

***Parents in their transition towards school.
An empirical study in Germany***

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1. Transition to school in international research

The transition to school has become a topic of international research for some time (Dunlop, 2007; Griebel & Niesel, 2011; Kagan & Neuman, 1998; Kagan & Tarrant, 2010; Petriwskyj et al., 2005; Vogler et al., 2008). The annual conferences of the European Early Childhood Education Research Association and the Special Interest Group “Transitions” have provided an additional forum on this topic since 2000. A website with conference articles has been set up (<http://extranet.edfac.unimelb.edu.au/LED/tec/topics.shtml>), and an internet journal “International Journal of Transitions in Childhood” has been installed (http://extranet.edfac.unimelb.edu.au/LED/tec/journal_index.shtml). Last not least some shared publications have already come out of this exchange (Dunlop & Fabian, 2003, 2007; Fabian & Dunlop, 2006).

2. From the child’s to the parents’ perspective

The interest of research related to the challenges of children’s school entry, and assessment of resulting strains. The aim was to find factors which influence coping of transition to school and to draw conclusions for managing transition.

These primarily aim at improving preparation of curricula and methods for school and a better cooperation and coordination between different educational institutions to ensure the progress of a child as a learner (Dunlop & Fabian, 2006). For this purpose, the emphasis first was put on the child's perspective (a.o. Clarke & Sharpe, 2003; Einarsdottir, 2007; Einarsdottir et al., 2009; Griebel & Niesel, 2000; Niesel & Griebel, 2001). Transition research also was interested in the meaning of parents for the child's coping with transition to school. A positive attitude towards school and learning of both, the child him-/herself and his/her parents, mattered (Ramey & Ramey, 1999). Including parents into practice activities (Beelmann, 2006; Margetts, 2006) and communication between teachers and parents resp. school and family already before beginning of school (Pianta, 1999; Pianta & Cox, 1999) positively affected coping of transition to the formal education system. Research consequently demands support also for parents (Beelmann, 2006) as well as cooperation of pre-school institution and school with parents and community (Mangione & Speth, 1998; Margetts, 2006; Pianta & Cox, 1999). Studies on transition that included the parents' perspective were also conducted (Clarke & Sharpe, 2003; Dockett & Perry, 2004a, 2004b; Westcott et al., 2003). They identified parental concerns, their ideas about school readiness, and their struggles to support their children. A German longitudinal study on transition from nursing school to primary school researched social support from the children's viewpoint (Grotz, 2005). According to this study, social support for the adaptability of children in pre-school age was important for coping with the transition, which was supplied by parents and nursery school. To cope with transition to school itself, nursery school seemed to be no longer needed, but support from the family was needed continuously after entering school. The perspective of parents as undergoing a transition themselves was not examined, but it is obvious that competent parents can provide support for their children's transition better than ill-informed, badly prepared and non-supported parents.

3. Cooperation of school and parents

German studies of cooperation between parents and school showed that institutionalised forms of communication predominate: parent-teacher conferences, consulting hours and occasional collaboration of parents at school activities, like festivals and excursions. Furthermore, there exists written communication via parent letters, information sheets and reports. The formalized forms of school contacts with parents are generally limited to the essential minimum and schools contacted parents only if problems had occurred with the child (Sacher, 2004; Walper & Roos, 2001). This was also confirmed by an international larger study (Tietze et al., 2005), which stated that other parents, who already had children in school, were an important resource of information to "new" parents. A small-scale international study (Johansson & Griebel, 2008) found that expectation of schools about parents' role was not addressed very often and only a few parents could speak about their own feelings as parents with school. The results of these studies show a lack of taking into account parents during their transition to become parents of a school child.

4. IFP Transition Approach: theory and justification of involving parents

In international research on transition, two strands of theory can be found: Apart from studies in the US and Australia/New Zealand that do not always relate to a stated asset of transition theory (vd. Petriwskyj et al., 2005), a sociological-anthropological tradition is more dominant in the UK (Dunlop, 2007; Dunlop & Fabian, 2006) referring to the work of Urie Bronfenbrenner, Arnold van Genneep, John Elder, Charles Bourdieu, and Jerome Bruner. An approach from family developmental psychology, which is predominant in Germany (Griebel, 2011; Griebel & Niesel, 2009), defines transitions to be distinctive transformation processes of children and their families, which are socially embedded and mastered by intensified learning processes of each party (Niesel & Griebel, 2006). Several theoretical backgrounds contribute to a constructivistic definition of transitions:

The model of ecological system levels of Bronfenbrenner (1979) is generally applied in transition research theory. Nickel (1990) proposed its application for enrolment in Germany, which includes the family as a developmental background for children.

Stress research provided a framework to explain reactions to demands caused by changes for the individual. Stress reactions can be avoided if changes in the child's living environment are minimized and if they are designed predictable and controllable. This is the background of the continuity paradigm in coping with transitions – which would leave open the question of how to cope with discontinuities of changes that are inevitably brought about by transitions. Additionally, the motivational level - pleasant anticipation on the one side and on the other side fears referring to upcoming changes - has to be considered (Lazarus, 1995). According to Lazarus, coping strategies include seeking for information, acting directly, delay of action, and intra-psychic processing. In general, a difference in coping styles can be made between an instrumental mastery-oriented and an emotion-focussed style of coping; the style chosen depends on the level of control or of insecurity and helplessness, that the individual feels. Appraisal of the given situation as well as social support are important factors for the way of coping.

Social systems theory as well as the stress paradigm have got constitutive strands in family psychology, respectively family developmental psychology (Cowan, 1991; Oerter & Montada, 1995; Petzold, 1992; Schneewind, 2010).

Changes of the child's living environment have to be examined in connection with development during lifespan as critical life events (Filipp, 1995). Transition to school has been theoretized and examined to be a normative critical life event (Beelmann, 2006). A critical life event can be a challenge which promotes development (Olbrich, 1995). Taken transition to school to be normative in Germany, changes and challenges of this transition have been considered to be looked at as a developmental task (Havighurst, 1976).

This implies culture- and history-specific patterns of transitions and successful developmental results. Educational transitions fit well into a model of culturally “institutionalised” life trajectories with normative societal expectations. Considering development during a lifespan, transitions of parents have to be focussed as well. Development of adults means learning processes and changes of attitudes resulting in enduring changes in the disposition to react to influences, to process information and to cope with problems (Brandstädter, 2007). Orientation to goals and plans in life happens in interacting processes of selfregulation and individual aims as well as guided by cultural expectations, which depend on information and knowledge. Amongst these, transitions within the educational system, the working environment and the family cycle, starting with transition to parenthood, are clearly culturally and also historically embedded. The significance of reflection and consciousness of changes grows with these processes. Pluralisation of ways of life and developmental options have brought about an understanding of development as a “reflexive project” that is open to action and modification (Giddens, 1991). Developmental transitions involve a restructuring of one’s psychological sense of self (Cowan, 1991) and a shift in what Parkes (1971) has described as one’s assumptive world; so in transitions one’s world will be seen through “new eyes” (Cowan, 1991, p. 14). Biological, cultural and personal aspects of development regulation converge in a socio-constructivistic understanding of development to be a co-construction (Valsiner, 1994), namely a process of interexchange of information between participants - family and educational institutions - about the meaning and content of various transitions as well as communication and participation of the participants (Griebel & Niesel, 2007, 2011). The agency perspective of adults’ development (Brandstädter, 2007) adds to the picture of well-informed, conscious and reflective, involved, all in all competent parents, who not only happen to, but want to get parents of a school-child.

5. Pilot study on transition to school in Bavaria including parents’ view (7/1998 – 2/1999)

The State Institute of Early Childhood Educational Research in Munich has undertaken a study that included the perspectives of children and their parents together and followed a family developmental approach (summarizing Griebel & Niesel, 2011). Parents and nursery school pedagogues answered questionnaires concerning 162 first-born children (85 girls, 77 boys) at the end of nursery school time in March 1998. Questionnaires referred (retrospectively) to transition to nursery school, to the preparation for school in nursery school and at home, to the child’s competences and coping strategies, to cooperation between family, nursery school and school, to parental expectations and additional transitions within the family development (e.g. birth of siblings, employment changes, separation). Additionally, 27 children were interviewed at the end of nursery school, three months and again six months after start of school, when they had got their first reports. Their parents were also interviewed three and six months after the start of school. The interviews drew on changes that they experienced in their lives and on strategies to cope with new demands.

6. Developmental tasks for parents during transition from nursery school to elementary school

As a result of the pilot study, changes and discontinuities coming along with transition to school for parents were structured into three levels of developmental tasks.

Developmental tasks on the level of the individual:

By their child's transition to school, mothers and fathers were challenged to adapt their identities as parents of a school child. They experienced responsibility for securing their child's success in school. At the same time, the parental identity was affected by having less control over the child in school. The control was taken over by the teacher. School was experienced as being very powerful for their child's development and academic success.

Additionally, parents had to adapt their expectations and aspirations to the child's development in school and to the evaluation of his/her further school career through the feedback from school.

Developmental tasks on the level of relationships:

To begin with, parents had to deal with feelings of loss that emerged with regard to relations with nursery school professionals and other nursery school parents, as well as with friends of their children. The dialogue with the nursery school professional influenced parental expectations in the child and his/her competences as well as success in school, and therefore was relevant in order to cope with transition. What may have been felt to be a strong support to cope with transition, could not be continued now on a daily basis. In terms of the relationship to the then school child, more distance and independence had to be acknowledged. In respect to a role of a school child's parent, new tasks were reasonable monitoring of homework and successful motivation of the child for school. For the parents, teachers were central persons to whom they had to cede responsibility and control and to whom they had to build up trust. New relationships developed within the group of other parents; sometimes competition occurred among parents and children likewise in terms of comparing the respective child's performance and success in school.

Developmental tasks on the level of living environment:

Parents faced the task of integrating three areas of life: family, school and job. The daily, weekly and yearly routine was influenced by school massively. Parents had to find institutional solutions, e.g. daycare centres during school holidays, or use social networks like grandparents to ensure care of their child through the course of a year. Partly, working hours had to be adapted and enforced in their working place to cover the need of time to care for the child. A very important task was communicating with school and participating in the child's school education in the sense of an educational partnership (Textor, 2006; Reichert-Garschhammer & Kieferle, 2011, pp.220 - 228). The transition of becoming a school-child's parent got more complicated if there occurred additional familial transitions like birth of a sibling, starting a new job or if parents separated.

Parents primarily pictured themselves as supporters of their child; only in hindsight some of them realised, which insecurities they had had to overcome themselves and how they gradually began to identify as being parents with a school child.

7. Recent empirical support

A recent study basing on the IFP transition-approach (Reichmann, 2010) replicated some of our findings on 118 parents' experiences and their reflections on becoming a school-child parent. The study also sheds some light on the influence of transition management on them. Strong emotions on the parents' side including grief about losses on the one side and pride and curiosity about the new were identified; reflections of their own history as school-beginners and of their function as moderating their child's transition were also prominent. Parents emphasized more their child's wellbeing than their own. They were concerned about social relations in the new class and liked the new teacher also, and in the end they were content with their child's successful transition. The aim of the study was a comparison with an intervention group where an advanced buddy system among the children had been established: Older school children got a pedagogical intervention on how to help school beginners. In the intervention group, not only the children had a better transition, but also their parents: They felt less stress and insecurity, they felt better informed about what was going on in school, and they relied less on pre-training of academic skills at home to prepare their children, and less on controlling their child in school. The closer the contact between them and nursery school and school, and the more detailed the feedback on their children's development had been, the less insecure felt the parents. Time for accommodation of parents differed and did not depend on first or second child to be new in school. Thus, intervention for children had a positive effect for parents too, and can be researched for all means of transition programmes for school beginners (Margetts, 2006).

Ahtola et al. (2011) examined in two Finnish towns whether transition practices in cooperating preschools and elementary schools had effects on children's academic development during the first year in elementary school, i. e. in reading, writing and maths. The most common practices like discussions about the new children in school and the familiarizing practices to the school environment and new teacher in connection with other practises – teacher cooperation, joint event for parents, family's personal meeting with the new teacher - supported well the speed of learning of the children in general. The most predictive practices yet were cooperation about curricula and passing on written information about the children – these practices being the ones that were rather seldomly carried out between preschools and elementary schools.

8. Study “Transition to being parents of a school-child and experienced support in cooperation with nursery school and school” (11/2010 – 10/2012)

In the IFP, a new study has started research the support that parents experience from cooperation between nursery school and school with them during the transition phase. The study is financed by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) and sponsored by the European Commission. Personal contact with school and being kept informed about the transition procedures and their children’s transition is expected to be the critical factor to ease the transition for the parents themselves. This assumption is underlined by results from another recent study in Germany about co-working of nursery school and school with 204 parents from a migrant background (Russian and Turkish speaking) (Pfaller-Rott, 2010). According to the IFP transition approach, the perspective of the parents in context with children’s transition to school was researched. Migrant parents wanted to get actively involved in planning, carrying out and evaluating transition activities and made a lot of proposals that would help them, e.g. an atmosphere in school that is friendly to them and their various backgrounds, information in their own languages, use of interpreters, organization of parents’ eves and of talks that fit with their working hours and with need to take care for younger children, and a kind of dialogical cooperation with teachers in nursery school and school. They intensely seeked information throughout the transition phase from other parents from their own background. These experienced parents could be taken into account as a ressource for working with parents.

As the study of social support experienced by children in transition to school gave interesting information (Grotz, 2005), we want to study the importance of social support that parents experience from nursery school and school as well as other parents as well. Social support is the amount of help from others in coping with stressful situations (Asendorpf, 1996) in emotional and instrumental ways and by giving information. Number of positive relationships with others, received support, expected potential of support in situations of need, and experienced support in stressful situations can be differentiated (Asendorpf, 1996, following Sarason et al., 1990). A positive effect is mainly attributed to emotional support from others in coping with stressful situations that is experienced by the subject. This is different from offers to help from the perspective of potential helpers, like parents in respect to their children (Sturzbecher & Freitag, 2000). Perkonigg (1993) has developed a model for coping with stressful situations and social support that is derived from the transactional stress model of Lazarus & Folkman (1984), which again is an integral part of the theory behind the IFP-model of transitions. New is the concern of effects of experienced support that is actually given by others.

Theoretically, it is important to consider that in our present study, we explore the parents’ perspective at a time, when the process of their transition to being parents of a schoolchild is not completed. They may be in the beginning to get aware what kind of changes in their lives will be present when their child is attending school. The transition being a process that starts before that event, we will concentrate on the support experienced by parents before start of school. This is

quite in analogy of Grotz' (2005) study of experienced social support of children before and after transition to school.

9. Hypotheses

- The transition process is a key situation to involve parents for cooperation with nursery schools and schools for the sake of the children.
- Parents' experienced social support has a positive effect on childrens' coping of transition.
- Parents with Turkish and Russian background differ in experienced social support and involvement in cooperation activities of nursery school and school.
- Adaptation of activities to match the diversity of parents' of school children raises their involvement in transitional activities (and in the educational system in the long term).

10. Design of the study

Type of study: The study is designed to be cross sectional at the end of the nursery school (t 1, 2011). That means that the transition process of parents has not been completed. With a part of the sample, there will be a follow- up 6 months after start of school so that additional information of the parents' transition can as well be taken into consideration as first information about the children's development in school (t 2, 2012).

Sample: There werde planned to include 1000 parents living in Germany. Out of these, 200 parents should have a Turkish and 200 parents a Russian background, (over-) representing the most prominent groups of families with a migration background in Germany. In total, about 30 % of children in German educational institutions come from a migrant background. Parents were planned to be contacted via nursery schools distributed in urban as well as rural regions in 7 German Laender (federal states).

Method

The parents were to be interviewed per telephone by interviewers who had a pedagogic professional education and were trained group leaders of courses "Strong Parents – Strong Children" ("Starke Eltern – Starke Kinder ©" of the German Children Protection League (Deutscher Kinderschutzbund, DKSB). The interviewers got additional trainings for their occupation in the current study. 5 % of the interviews were planned to be carried out personally, if parents should wish that.

According to wish of interviewees, the interviews could be carried out in German, Russian or Turkish language. Interviews were structured in a questionnaire with open and closed questions (predominantly ratings). The data were audiotaped and are to be transcribed and, where necessary, translated. There will be quantitative and qualitative analyses using content analysis.

11. Status of project

The first cycle of data collection is by mid of September 2011, nearly finished. Via 273 nursery schools 5217 parents were contacted of whom 919 parents agreed to take part in the study, making up a response rate of 17.6%. Finally 721 interviews were completed, out of which 5% are personal interviews. According to the origin of the parents of the interviewed parents 61% (n = 440) of the interviewed parents were of German origin, 15% (n = 105) of Russian, 9% (n = 63) of Turkish origin and 15% (n = 109) had another than Turkish or Russian migrational background. 55% of parents had their first born children starting school, 45% their second born children. *Results:* There are still no results out of the interview data at this time, but there are already randomly given feedbacks from interviewers that we are planning to collect systematically from all of them. Coming from pedagogic professional backgrounds themselves, they experienced that they learned the parents' perspective on transition to school with new eyes and reflect their own professional practice in working with parents of school beginners. We take that as a promising indicator for the content of our data and their relevance for developing recommendations for the cooperation of nursery schools, schools, and families in transition.

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