

THE TRANSITION FROM GERMAN KINDERGARTEN TO PRIMARY SCHOOL: PARENTS' ROLE IN THE TRANSITION PROCESS

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Abstract:

In the transition from kindergarten to primary school the main attention normally focuses on the children's experiences in the transition process. The perspective of parents on the other hand is often overlooked or marginalised (Tietze et al., 2005; Johansson & Griebel, 2008). This article concentrates on the parents' perspective of their child's transition. In a German study evaluating the transition programme "School kids support Kindergarten kids" 39 children, 26 parents and 11 teachers were interviewed. The theoretical background was provided by a multi-perspective transition approach (Griebel & Niesel, 2004). Using data collected from these interviews, the objective of the article is to outline the parents' understanding of their role in the transition process, their emotional attitude towards their children entering school and the influence of the parental attitude on their children. These findings may help develop ways of cooperation between parents and preschool/school to further support the parental as well as the children's transition process.

Introduction

Although research has increased and various transition programmes have been implemented in recent years the transition from German kindergarten to primary school is still considered a fault line in the German educational system. The main focus group which is conceived to have to cope with the step from one institution to the other are usually the children. It is often overlooked that the parents are affected by this transition as well. In the transition process they usually hold a double function. On the one hand they are expected to support their child's transition and on the other hand at the same time they have to cope with requirements that the transition poses to them as parents (Griebel & Niesel, 2011).

Although the parents' perspectives are not always taken into account in the actual transition process (Griebel & Niesel, 2011; Johansson & Griebel, 2008), there are international studies including the parental point of view. They emphasise the essential role that parents could play during the transition by being involved in the process (for example, Griebel & Niesel, 2006; Alexander & Entwisle, 2002; Dockett & Perry, 2004; Clarke, 2007). Clarke (2007) showed that parental involvement had effects on the academic outcome of the students. Dockett & Perry (2007) highlighted different aspects of the parents' perspective including their attitude towards the educational environment and their feelings and concerns as their child enters school. Griebel & Niesel (2006) and Dockett & Perry (2007) also noted that the parents had to cope with a wide range of emotions during the transition process and focused on the strategies parents used to support their child. The transition process can be influenced positively when parents are involved in transition activities (Margetts, 2006).

Transition theory

There are different theoretical approaches to defining transitions. Transitions can be seen as ecological transitions according to Bronfenbrenner (1981) and they can be seen as potentially critical life events (Filipp, 1995). Theories also include the stress theory by Lazarus (1995) and results from family transition research (Cowan, 1991).

These approaches were incorporated into a multiperspective transition approach by Griebel & Niesel (2004). In this approach transition is seen as a process which already starts before the actual transition and ends with the final settling into the new educational context. During the transition process different participants are involved, holding different functions. There is one group of people who have to cope with the transition. These are the children and their parents. The other participants' function is to support the transition process. This group usually includes parents, preschool and primary school teachers.

This approach makes it clear that the transition is not only the task of the child but a co-constructive effort of all parties involved. For research purposes the multiperspective transition approach takes the perspectives of the different actors in the transition process into consideration (Griebel & Niesel, 2004).

Transition programme "School kids support Kindergarten kids"

The starting point of the research was the evaluation of the transition programme "School kids support Kindergarten kids" which was designed and implemented by the author. 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 (Margetts, 2006). It was 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. 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).

Research Questions

While the main focus of the programme's evaluation was on the effects on the children's perspectives on the transition to school as well as the influence on the actual transition process the parents' perspective was also taken in account. Data was collected to gain insight into the parents' attitudes towards the transition and the possible effects the transition programme might have had on the perception of their own transition process.

Method

The research was based on a qualitative short-term longitudinal study with a pre-post-design to evaluate the transition program "School Kids support Kindergarten Kids" (Reichmann, 2010). The study was conducted over a period of 10 months (March 2005 – December 2005). There were three periods of assessment: The first assessment took place in March/April 2005, the second assessment in July 2005, and the third assessment in October, November and December 2005.

The sample consisted of 39 children who attended their last year of preschool. The group of children 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 were collected from semi-structured interviews. Parents were interviewed about different aspects of the transition including their view and emotional attitude on their child's transition, their efforts to support their child and the impact of the transition on their own emotional setting.

To meet the requirements of interviewing children the questionnaire was adjusted and children were consulted with photos, hand puppets and symbolic response options (Figure 1).

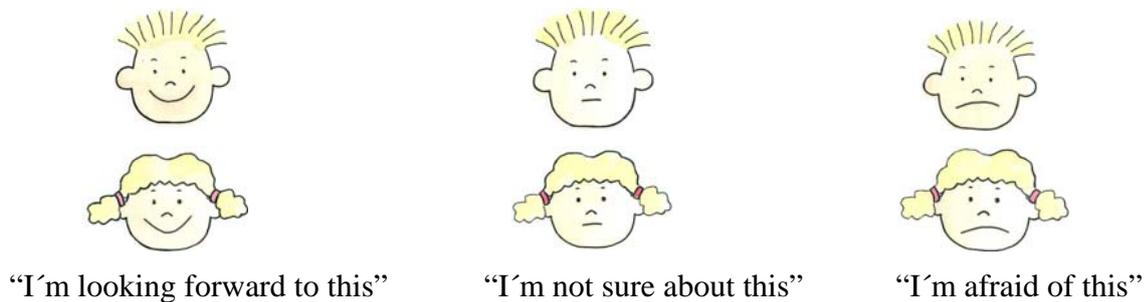


FIGURE 1. Children’s symbolic response options

Analysis

Data evaluation was conducted through qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2002) and empirically validated typing (Kelle & Kluge, 1999).

Results

Subjective attitudes

Their child’s entry into school can be a complex challenge for the parents. It can trigger the dealing with their own school days. The interviews showed that the parents’ experiences as a student can influence their attitude towards school and thus can also influence the attitude towards their child’s entry into the school system.

“I know, when T. (older son) entered school ... I had a lot of things I was scared about. I was often scared at primary school.” Mother 7 – intervention group, period of assessment 1

“I didn’t like going to school in general. ... It’s like a grinder. I can see that with S. (older daughter). ... One gets to be judged from the outside, that wasn’t an issue before. And all of a sudden there are people and they say ‘You’re not okay. That’s not okay.’ And I think for children that is quite drastic. That’s why I was very sceptical with school.” Mother 1 – intervention group, period of assessment 1

In their support of the child parents draw on these experiences when negotiating their role in the transition process (Dockett & Perry, 2007). The following chapters will show that this is also relevant with regard to the influence on their child’s attitude as well as the extent and quality of the support in the transition process.

Relationship between parental attitude and the child’s perspective on school

One objective of the study was to assess the children’s perspective on school before and after they took part in the transition programme. The children were questioned about their attitude towards different features such as learning how to read, write and do maths, arts, sports, re-

cess, the school class as a new social group, the familiarity of the school building and the way to school. Children’s attitudes were indicated using a set of faces (see above Figure 1).

In most cases the comparison of the child’s assessment of school with the parents’ attitude showed an influence of the parental attitude on the children’s perspective on school.

Positive attitude

A lot of parents expressed an open and positive attitude towards school. This attitude was often based on their own positive experiences at school.

This relationship can be seen in the following example of a mother’s experiences as a child and her son’s assessment of school at the first period of assessment.

“Yes, I definitely wanted to go to school. ... I was always the youngest one but I was also always among the best students in my class. ... That was something very special.” Mother 1 – control group, period of assessment 1

Table 1 shows that the son’s assessment of school is predominantly positive as well. Except for one feature – he shows some fears regarding the new social context - he is looking forward to school and the different activities. He’s also confident about finding his way around the premises.

TABLE 1. Child 1 – control group, assessment of school features

Child 1, control group	T1		
	☺	☹	☹
School feature			
Looking forward to school	x		
Sports	x		
Arts	x		
Recess	x		
Play	x		
Doing math	x		
Reading	x		
Writing	x		
Knowledge of school building	x		
Knowledge of school way	x		
Other students		x	

Positive attitude with high performance standards

Some parents had a positive attitude that was interlaced with a clear focus on an excellent school performance of their child. These parents also enjoyed going to school mainly because they were good students, as can be seen in this example:

“All in all I was a very good student at school, though I didn’t really have to work hard. Strangely enough I still had good grades. ... I liked going to school.” Mother 8 – control group, period of assessment 1

The parents consciously or unconsciously conveyed the same expectations to their child.

“Right now we work on getting D. (daughter) under control. Okay, that was a little blatant maybe, but we simply try to convey to her ‘We are here, but it is your job to achieve something.’ ... I expect good behaviour ... and I expect good grades.” Mother 8 – control group, period of assessment 1

This was also confirmed by the preschool teacher:

“I think she senses the high expectations that are set in her ... and that she experiences pressure. And that she notices the fears (of her failing) at home.” Pre-school teacher of child 8 – control group, period of assessment 1

The children who were confronted with this attitude showed some insecurities and fears in their assessment of school which can be seen by the example in Table 2.

TABLE 2. Child 8 – control group, assessment of school features

Child 8, control group	T1		
	☺	☹	☹
School feature	☺	☹	☹
Looking forward to school	x		
Sports		x	
Arts	x		
Recess		x	
Play	x		
Doing math	x		
Reading		x	
Writing		x	
Knowledge of school building	x		
Knowledge of school way		x	
Other students		x	

Ambivalent attitude

For some parents school had not been all positive. They recalled negative experiences, that they sometimes assessed as less negative in retrospect but still conveyed these mixed feelings to their children, projecting their own insecurities on the child.

“...I can remember certain situations at primary school that remind me a little of A. (daughter) today. Back then it didn’t go so well for me either. ... Today I can carry my point but back then that wasn’t the case.” Mother 21 – intervention group, period of assessment 1

In this example this was also noticed by the preschool teacher who confirmed that the mother’s attitude was influencing her child.

“And she (the daughter) doesn’t know what she’s going to expect at school. I think, there are some fears and negative experiences in her mother. And I think she projects these feelings on her daughter, because she (the daughter) is very sensitive. That could be a problem concerning school.” Preschool teacher of child 21 – intervention group, period of assessment 1

The child’s assessment shows an ambivalent and not completely positive pattern as well.

TABLE 3. Child 21 – intervention group, assessment of school features

Child 21, intervention group	T 1		
	☺	☹	☹
School feature			
Looking forward to school	x		
Sports	x		
Arts	x		
Recess	x		
Play	x		
Doing math		x	
Reading		x	
Writing	x		
Knowledge of school building		x	
Knowledge of school way		x	
Other students		x	

Negative attitude

Very few parents had a clearly negative or indifferent attitude towards school. These parents did not like talking about school and told very little about their own school experiences. Their children usually showed stronger signs of insecurity and fears towards school as shown by the example in Table 4.

TABLE 4. Child 10 – intervention group, assessment of school features

Child 10, intervention group	T 1		
	☺	☹	☹
School feature			
Looking forward to school		x	
Sports	x		
Arts	x		
Recess	x		
Play		x	
Doing math	x		
Reading		x	
Writing			x

Knowledge of school building		x	
Knowledge of school way			x
Other students			x

Parental attitude and supporting children

In all families taking part in the study accompanying measures to actively support the child’s transition were taking place. The most common measures were parents talking to the children about school and answering their questions as well as practical exercises in arithmetic, writing and reading (Nelson, 2004). In some cases this was assisted by buying material like preparatory exercise books. To a much lesser degree parents practiced (assumed) school related patterns of behaviour like sitting still, concentrating on a subject for a length of time and staying focused on the task. Interestingly the extent of the measures did not increase by the time the school entry came closer (Table 5).

TABLE 5. Preparatory measures of parents

Supportive measures	Intervention group		Control group	
	T1	T2	T1	T2
Exercising basic skills in reading, writing and mathematics	16	13	15	15
Talks	9	7	5	5
Exercise books	6	4	3	4
School related behaviour	1	0	1	1

Although preparations were common in all families, differences could be found in the extent and the objective of the measures. Three major attitudes were differentiated: child-oriented support, non-child-oriented support, and insufficient or no support.

Child-oriented support

A lot of parents were in communication with their children about the transition process. They tried to find out what the child’s interests and needs in this situation were and then tried to cater to these needs. For example, they answered questions or they offered information about cultural techniques.

“Well, he writes characters, but he loves mathematics. At the dinner table he often asks ‘Dad, give me an arithmetic problem’ and then he wants to solve it.”
 Mother 6 – intervention group, period of assessment 1

These parents also worked towards minimising possible deficits concerning motor skills or language skills in their child, so the school entry could be an easy one. Families often accompanied their efforts with non school related activities e.g. learning a musical instrument to encourage basic competencies.

The extent of the measures was orientated on the resources and capacities of the child and sometimes no further support from the parents was considered necessary.

“I think, he already knows so much. I don’t really have to tell him anything. He already knows it.” Mother 20 – intervention group, period of assessment 1

Non-child-oriented support

In this case the parents felt the need to support their child, but this preparation was often not in line with the needs of the child. Existing deficits were ignored or trivialised and supporting efforts were not performed regularly. Supportive measures instead were partly understood as formal training of school-related behaviour patterns like sitting still or raising one’s hand.

These discrepancies can be shown in the following example:

“(I told her) ‘And if you want something sit still’. And then I told her ‘You know what? Let’s do it the way they do it at school. If you want something raise your hand.’” Mother 6 – control group, period of assessment 1

The preschool teacher at the same time noticed deficits in the child that needed attention. After the preschool teacher suggested for example speech therapy, the contact with preschool was broken.

“A. (daughter) has trouble with her fine motor and language skills. She can’t stay attentive in conversations and follow instructions.” Preschool teacher of girl 6 – control group, period of assessment 1

Insufficient or no support

A small number of parents did not give their child support although it was necessary. In these cases dire family situations such as being a single or working parent or having to attend to the needs of younger siblings often did not allow the support of the child. In these cases the children were left to their own devices within the family context and support was seen as a function of preschool and elementary school.

“It’s quite difficult because of the twins and I simply don’t have the time to sit down with him to prepare something... but I also think that’s the school’s job.” Mother 10 – control group, point of assessment 2

Role of parents in the transition process

All parents interviewed thought the parental support-function to be important. This function though could be interpreted in different ways.

Some parents saw the support of their child as an active act. The parents wanted to find out about the child’s emotional situation and possible problems by actively asking the child (Griebel & Niesel, 2006). Support measures were based on the results of these talks.

“...to be very attentive, to listen to what she has to say, to see what mood she brings back (from school). To pick all that up and yeah, simply to be someone who listens who asks and so on.” Mother 8 – intervention group, point of assessment 1

Some parents saw their function more as a passive but attentive observer. This attitude changed into activity when it was clear that the child's coping resources were insufficient. For these parents self-reliance and the ability of responsibility in the child were important.

“(I got) the attitude ‘Child, school is your responsibility’. Okay, I back you and you know I’m there for you, in case you need me. ... I’m in the background and I feel good about it.” Mother 3 – intervention group, period of assessment 1

“What is important to me now is that this is not my school time. I went to school already. I will not go again. I am not going to do the homework and I won’t take care of anything for A. (daughter). She has to do that herself. She has to realise or she has to learn or she should care about taking care of these things herself. And if maybe she doesn’t do that, she has to live with the consequences.” Mother 21 – intervention group, period of assessment 1

Emotional attitude

Throughout the transition process all parents go through a wide range of emotions. These results are consistent with Dockett & Perry (2007) and Griebel & Niesel (2006). About half a year before the school entry most of the interviewed parents were confident about the smooth transition of their child. They were optimistic that their children would handle the situation and that possible problems could be easily solved. They were excited for their children and sometimes proud of them because the transition was seen as the next big step in the child's development.

“To be honest I’m looking forward to him going to school.” Mother 20 – intervention group, period of assessment 1

“And I’m not particularly worried about him. I think, he will make his way.” Mother 7 - intervention group, period of assessment 1

“It’s a step towards growing up...her growing up and the family’s growing up.” Mother 8 - intervention group, period of assessment 1

To a lesser degree fears were articulated:

“And of course certain, well, fears would be too strong a word, but thoughts about how he will do at school, will he make it, will he prevail.” Mother 1 – control group, period of assessment 1

This predominantly optimistic attitude changed at the end of preschool. Now a certain sadness about the imminent end of the preschool time overshadowed the positive feeling.

“Well, for me it is getting worse. I start crying simply thinking about the last day of kindergarten.” Mother 4, – intervention group, period of assessment 2

“Now the end of kindergarten comes very quickly and abruptly. It affects me deeply.” Mother 21 – intervention group, period of assessment 2

During the summer break a range of emotions was reported. These emotions were closely connected to the child's emotions. If the child was relaxed about going to school parents experienced this time as normal. If children were excited or nervous about going to school parents found this time to be exciting too or sometimes rather stressful and annoying.

“Well, it was a bit annoying, a bit exhausting, because she was constantly hanging on to me ... her nervousness and her agitation, personally I found that rather

exhausting, but also understandable.” Mother 17 – intervention group, period of assessment 3

This was also true for the time after the school entry. The experiences of the parents were closely connected to the experiences of their child.

Parents’ transition process

It was interesting to see that the parents’ perception of their own transition process was often linked with the child’s transition process (see above; Dockett & Perry, 2007).

When asked about their transition from the parent of a kindergarten child to the parent of a school child parents often reflected on the external changes that came with the transition to school for example having to organise the day differently or supervising homework (Griebel & Niesel, 2006). Intrapersonal changes were reflected to a much lesser degree and were also connected to the child’s state of mind, for example adapting the parental role concept according to the different needs of their child. It became clear, that in the transition process parents defer dealing with their own emotional state in favour of the child’s well-being.

The effects of the transition programme “School kids support Kindergarten kids” on the parents’ transition process could be related to this attitude. Not only did the children’s intervention group cope well but also their parents. Because of the smooth transition of their child, parents felt less over-burdened and insecure and therefore felt that their own transition process was less stressful.

Conclusion

Parents play an active part in the transition process. They are aware of their function as a supportive person in the transition and play an important role in preparing children for school. These findings mirror results of Dockett & Perry (2007) as well as Griebel & Niesel (2006; 2011). Parents also have a considerable influence on their child’s attitude towards school as well as the actual acclimatisation by fostering basic competencies before entering school. Parents’ therefore should be seen as important collaborators in organising the transition (Griebel & Niesel, 2011; Margetts, 2006; Pianta, Rimm-Kaufman & Cox, 2002). German studies on the cooperation with parents however show that institutionalised forms of communication such as letters, parents’ evenings or helping out on school trips predominate (Griebel & Niesel, 2011; Tietze et al., 2005). These results suggest that the parents’ role in the transition process should be taken more seriously and transition programmes should be designed to involve parents as equal cooperation partners.

On the other hand the findings show that not all supportive measures taken by the parents are actually effective and they might have negative influences on the child’s perspective and transition process. In this case supporting cooperation measures for parents could help redefine their role. Supporting measures might also be helpful for parents to cope with their own transition process by being able to reflect on their own emotions.

Further research is necessary to find equitable forms of cooperation. Research is also necessary to gain more knowledge about the internal transition processes of parents and their support.

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