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### ***The children's voice in the complex transition into Kindergarten and school***

#### Theoretical background is a multiperspective transition approach of family development

Instead of entry into Kindergarten and into school being understood as a crisis or stress for the child, we found a concept of family transition suitable for enhancing the multiple demands and expectations concerning children and parents as well as on the institution's side (Griebel & Niesel, 1997; Niesel & Griebel, 2000; Cowan et al., 1994). Within a developmental perspective of adaptation to changes in life circumstances, Welzer (1993) defined transition as a "phase of intensified and accelerated developmental demands"; transitions being socially regulated. The conceptual framework of H. Fabian (1998, 1999) we also found very stimulating. Reactions of children in these transitions have been described as developmental disharmonies (Kienig, 1998, 1999).

The family transition model of Cowan (1991) for family development was designed to study e.g. birth of first child, divorce, remarriage and includes the perspectives of all family members. In our society children and their families will have to cope with more and more discontinuities and transitions in their lives, so transition learning is of great interest to us (Fthenakis, 1998; Fthenakis et al., 2000).

We wanted to explore transitions from family to institutions (i.e. Kindergarten, school) from three perspectives: Teachers, parents, and the children themselves..

#### Empirical background are two studies in Bavaria

##### *1. Study (Griebel & Niesel, 1997)*

- Questionnaires for Kindergarten teachers, representative for Bavaria, 133 questionnaires were returned (44% of emission) 124. Teachers completed an additional part concerning the adaptation of a target child in the group (July 1995).
- Interviews with 20 parents around the beginning of Kindergarten (Sept./Oct. 1995 and six months after entry of their first born child (Feb./March 1996)
- Interviews with 11 children in 2 Kindergarten groups, newcomers and elder children together (Nov. 1995 – June 1996) in small discussion groups.

Questions referred to procedure of admittance, experiences of parents and children with the transition, the teachers' realisation of adaptation of children and parents, the dialogue between parents and teachers and exchange of information between institution and families.

2. Study (Griebel & Niesel, 1999)

We collected from July 1998 till March 1999

- 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 (1) end of the last Kindergarten year, (2) 3 months after entry into school, (3) half a year after entry into school and getting
- the first report by the school teacher, and
- interview data from parents (1) 3 months and (2) 6 months after child's school entry.

Questions referred to coping with entry into Kindergarten (retrospective), preparation for school in Kindergarten and at home including "playing school", child competencies and coping strategies, ways of co-operation Kindergarten-school, expectations of parents, and additional transitions in the family biography.

Differences in parents' and educators' perspective

We found differences in rating the children's competencies at the end of Kindergarten time. Teacher's considered children to be better prepared for school than did parents, who were more often insecure. In some cases problematic behaviours of a child were seen in a different way.

An example for another difference:

*What are the parents' expectations regarding their child's preparation for school in the last year of Kindergarten*

N = 162

	Parents expect		Teachers say about parents' expectations		
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Don't know
More achievement-orientation in work in Kindergarten	<b>27 %</b>	<b>71 %</b>	<b>33 %</b>	<b>47 %</b>	<b>16 %</b>
More consideration of school curriculum in Kindergarten	<b>35 %</b>	<b>64 %</b>	<b>23%</b>	<b>56 %</b>	<b>18 %</b>
More use of work sheets	<b>70 %</b>	<b>30 %</b>	<b>25 %</b>	<b>47%</b>	<b>25%</b>

Difference to 100% due to missing answers

This discrepancy illustrates the different perspectives of professional teachers and parents who want to prepare their child for school in the best way.

Years ago most teachers in Kindergartens decided not to

use work sheets any longer. Many parents on the other side appreciate this medium, that is available in many variations, to prepare them for activities and demands like in school.

### Methodological discussion on including children in qualitative research

A new discussion has started on the inclusion of children' perspective into research projects dealing with childhood topics (Heinzel, 2000 a) based on the following principles:

- Childhood is one form of reality in tendency different to adulthood.
- Children are not passive recipients but active constructors of their socio-cultural environments.
- One aim of new childhood research is to make the social construction of childhood visible (Scholz, 1994).
- As children and adults both are working together in constructing the "specific world" of childhood (Hülst 2000), both perspectives have to be considered.

Although these basic principles can be easily agreed on, the "conversion" into research methods reveals many problems. To mention only a few:

- Children at different ages can express themselves differently well and even within one age group there are considerable differences, e.g. between boys and girls or between children of different SES or different cultures.
- It may be difficult for an adult researcher to distinguish between reality and fantasy in a child's statement.
- Communication between adult and children in our society is in many aspects embedded in a relationship of caring, control and power. Children experience more intense verbal interaction with adults mostly in pedagogical contexts as with parents or teachers, or in special contexts like medical or forensic (Garbarino, 1989).
- Children may want to please the adult person and appear as a competent partner in communication. That means a high danger of suggestibility; the adult interviewer – without intention – may be manipulating the child's answers.

Under methodological aspects experts used to be critical of interviews with children younger than seven years. For children of young age, symbolic forms of "interviews" are recommended (Fuhs, 2000). That means non-verbal methods like painting, constructing with different materials, story telling or role playing.

School children older than seven years are expected to be able to give reliable reports. This assumption is based on research in developmental psychology concerning memory and recollection competencies of children. Events accompanied by intense emotions are recalled better – this should be true for transition to Kindergarten and school.

Zinnecker (1996) values "free conversation with children" as a chance to overcome the border" that separates the child's world from the adult's world.

It is one opportunity for children to present their personal world beyond barriers of authority, judgement or criticism. The adult researcher entering into a dialogue with children about their world of family life, school, play, conflicts, friendship etc. is not dealing with a simple

research object but can be seen as a “translator” of the child’s world, so that it can be understood by a broader audience.

One prerequisite of research about childhood topics is a certain adult image of childhood that determines what is selected as a proper research method thus bearing the danger of reproducing the adult image instead of the child’s perspective.

We are talking about a general dilemma of childhood research: How can it be possible to translate the personal world of children without deforming it through the adult’s perspective ? Qualitative interviews with children serve the request to give children a voice in research on childhood topics, they require a reflection of adult images of childhood and the necessity always to consider the developmental psychological context. It has been suggested, therefore, to always supplement interviews with children with information from children’s parents, teachers, siblings or other important persons (Garbarino, 1989; Petermann & Windmann, 1993).

Of course there is a broad agreement that to the situation in which the interview with the child is conducted as well as to the attitude of the adult researcher has to be given very careful attention.

### Feelings and ideas the children expressed themselves

#### *Transition from family to kindergarten*

In our two studies we had an experienced Kindergarten teacher as a team member who had practised “conversation circles” on selected topics even with young children regularly in her groups in Kindergarten (children from ages 3 to 6). So we decided to do interviews . The conventions in respect to an interview say, that the questioning and the answering person both assume, (1) that the interviewer does not know the answer and (2) the answering person does know it, (3) that the interviewer wants to know it and (4) believes that the answering person will give it, and (5) that the interviewer expects, that the answering person will give a true answer (Garbarino, 1989).

Our plan was to talk to the children one by one, but the children themselves decided for group discussions. This confirms Heinzl’s (2000, b) recommendation for group discussions with children in childhood research. For several reasons this method seems to be adequate for interviewing younger children:

- Children in this situation are dominant by number, thus balancing a dominance of a grown up interviewer.
- Thinking and behaviour of children is influenced and reinforced by peer interaction.
- Children stimulate each other for contributions and memories.
- The interview situation gets less strange.
- In their group conversations, children of a generation, in their individual peer system or in institutional contexts like Kindergarten group document a specific collective experience.

We gained some detailed insights into the children’s perspective and we found the different areas defined within the transition concept mirrored the children’s statements. Even older children remembered the entrance into Kindergarten very well and confirm the emotional

- *Identity:* The child experiences a qualitative shift in perception of himself or herself, he or she develops a feeling of new status, being a competent Kindergarten child and competent school child.
- “I cried a lot, when I was new here. But secretly. Nobody should see that. Because – I wanted to be a Kindergarten child – and I did not want to be one. My head didn’t know that. That’s what it was like.” (Petra, 4;1) “I liked to come here. I had a new dress on and shoes and a new bag. That has been really worth while.” (Steffi, 5;1)
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- *Roles:* The child adds a new role as Kindergarten child to role as child in a family and accepts role demands on a school child instead of role demands on a Kindergarten child.
- “A Kindergarten child does not pee into the trousers any more. Only sometimes it happens. Then I’m glad if nobody sees it.” (Marius, 4;9) “It is not so good here. All the time you may not do what you want. I must wait so often. That is hard. When I think now, it shall happen now.” (Andi, 4;8) “I have known for long, what you do and what you don’t: hit, bit, scream and bad words.” (Wedran, 6;0)
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- *Relationships:* The child develops new relationships with teachers and peers; relationships in family change when the child gets more independent. While transition into Kindergarten means an increase in relationships, transition into school also means the loss of relationships with Kindergarten teachers and friends.
- “I don’t have a friend. I am looking for, but Fernando doesn’t want yet. He would then play with me.” (Maxi, 4;0) “Yeah, a Kindergarten child can do many things. Do everything alone. And, please, not cry or hit right away – you can ask Mrs. Kunz, and she will help you. I like to be here because I have good friends, for example Wedran, here. We are a team. What that is? Well, what one does not do, the other one does. We help each other, also against the girls. They scream and destroy the construction. But we take care now, don’t we, Wedran?” (Marius, 4;9)
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- *Commuting between different settings:* The child adapts to demands that are specific for Kindergarten or school. Parents see the child before and after Kindergarten or school, teachers see the child in group or class, they see the child after and before family.
- “So – home is home, and Kindergarten is Kindergarten. Here is my work and at home is off time – understand? My work is that I learn something, says Mama. Learning is, when you drive your head, and off time is, when the head slows down. I like that.” (David, 3;10). “The tables are different here and the chairs. So many of them would not fit in my home. I like it when I come here and I like it better, when my Mama takes me home again.” (Julia, 3;4)
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- *Process quality* means, that the transition begins quite some time before entry into Kindergarten or school and that adaptation lasts longer than parents and teachers usually expect.
- “So – in the beginning everything here was new. But a few days later it was old. Not

- Transition processes go along with *strong emotions* until a new emotional equilibrium is reached. Stress can be eased by adequate coping strategies and if demands are viewed as challenges rather than threat (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987).
- “When I was still little here, I was so excited. I could not sleep at night. I had joy and I had fear. Everything was so big and I always went after my Mama. But she put me in here and – that was it.” (Tino, 3;8) “I was sad in the beginning. I could not imagine this here. I like it better if I know something . I was afraid all night long. But I needed not be afraid. It is great here. I see, it is getting greater with me here!” (Desiree, 4;1). “A Kindergarten child like me is rather big. Not so babish. The new ones are so dreadful cry-babies. They always cry Mama, Mama. I don’t do that any more. I want to got to school.” (Laronne, 5;4)

### *Transition from Kindergarten to school*

The interviews in the second study were conducted in the children’s homes. Transition to school was not represented as a real experience during the first interview. Expectations of the children seemed to be influenced by messages of the grown-ups. Two months after school had started, this feature had changed.

We talked to children for the end of their last Kindergarten year, when they were about 6 years and six months old. We saw them again about 3 months later after they had entered the school, and a third time half a year later, when they had got their first reports.

What did we find?

General statements like “most children are looking forward to go to school” we could confirm, but we also found, that children who are looking forward to school, tell also about feelings like nervousness and insecurity. And we found, that some children had complicated ideas about school that made it difficult for them to imagine it.

Four children explained in the interview, what they thought and felt:

Claudia:

I.: You said before, that you would prefer to stay in Kindergarten.

Claudia: Yes, well, but the first day always is beautiful, the second also, but the third one not quite.

I.: Are you a little bit nervous about it?

Claudia: Well, yeah – I just wait and see.

After 2 months at school:

Claudia: My first day in school was just beautiful. Now it has got different, it is harder. It was different from what I had thought. But my feeling was good. I just have to be attentive now and you are not allowed to play at school. Only in the little or in the big break. I would like to have all the way school and Kindergarten by turns. That would be great.

Karin:

I.: Next Tuesday you go to school. Can you imagine how it will be there?

Karin: Learning...yeah and learn to write ... I will have to learn dreadfully much.

After two months at school:

I.: How do you feel now at school?

Karin: Hmm, well it was somewhat strange. But it was also something great, a great feeling. That I got together with two friends into my class, so we did not feel so strange.

I.: And what is not so good?

Karin: Home lesson every day and day, and that the boys are so wild.

Susanne:

I.: When you will go to school soon, will it be difficult to get up early?

Susanne: Then we will just go to bed earlier. It will be more difficult for my parents, yes. Not for me.

Two months later:

Susanne: In the beginning I was a little bit excited and did not feel quite sure. I thought I felt a little bit of fear... I just was nervous if I would get a nice teacher... and in the beginning I was not yet so cute, I did not know the letters, then, only the A.

I.: And have you got cuter now?

Susanne: Yes, of course, now I know all letters from A to Z.

Gabriel:

I.: Are you rather nervous, because you think that you will get more work to do?

Gabriel: Yes, when I have got to school, then I will have even more to work, I will get work sheets that are all the more difficult to do and I will have to do home lesson.

Two months later:

I.: What has changed in the meantime?

Gabriel: So, in Kindergarten you are allowed to play more and you may always get up. But you must eat your breakfast in the Kindergarten and you need not do that at school. But therefore you must learn at school day for day, very often that is very much.

I.: And what makes a school-child?

Gabriel: Have fun...have joy. And concentrate and home lesson.

### Conclusion

From the transition approach we see very clearly the difference between the perspective of professional routine and the unique experience of children and parents. Although Kindergarten as well as school teachers experience a very demanding time every year guiding children and parents during transition into Kindergarten and school, they do not have to cope with strong emotional arousal and they do not develop a new identity. So they do not experience a transition themselves.

Kindergarten in Germany in some aspects has a contradictory philosophy to school: Social integration is a substantial function of Kindergarten - while social selection is a substantial function of the school system (cf. Broström, 1999).

Parents are very nervous when their children start school.

What parents expect, what they fear and hope, influences the child through verbal and non-verbal messages as well as parental efforts to support their child.

Parents' moderating of the transition may counteract pedagogical efforts of the educators. Parents and educators need to enter a dialogue about pedagogical concepts, about what is done and not done in the institution and in the family to prepare children to cope with the transition to school. Preparation for school is needed not only for children, but also for parents.

If teachers note that a child shows some deficits and parents do not report this, there is a strong need for more dialogue, and of course parents should be encouraged to talk to the teacher if they think that their child's development to getting a school child needs some special attention.

The pedagogical task is, supporting the coping of transition, but keeping up the challenging nature of the new.

A consequence is, that free conversations about the transition to school should be part of preparation of the children for school – it sounds self-understanding, but actually does not seem to be.

The first intention underlying our study was of course to learn more about the child's

children into childhood research. We found that methods are time consuming and that carefully prepared research settings and - most important – interviewers with high competencies for interactions with children and understanding of the research intentions are needed. Educators in Kindergarten have these competencies or can rather easily assume them by exercise. We got some feedback that our questionnaires were considered a good instruments to talk with parents about the child and especially about the different perspectives on his development. Combinations with practitioner make good research teams. As for complexity, diversity and multiple perspectives, you can make from necessity a virtue, as the saying is in German.

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