Influence of transition programmes on the transition from German kindergarten to elementary school

Elke Reichmann

Department of Educational Science, University of Education Weingarten, Germany

reichmann@ph-weingarten.de

Introduction
This paper addresses the possible effects transition programmes might have on the emotional attitudes of children towards school and their actual transition process exemplified by a German study.

Transition from German preschools to elementary schools

The relationship of German preschools and elementary schools

Children entering school are often confronted with a setting that is different from the preschool setting (Margetts 2006, 111). These differences are more pronounced in educational systems where the two institutions belong to different administrative and structural sectors (Griebel 2004, 25).

In Germany, the preschool setting is part of the social welfare system and not the educational system. Therefore, preschools and elementary schools are distinct from each other. This results in a number of differences concerning curricula, staff, educational philosophies and daily routines as well as teacher training and administration. As for the transition from preschool to elementary school, this situation necessitates cooperation between the institutions (Reichmann 2010, 38-42). Findings, however, show that – due to these differences – there is also a deficiency in cooperation. Effective transition programmes are not found extensively (Griebel & Niesel 2002).

The transition programme "School kids support Kindergarten kids"

The focal point of "School kids support Kindergarten kids" was a more effective arrangement of school visits for preschool children. Getting to know the school environment as well as school lessons is an important prerequisite for preparing for school. Traditionally, German preschool children often visit school once or twice before starting school. Research, however, shows that this common practice is less effective than expected (Griebel/Niesel 2002). As a result, the number of school visits in this programme was increased to ten. It was also taken into account that the arrangements of school lessons catered to the development of transition strategies. This was accomplished by adopting peer-assisted learning forms where a student and a preschooler constituted a tandem. The older children functioned as mentors, role models and peer tutors for the younger children. They supported the younger children's well being, their learning process as well as answering questions and showing the right attitude towards school (Topping 2001). The practical implementation included visiting second grade school lessons weekly over the course of ten weeks. The lessons covered different subjects to guarantee a broad overview for the preschoolers. They were designed to enhance peer-assisted learning and cooperation between the different age groups (Reichmann 2010, 72-74).

Theoretical background and method

The theoretical background was provided by a multi-perspective transition approach (Griebel & Niesel, 2004; Cowan 1991). Thus, the perspectives of all parties involved (children, parents, teachers) could be taken into consideration.

The research was based on a qualitative short-term longitudinal study with a pre-post-design. The study was conducted over a period of 10 months (March 2005 – December 2005).

The sample consisted of 39 children who attended their last year of preschool and was divided into an intervention group and a control group. The sample also included 26 parents, 11 preschool teachers and 4 elementary school teachers. The data was collected from semi-structured interviews. Data evaluation was conducted through qualitative content analysis (Mayring 2002) and empirically validated typing (Kelle & Kluge 1999).

Results

Attitudes toward school

Entering school was generally anticipated positively by all children. Despite this positive attitude towards school there were differences in the perception of various school features. Overall, three groups of features could be found: features that were positively assessed, features with ambivalent assessment and features with a rather negative assessment (Reichmann 2010, 110-118).

The attitude was significantly positive towards activities that the children were familiar with. They knew these activities from preschool or associated them with similar preschool activities. Among these features were sports, the arts, recess, and playing (Reichmann 2010, 110-113).

The second group of features was assessed more ambivalently. These features were definitely school related. Among them were the acquisition of reading, writing and doing math as well as the familiarity of the school building and the way to school (Reichmann 2010, 113-116).

The school class consisting of children unknown to each other was the only feature that was assessed clearly negatively. Becoming oriented in a new group of children and the fear of being isolated by others was the feature that children apprehended the most (Reichmann 2010, 117-118).

The first assessment showed no major differences in assessment between the intervention group and the control group. At the second assessment the attitudes of the two groups of children differed. This was especially the case with features that were earlier assessed ambivalently or negatively. While there was little to no change in the assessment of the control group, there were definite positive changes in the assessment of the intervention group (Reichmann 2010, 111-118).

Transition process

The study also dealt with the individual transition process of the children. In the analysis, different protective and risk factors of the child's environment were taken into consideration. It is assumed that the accumulation of protective factors support a smooth transition while a greater number of risk factors are likely to result in a problematic transition (Reichmann 2010, 132; Beelmann 2006).

Three different types of coping could be found (Reichmann 2010, 140):

Group A: Children without problems
Group B: children with minor problems
Group C: children with major problems

In most of the cases a correlation between the factor profile and the coping of the transition could be found. There was one deviation in Group A, where the manifestations of protective and risk factors suggest a differentiation of two subgroups (Reichmann 2010, 141).
The factor profile of subgroup I predominantly shows protective factors. Only few factors are manifested in an ambivalent or negative way. The second subgroup shows a factor profile that is characterized by considerably more risk factors. One remarkable fact is that all children in this subgroup belong to the intervention group and according to parents and teachers had a rather negative prognosis concerning their transition (Reichmann 2010, 144-145).

Conclusion

These results suggest that the transition programme presented here had positive effects on the attitude children have towards school. Uncertainties could be reduced so children could enter school more confidently. The program also had a positive influence on their coping process. This is especially true for children with unfavourable conditions (Reichmann 2010, 190). This study, however, concentrated on the short term effects on children and a small sample. Further research could extend the sample or focus on long term effects.

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