

Overview of research on transition

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In the following I give an overview of my research in the field of children's transition from preschool (kindergarten) to school (kindergarten class).

For the majority of preschoolers worldwide, the transition to formal education marks a transition from a setting that deals primarily with play to an activity system that deals with the transmission of knowledge and skills. In recent years around the world, preschools are being encouraged, even pressured, to become academically oriented, to place the mastery of basic literacy skills at the core of the curriculum. Despite the widely held belief of developmental psychologists that play is the most essential developmental activity of young children, play is being slowly relegated to a marginalized position in the pre-school curriculum.

In the Nordic countries a similar debate is taking place. However, the proposed solutions are rather different than those in the US and big parts of Europe. In contrast to the trend to lower the age when basic academic skills are being taught, Nordic educators tend to gradually eliminate the boundaries between the two systems by using two different strategies: One strategy is to make up so-called *transition activities*, which are activities through which the child's transition is made more easy. For example by co-ordination of the two curricula, let the child visit school before school start, let the preschool teacher and school teacher have shared activities etc. Another strategy is to create so-called *transitory activities*, which are play-oriented educational activities through which the child develops a new psychological structure, which helps the child to cope with the form and content in school. Some educators and researchers are working with developing hybridized activities in mixed age classrooms, which are taught by both preschool and elementary school teachers. The core of these transitory activities are "drama play" or "narrative" activities (Broström, 1999, Hakkarainen, 1999; Lindqvist, 2003), which are seen as a bridge between children's play and literacy instruction, in a broad sense of this concept.

Below the two approaches are expressed and my English publication on the two dimensions are mentioned.

TRANSITION PROBLEMS AND FRAME-PLAY AS TRANSITORY ACTIVITY

Problems

Research in Denmark shows, that too many children experience the transition to school as a culture shock, and each day brings too many challenges or wrong kinds of challenges. For example there is too big educational differences between preschool and school. More we see a lack of communication between preschool and school; some children had a diffuse or outdated picture of school; parents, preschool teachers and teachers have different definitions of the concept school readiness (Broström, 2002). A smooth and successful transition from preschool to school requires attention to several related elements (Broström, 2002): 1) The extent of the child's school readiness. 2) Support from parents, family and community. 3) A system of high quality kindergartens for children aged 3-5. 4) A schoolteacher who is able to take the child's perspectives, interests and needs into account. 5) Continuity in curricula, home-school communication, and a welcoming environment for family and children. These related elements, taken together, provide direction for the development of activities on transition. Such connections are highlighted in an ecological model of perspective. Through the interaction and connections between the different areas the adults strive for helping the child to experience continuity and seeing his or her life as a

unified whole with an interior progression. The term ecological process and model is rooted in Bronfenbrenner's (1989, 1986) ecological system theory. Examples of such ecological models in the American context are among others described in Pianta & Walsh, (1996), and in a European perspective by Fabian and Dunlop (2002).

However, although preschool teachers and schoolteachers during the last years have implemented so-called transition activities like for example mutual visits before school start plus conferences on children's life and development (Broström, 2002), still too many children get problems when they transit from preschool to school. For example through a case study (Broström, 2003) four children were observed and described in their preschool as independent, active inquisitive and exploring persons, who functioned well with peers. However, during the first weeks in school these children seemed to change. They exhibited less positive attitudes, became less active, and expressed insecurity. Although these children seemed to have obtained the necessary level of school readiness, they did not feel "suitable" in school. This spoiled their sense of well-being and hindered their engagement as active learners in the new environment and this (temporary) loss of competencies might pave the way for a poor self-esteem and insecurity in the new setting.

Transition activities

Situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991) provides a useful framework for understanding the paradox of four competent and suitable preschoolers who seemed neither competent nor suitable during the first weeks of school start. Situated learning theorists argue that learning is social and contextual. Learning happens in and is bound by specific shared, social practices. Thus, learning is rooted in and tied to a specific situation. Learning is situated in the specific environment in which it takes place. Therefore it seems appropriate to strengthen some of the most promising transition practices, such as having a familiar adult follow the children on their transition journey, and helping children themselves become more aware of and better able to more consciously and purposefully participate as agents in their own transitions (and here children's own documentation of their learning can be a useful tool, for example through "learning stories" described by Margaret Carr, 2000).

More coherent transitions can also be achieved through a shared overall curriculum and co-ordination of teaching practices. Thus, preschool and school should develop and implement at least a few shared methods and ways of organizing time, space and materials in their environments. It is important to create similarities between preschool and school to make it easier for children to recognize activities and feel confident tackling challenges as they arise. As a specific example, it might support children considerably if teachers from the various cultures were to use similar strategies and methods for planning and carrying out a project on a related topic. For instance, during the month of April preschool teachers might develop projects around the children's favorite fairytale. Then, at school start in the fall, the schoolteacher could use similar methods and strategies to engage children in projects where they could use their prior experiences with this fairytale for interesting and exciting new purposes. Being able to choose meaningful topics and problems the children bring photographs, drawings, and favorite stories from their life in preschool. The teacher uses these artifacts to learn about the entering children and also to build upon their previous shared experiences as a starting point for curriculum development. These materials can be displayed in the school to help the newcomers feel "at home" in their new school environment. Or inspired by the Italian idea (Canevaro, 1988) of using a suitcase to hold children's products and other "tracks" from their preschool life, each child presents his or her suitcase for the entire group in school. This gives the teacher an opportunity to use children's "tracks" as a starting point in the new school year. Thus, the children quickly engage in already-familiar themes and activities they can manage and enjoy.

Such an approach holds a possibility to stress the narrative dimension, which children are familiar with in preschool (first of all free dialogues, storytelling and play).

Play as transitory activity

Using play – and especially other forms of play than children's own "free play" – in both preschool and school has a double aim. Referring to the need for similar methods, play can become such a shared educational method for both preschool and school, and can also function as bridging tool transmitting and using children's "track". More using play (frame-play, drama play) in preschool and school children are brought in a type of activity, which cross or at least challenge their activity system (Leontjev, 1981). And with that one might suppose the development of the learning motive (Leontjev, 1981) and the activity system of school learning will come into existence.

Any role-play entails the exercise of shared imagination and shared development of the theme (Garvey, 1976). For that reason six-year-old children become more conscious of the imaginary play situation (Elkonin, 1980), e.g. the concrete situation they imagine. The development of this new level of play makes it possible to introduce what I call frame-play (Broström, 1997, 1999). Unlike role-play, frame-play is a play activity in which children and the teacher plan and play together. On the basis of common experiences, for example a field trip or a story the children themselves have created, they decide a general theme, e.g. 'What happens in the witch's forest?' or a theme with more socialist realism.

Frame-play is situated between the activity system of play and activity system of school learning and thus is seen as a transitory activity. Here the teacher plays an active role, he/she is not only observing with a wait-and-see attitude. Vygotsky can be interpreted (in Rieber & Carton, 1933) as arguing for a challenging and supporting function in play. Through this the teacher can create a relational community and with that the possibility to develop children's zone of proximate development (Vygotsky, 1978; Newman & Holzman, 1993). However this is not a process, which happens automatically. Learning and development through play demands what Holzman (1997) names interaction of creative imitations and the implementation. This gives the possibility to go beyond the current contextual frame. Children not only play in agreement with the common theme, they also expand beyond it as well. Such play activities are characterized by changes and appearance of new contents. According to Engeström (1987), through such activities new knowledge, skills and actions often will appear. For that reason Engeström names this kind of learning activity 'learning by expanding'. In frame-play we see such episodes, but while young children's leading activity is play and not learning this type of activity can be named expansive play (Broström, 1992).

Another dimension of frame-play to mention is the goal-directed use of tools and signs. According to Vygotsky (1978) signs and tools have a mediating function. Though signs and tools diverge the basic analogy between them rests on the mediating function. Like this Vygotsky (1978) shows that each concept can be subsumed under the more general concept of indirect (mediated) activity. Vygotsky (1985) assumes that signs, e.g. speech, writing, number, drawing, symbols, etc., manage and mediate higher mental functions (attention, perception etc.). In frame-play the teacher and children are able to incorporate and work active with symbols. For example Christie (1994) illustrates different types of literacy materials (functional literacy props), which might be useful in children's role-play. For instance in a play on restaurant the teacher provide the setting with following functional literacy props: Pencils, pens, markers, note pads, bank checks, wall signs (supermarket), shelf labels for store areas (meat), product containers.

The paper will hold reflections on frame-play as an activity between the two activity systems (play and school learning) and will be described as a transitory activity which both will enrich the individual child (a development towards learning motive) and also an activity which will bridge preschool and school.