes.“

„What is it?“

„Let's say you will get grades not before fourth year of school.“

„Only later, exactly.“

„And then, when you have finished, the teacher takes all the copy-books home, I think, and then she writes down sort of numbers up to 6.“

„Ah, indeed, and what is the best number?“

„For example if someone was very good and has everything right, then one would get a 1, or sometimes a 6, if it is all bad.“

„But not in the first year, right?“

„No.“

t1 027 boy

„Do you know by chance, what a report is?“

„On one side there is written a 1 or a 2. If you have a 1, it is very bad. If you have a 2, it is a little bit better. A 3 is fairly good, 4 is even better, 5 is still better and a 6 is very good.“

„And a 7? Also good? Up to what do the grades go?“

„Up to 13!“

„Would 13 be the very best? What do you think – could you get a 13 some time?“

„Hardly – only after three years in school and if you are pretty good.“

## **Co-construction: Sources of information and coping strategies**

### Sources of information

Where do children get their information from? From other people, also adult people within and without their family, amongst them their parents and teachers in Kindergarten, and from media like stories in books or in TV. The children in our study were first-born children who had not got information from older

Some children named the source of information, some did not:

t1 014 boy

„If you think of school now – do you look forward to it or are you rather concerned?“

„I am looking forward!“

„And why?“

„At last I learn to write!“

„Learning, yes, and is there anything that could happen that you were afraid of?“

„Because I always will make a very fine grade.“

„What is a grade?“

„If you get a 1 or a 2. Or a 3 or a 4.“

What is that, then?“

„A grade.“

„What do you get that for?“

„If you are good and if you are bad.“

„Yes, indeed – and you want the good grades, 1 or 2 or 3?“

„A 3 is not so good.“

„No?“

„Then you cannot go to grammar school.“

„Ah, you need a 2 for grammar school?“

„2 or 1.“

„And who has told you all this?“

„My daddy.“

„And you daddy said, dear son, you must have 2s, yes?“

„Or 1s.“

t1 014 boy

„Attention now, Richie, now I want to ask you, what do you think will be the best in school?“

„Recess.“

„Recess, indeed? Why, I do not understand, what then is a recess?“

„That is, you are allowed to go around, if the weather is fine.“

„You believe now, before school has started, that recess will be the best about it – Who told you?“

„Nobody.“

## Parental strategies for coping with transition to being parent of a schoolchild in relation to children's efforts to imagine School

From interviews we found parental behaviors that were understood as strategies for coping with the transition to being the parent of a school child – as individuals in their own transition and as parents in fostering the transition of the child from Kindergarten to School (Griebel & Niesel, 1999).

Such coping strategies were:

- Keeping optimism but also some scepticism
- Seeking for security by information
- Seeking for continuity
- Structuring the day
- Traditionalization of parental style
- Stressing child's cognitive competence
- Stressing positive aspects
- Keeping optimism but also some scepticism
- Overfulfilling the task

Are the children's pivot conceptions efforts to imagine what school will mean to them, and are these efforts related to transition strategies of parents?

1. Parents expressed optimism, but also some scepticism, if their child will manage the transition well. Before school started, all children said they were looking forward to school, a few seemed a little bit anxious about what would come. Optimism at the beginning of school surely can be seen as a strong social expectation.
2. Parents gathered information about school mostly from fellow parents with older children, i.e. from the family's social network rather than from institutions. Information for children can be filtered. Report and grades were not so important for all children than we had expected them to be. That only half of the children we interviewed knew something about reports and grades, might reflect efforts of parents, Kindergarten and School, not to frighten them with an idea that is widely considered to be a stress factor in the life of schoolchildren. Comparing achievement in a formalized way by numbers from 1 to 6 is very often criticised as not being adequate for School beginners. Children's imaginations about School generally were rather vague and with little concrete knowledge. Nine out of ten children had visited a School before they entered school, but we know very little about what they really observed and heard there, what they could learn about school culture. One out of four children experienced a School teacher visiting the Kindergarten, and again we don't know more of what they had been shown

3. Parents strived after social continuity where they saw a chance that close friends of the child would attend the same class. To children, lessons will mean learning something that children do not know and requires behaviors that they do not yet know exactly. Recess is connected with play and eating, talking to other children, running about – something that they know. So imagining recess as something very important may reflect some seeking of continuity within change. There also is an analogy to work and leisure time – something they know from their working parents, and again binary oppositions sensu K. Egan.
4. Parents undertook some efforts in restructuring the day and thought about it already in the end of Kindergarten time. In children's imaginations of school the structure of School morning was very important, where there are by turns lessons and phases of recess. Recess cuts the School into portions.
5. Parents of School beginners in their educational style stressed less autonomy of child but more traditional virtues like obedience, punctuality, willingness to achieve defined goals. This traditionalization of educational style may well have occurred already in the end of Kindergarten time – some children expressed the expectation, that School will mean pure obligation and less freedom.
6. Parents coped with the ongoing transition by stressing especially the child's cognitive competencies more than before. Children want to learn to read and write and calculate – surely a common goal of highly motivated children and parents.
7. Developing a positive picture of the School teacher, a very prominent feature at the beginning of School, did not appear in interviews at the end of Kindergarten time. Maybe the Kindergarten teacher still is too prominent in their minds – but is not mentioned, either.
8. Overfulfilling the task by very eager parents seems a coping strategy to avoid failure – some children express achievement pressure at the end of Kindergarten time.

To sum up: The efforts of the children to get a picture of School, and the feeling of getting a School child reflect a very meaningful transition in their biography. School means learning and achievement. Recess in the structure of School day seems like a peninsula of childhood. Information as well as emotions are shared by children and their parents and they influence each other.

We can relate their coping efforts to those of parents. Transition to School is a common experience of the whole family, and appears as a co-construction of child, parents, and others that transfer knowledge about culture of school.

**Conclusion: What do we learn?**

Could it be effective to be optimistic about school and keeping some scepticism?  
Could it be effective to know so little about school before you go there?  
Could it be effective to seek for continuity in this field?  
Could it be effective to stress cognitive competencies of the children?  
Could it be effective to change the educational style to a more traditional one?  
Could it be effective to stress the positive aspects of change?  
Could it be effective to structure the day according to new demands?  
Could it be effective to try to overfulfill the task?

Let us put these questions into context:

Kindergarten in Germany in some aspects has a contradictory philosophy to School: Whereas social integration is considered to be a substantial function of Kindergarten, social selection is a function of the School system (cf. Broström, 1999, for Denmark).

What children and parents told us about their expectations concerning transition from Kindergarten to School reflects this dichotomy.

Not a philosophy of fostering continuity seems necessary, but coping with discontinuities.

Both generations experience the transition to School as a process of co-construction.

Pedagogical efforts to help families with transition to school may not be restricted to helping the children alone.

Coping with transitions should be fostered in all educational institutions as an educational goal.

Coping with transitions, developing resilience and learning competencies should be basic competencies and central concepts of curricula throughout educational settings including the family.

This is the goal of a new projekt of the Bavarian Institute for Early Childhood Education and Research (Fthenakis, 2000).

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