

Successful transitions: Social competencies help pave the way into Kindergarten and School¹

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Abstract: From a background of family transition theory, two small-scale, quantitative and qualitative studies have been conducted at first-born children's entry into German Kindergarten and into school. Coping with transition into school, together with developing resilience and learning competence, is worked on in a project on educational quality in day care settings in Germany. Social competence is seen to be essential for coping with transition to school. Results of our studies as well as international research on that topic will be reported. The continuity paradigm will be discussed.

Theoretical background

Children and their families will have to cope with transitions and discontinuities in their lives more than ever. Not only normative critical life events like marriage and birth of children and mothers starting to work outside the house, but also parental divorce and remarriage may as well affect them as phases of unemployment and poverty or migration into other cultural contexts (Fthenakis, 1998).

From a background of family research, Cowan's (1991) concept of family transition was adapted to study the multiple demands concerning transitions in the educational system, i.e. the entry of Kindergarten (Griebel & Niesel, 1997; Niesel & Griebel, 2000), and the entry of the formal school system (Griebel & Niesel, 1999, 2000, 2002a, 2002b).

The perspectives of children themselves as well as of parents – mostly mothers – have to be taken into account within a concept of life-span oriented learning. The view of the Kindergarten teacher is also required, especially in respect to the co-construction of transition into School (Griebel & Niesel, 2002). From theory on stress (Lazarus, 1995; Lazarus & Folkman, 1987) and of critical life events (Filipp, 1995) the appraisal of the critical event was considered as being of importance.

IFP-study 'Transition from Family to Kindergarten' (Griebel & Niesel 1997; Niesel & Griebel, 2000)

Research questions referred to admission procedures, transition experiences of parents and children, the teacher's recognition of children's and parents adaptation, the dialogue between parents and teachers and exchange of information between Kindergarten and families.

¹ In Germany "Kindergarten" (nursery school) is part of the social welfare system and not the education system. To distinguish this from the systems in other countries we use capital initials: Kindergarten and School.

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- 133 (44%) of 300 questionnaires for Kindergarten teachers in Bavaria were returned. 124 teachers completed an additional part concerning the adaptation of a target child in the group, who was also the first-born child in her/his family
- Interviews were conducted with 20 parents at the beginning of Kindergarten and six months after entry of their child
- Interviews were performed with 11 children in two Kindergarten groups, both newcomers and older children together, in small discussion groups.

IFP-study 'Transition from Kindergarten to School' (Griebel & Niesel 1999, 2000, 2002a,b)

Research questions referred to coping with entry into Kindergarten (retrospectively), preparation for School in Kindergarten and at home including 'playing School', children's general competencies and coping strategies, expectations of parents about preparation for school and successful transition, additional transitions in the family.

- Questionnaire information on 162 first-born children (85 girls, 77 boys) in Bavaria from parents and from Kindergarten educators,
- Interview data from 27 of these children at the end of the last Kindergarten year, 3 months after entry into School, half a year after entry into School and at the time of the first report from the School teacher, and
- Interview data from parents 3 months and 6 months after child's School entry.
- Telephone interviews at the end of 4th grade elementary school with parents and children from 23 of these families have just been completed (July, 2002).

IFP-study 'Re-conceptualising quality of education in day care institutions for children in special respect to transition to elementary school' (Fthenakis, 2000)

Our study is now part of a project of the State Institute for Early Childhood Education and Research (IFP) on quality of education in German Kindergartens that aims at developing children's competencies in respect to resilience, learning and transitions (Fthenakis, 2000). New curricula have a priority in an early strengthening of the child's personal skills: a stable self-concept, high self-esteem, self-regulatory skills, secure attachment with parents and teacher, competencies for solving interpersonal conflicts in a constructive way, developing optimism, self-confidence and a sense of self-efficacy and other skills like linguistic and intercultural skills (Fthenakis, 2002). Curricula do no longer center around teaching contents of knowledge, but rather they strive after strengthening the competence of learning how to learn, how to organize one's own knowledge and how to use it for problem-solving in social responsibility. Teaching learning skills is a main topic of contemporary curricula for early childhood education.

In our project we use findings from transition research and suppose there is a strong link between adaptation in school, the level of achievement and the ongoing development of the child.

Selected results and discussion

The transition concept has been proved to be suitable for research on entry of Kindergarten and School. The multi-perspective approach has led to insight in transition processes of child and of parents in respect to demands of transition as well as coping strategies. Transition leads to changes on an *individual level* – changes of identity, coping with strong emotions, development of competencies -, on an *interactive level* – building new relationships, changing existing relationships including loss, new roles – and on a *contextual level* – integration of two environments or micro-systems, coping with additional family transitions.

This scheme of changes that go along with transition processes for children and adults is more general than specific demand profiles of transition into school that you will find in the works of H. Fabian (2002a,b) and K. Margetts (2000, 2002). Family transitions have similar structures, but different contents and appraisals, of course. Coping strategies of children (Griebel & Niesel, 2000) and parents (Griebel & Niesel, 1999) could be identified that corresponded to specific tasks (Griebel & Niesel, 2002a,b). Parents support their child on the one hand, but also make a transition to being a parent of a Kindergarten child and parent of a school child, respectively. Familial coping with transition appears as a co-constructive process (Griebel & Niesel, 2002b). Two coping strategies shall be mentioned: Parents often tried to get their child together with friends into the same school or even classroom. And parents tended to change their parental education style to a more traditional one: They started to stress obedience, punctuality, accuracy instead of emphasising independence and autonomy of their child.

Children turned out to be valuable interview partners and important contributors to understanding of transition processes (Niesel & Griebel, 2000; Griebel & Niesel, 2002a,b). Kindergarten children in our study were looking forward to school in a way that seemed to be more optimistic than one could expect from an international comparison; this is due to theory and methodology that asked for positive as well as for negative emotions (Broström, 2002). But a small group of children were not looking forward to going to school. Those were some children, who had stayed shy and anxious from the beginning, had difficulties to separate from their mothers in the mornings, to find friends, to show initiatives and to build relationships with educators. Only in one respect they were faster than their peers: they very soon accepted and fulfilled the rules of the institution. They had parents who also had needed longer to get familiar with Kindergarten, to take part in activities and feel comfortable. That means that these shy children lacked support from their parents in Kindergarten in developing social skills (Griebel & Niesel, 2002a).

Successful transitions

Transition success is defined as the absence of major problems (Entwisle & Alexander, 1988). If children feel suitable, relaxed and well adjusted in kindergarten, they are likely to experience school success later on (Broström, 2002; Gresham & Elliott, 1987; Ladd & Price, 1987; Thompson, 1975). Successful transition has links to school readiness (Broström, 2002; Lewitt & Baker, 1995; Pianta & McCoy, 1997) and is spoken of if the child settles emotionally, psychologically, physically and intellectually well in school; and this is most likely if the child is prepared well (Yeboah, 2002). Successful transition is also seen in connection with school success and school trajectories (Fabian, 2002a,b; Ramey & Ramey, 1998; Yeboah, 2002). Initial success in school went along with high achievement throughout the elementary school (Tizard, Blatchford, Burke et al., 1988). But not all children settle equally well at school in the beginning (Kienig, 2002; Pianta & Cox, 1999).

Factors that are associated with children's adjustment to school start are social skills in connection with co-operation, initiating interactions and self control (Margetts, 2000). An important positive factor to school adjustment for a child was to have a peer friend in the same class (Margetts, 2002; Ladd, 1990; Ladd & Price, 1987). This is also true, if children have friends in pupils' daycare outside school (Griebel & Niesel, 2002a). Successful interactions with peers and in consequence good peer relations enhance development of social competencies that are crucial for successful school trajectories (Brown, Odom & Holcombe, 1996).

Successful transition is supposed to strengthen the competencies of children, whereas problems with coping and maladaptation rises the probability that consequent transitions will not be coped with adequately (Kienig, 2002; Ladd & Price, 1987; Oerter & Montada, 1999;

Taylor, 1991). Bronfenbrenner (1981) sees the child's adaptation to entry into kindergarten as prototypical for the competence to function well in other ecological contexts. Empirical proof for the transition to school has been given by Kienig (2002). Important for coping with transitions and avoiding behaviour problems that are not transitional reactions (Niesel & Griebel, 2000) are resources of the child and its family (Rutter, 1987; Ulich, 1988; Wicki, 1997). Family factors were more influential for school trajectories than attending an pedagogical institution before school (Pianta & Cox, 1999; Rossbach & Tietze, 1996; Krumm, 1998).

Competencies to cope with transitions

Social competencies enhance the family's coping with transitions (Griebel & Niesel, 2002b). There are different catalogues of social skills children need in transition processes, and they can be fostered pedagogically (Fabian, 2002a; Griebel & Niesel, 2002a; Margetts, 2002). They include self-reliance, problem-solving, physical fitness and coping with stress as well as well-being.

But it does not make much sense to understand competencies as something you can find only in the child. To conceptualise child's readiness for school without considering how adaptation to school is influenced by relations in family and school, would be too narrow, as well as measuring isolated, pre-academic skills in the child (Broström, 2002; Pianta & Cox, 1999). For example, ego-flexibility and ego-control in the early childhood, in connection with the mother's interaction was found to be a predictor of school-related behaviour in the first grade (Spangler, 1999).

Transitions are co-constructed in social processes and embedded in social contexts. They depend on effective communication. It is verbal information, verbal instruction, words and language of school, that has to be understood (Fabian, 2002b).

Imagine a child and his family facing the complex demands of entry into school: When things are no longer self-understanding, they have to make themselves understood and have to learn to understand others again:

- communication between child and her/his parents
Many early childhood intervention programs focus on effective communication between child, mother and father, for example "Starke Eltern, starke Kinder" of the Deutscher Kinderschutzbund (German Child Protection League).
- communication between child and educator/teacher
Quality of relationship between child and teacher is crucial for child's well-being and school success (Pianta, 1999).
- communication between educator/teacher and parents
Problems in communication between teachers and parents are common, because teachers are not prepared to work with parents (Walper & Roos, 2001). Direct communication was found to often be restricted to cases of urgent necessities with negative connotations. We found different expectations between educators and parents in respect to school preparation of children and different ratings of child development; the closer contact between educators and parents, the more agreement and the more positive ratings we found (Griebel & Niesel, 2002b). Entering dialogue is a permanent task for parents, educators and teachers (Niesel & Griebel, 2000).
- communication between staff

Communication of staffs of school and nursery school, pre-school and kindergarten is considered to be crucial (Broström, 2002; Fabian, 2002a; Hollerer, 2002; Margetts, 2002). A problem for communication is criticism about the skills children bring from kindergarten into school and prejudices about practice in the other institution (Broström, 2002). Between kindergarten and school there is a contradictory philosophy (Broström, 1999; Griebel & Niesel, 2002b). These obstacles have to be overcome by better communication.

Continuity and discontinuity

Without doubt discontinuity is an essential feature of transition. If the demands of a changed situation can not easily be fulfilled and resources are not sufficiently available, stress occurs (Lazarus, 1995). Stress causes problems. A comprehensive strategy to minimise problems would aim at minimising stress and that means to minimise changes. This strategy can be described as a strategy of continuity. In respect to the educational system, the continuity strategy to facilitate transitions first is applied to structures of the institutions. This means, that the transitioner has to be prepared to learn hitherto unknown buildings, persons, customs. If differences could be levelled out, they should be levelled out.

Second, continuity can be applied to the curriculum. Skills and competencies and values that are acquired and appreciated in kindergarten, shall not be depreciated in school. In consequence, basis competencies and anticipatory skills have to be identified, that can be considered to be part of a supra-curriculum of all educational institutions or system levels: Family, kindergarten, school. This has also been understood as continuity.

The underlying philosophy could be paraphrased as “continuity is always good, discontinuity is always bad” (Peters & Kontos, 1987).

Our argument is, that this is only part of the truth.

First, there may be conditions for development, that require interventions in direction of discontinuity. Remember the isolated situation of shy children in a group.

Second, striving after continuity is just one strategy to cope with transitions among others (Griebel & Niesel, 1999, 2002a,b); the effectiveness of which still has to be researched.

Third, it is a very complex problem to identify continuity in development of the individual (Oerter & Montada, 1999).

Fourth, and most important, discontinuity of experience can be considered to be an important stimulus for development (Filipp, 1995; Olbrich, 1995; Welzer, 1993). We have to develop a concept of transition from kindergarten to school that takes into account discontinuous processes of change and that enhances practitioners’ attention and sensitivity towards transition processes. Discontinuity has to be planned for as carefully as planning for continuity. Coping with discontinuities and concentrated social learning is seen to be the key to successful transition in co-construction of all participants.

Instead of a conclusion: A stimulus

During the interviews a question was asked, that was not connected in a direct way to school entry. We wanted to know something about the child and a situation of challenge that the children should be able to imagine well. The question was: “If you do a little excursion and you get to a creek – how wide could that be that you still dare to jump over it?” The children were asked to show with their hands, how wide that creek might be, and the interviewer commented their gestures, so that in the transcriptions we had some “quantitative” information. 10 girls and 12 boys answered the question. They showed measures of the imagined creek from about 10-15 cm to 50 cm and up to one meter. Only one boy said he would not jump even over the smallest creek. The next question was: “And now, if your

mother or your father were there – would they allow you to jump or would they not?” 13 of 22 children said that their parents would not allow them to jump, whereas they themselves would dare so. Only 3 children said their parents would encourage them. We do not want to over-interpret this little game. But we would like to reflect how often a child meets a challenging situation – and realises that an adult might feel uncomfortable about it. Do adults know enough about what children actually are able to do and what they would like to try? Let us remember Astrid Lindgren’s Ronia, the robber’s daughter, when she finally was allowed to stroll about, but keep in mind her father’s warnings (Lindgren, 1985, p.17): “And in the days that followed, Ronia watched out for what was dangerous and practised not being frightened. She was to be careful not to fall into the river, Matt had said, so she hopped, skipped, and jumped warily over the slippery stones along the riverbank, where the river rushed more fiercely. She was to stay by the waterfalls. To reach them, she had to climb down Matt’s Mountain, which fell in a sheer drop to the river. That way she could also practise not being frightened. The first time it was difficult, she was so frightened that she had to shut her eyes. But bit by bit she became more daring, and soon she knew where the crevices were, where she could place her feet, and where she had to cling with her toes in order to hang on and not pitch backward into the rushing water. What luck, she thought, to find a place where she could both watch out that she didn’t fall in *and* practice not being frightened!”

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