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### **From Kindergarten to school: A transition for the family**

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#### **Remember...**

- In Germany "Kindergarten" (nursery school) is part of the social welfare system and not of the education system.<sup>1</sup> Therefore entry into primary school is a very important life event that we understand both as a transition for the child and for his/her parents. Kindergarten 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).
- Schools in Germany are working only in the morning hours. This is especially important for the division of labour amongst the couple and for the chances of father and mother to be present when the school child comes home.
- Co-operation between Kindergarten and school under the auspices of continuity in contextual conditions for child development and learning has been explored and recommended, even by governmental authorities, in the 80ies - with no substantial effect.

#### **Our aim:**

Our study aims at a conceptualisation of pedagogical support in Kindergarten and school for children and parents coping with this transition. Our work should be understood as part of a life-long perspective of transition learning (cf. Fabian, 1999). Therefore we wanted to find more detailed information about the process of entering the school system as a transition for the child and her/his parents, and about the competencies that children learned in the "dual socialisation" of family and Kindergarten (Dencik, 1997).

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<sup>1</sup> To distinguish this from the systems in other countries we choose the writing with capital initial.

## **Developing the theoretical background:**

There are several theoretical concepts to describe the child's entry into the school system (cf. Fabian, 1998, 1999). In an eco-psychological perspective i.e. person-process-context model of Bronfenbrenner (1979) one could describe the interacting of a child in different social systems and interactions among these systems. School is understood as a micro-system for the child with direct interactions. By connecting the school with the child's family and indirect influences school is also a meso-system (Nickel, 1990; Petzold, 1992). Changes of interactions within and between systems occur over time, as a chrono-system (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). Societal norms and values work within a macro-system level, especially in respect to goals of socialisation and education (Tournai, 1998).

Fabian (1998, 1999) in her conceptual framework additionally integrates an anthropological approach of van Gennep (1960, 1999). She describes rites of passage for entering the school system and identifies preliminal stages, liminal stages and postliminal stages of a rite of passage. To give examples: Talking about "big" school and creating expectations, different treatment of the oldest children group within the kindergarten represent preliminal rites of passage. Pre-entry visits of school and buying the school uniform also are considered as belonging to the preliminal stage (Fabian, 1998). Meeting the first teacher and separating from the parent(s) on the first day of school would be part of liminal rite of passage, and recognising and acknowledging the first day of school by presents, invitation and celebration could be regarded as parts of postliminal rite of passage of induction to school, followed by processes of habituation to the new status (Fabian, 1998).

Instead of being understood in a perspective of crisis or stress for the child, we showed that a concept of family transition is suitable for enhancing the multiple demands and expectations concerning children and parents as well as on the institution's side (Griebel & Niesel, 1997; 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 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, 1997).

Transition in our study is understood as a process leading to changes in

- Identity

- Roles
- Relations
- Settings reps. commuting between different settings.

Transition processes go along with strong emotions and stress.

We found it important to include an aspect of Lazarus' advanced stress theory: it makes a difference for the subject, if adaptation demands are appraised as a challenge or a threat (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987).

### **Methods:**

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.

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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.

### **Selected results:**

#### Coping with entry into Kindergarten - retrospective

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<sup>2</sup> How we got the sample: We sent questionnaires to 450 Kindergartens. We asked a teacher two favours: (1) to complete it for one child out of her group. It should be a first born child out of a family, she should know it from the child's start into Kindergarten, and out of these the first one in alphabetical order. (2) To hand a questionnaire to the parents of that target child and ask them to complete it and send it back directly to us. Of course they were allowed to talk about our questions. As we got one third of questionnaire "couples" back, and only very few "singles", we think of a bias of self selection of motivated teachers and parents, that were selected by the teachers. On the other hand, we find indicators of a well mixed sample in respect to parental education and working hours. But we got only 5 % of foreign children, far less than in the average of children in Bavarian Kindergartens. With one third of the questionnaires fathers actively participated.

7 children entered 1994, having spent 4 years in Kindergarten  
 80 children entered 1995, having spent 3 years,  
 48 children entered 1996, having spent 2 years in Kindergarten.

We asked for separation reactions in the morning, relationship with teacher, keeping rules, and some more.

Correlation between teachers and parents in general, was .49, so the recalled observations were rather similar, but there were differences between the criteria. Correlation was highest for separation reactions in the morning: Both parents and teachers are confronted with them. Asking for appropriate relationship with teacher and keeping rules of the group, the correlation was the lowest. Do parents and teachers need more communication in this respect?

#### Activities for induction to school

Only one out of four children experienced a schoolteacher visiting the children in the Kindergarten.

Nine out of ten children visited a school (not necessarily the school, they would attend). But we know very little about what really could be observed there by the children, what they could learn about the school culture. But this is considered to be an important prerequisite of preparation for school (Fabian, 1998, 1999; Kienig, 1999).

#### Participation in school preparing activities

We asked for writing exercises, handling numbers, reading single words, use of learning games, of work sheets, of work booklets.

# insert table here

7 children participated in one activity, 16 in two, 24 in three, 38 in four, 38 in five, and 39 in all six activities we asked about.

Most Kindergartens offered several activities, few Kindergartens offered few activities of direct school preparation. In general our results reflect that there is no pre-school curriculum in German Kindergartens, the teachers handle pre-school preparation according to their individual approach and according to the parents' wishes (Dippelhofer-Stiem, 1998).

We compared the activities in Kindergarten and at home. Obviously school preparation did not only occur in the institution, but even more often at home. Most interestingly we found that those children who got more pre-school preparation in Kindergarten than others got even more at home. That means that preparation at home was not carried out in order to compensate missing preparation in Kindergarten but there seemed to be an interactional process, leading to combined effects.

### Rating of social and cognitive competence, self control, active problem solving, attitude in respect to school entry

As for social competence, girls were rated more positively in general, and even more positively by teachers than by parents. Teachers rated boys less positively than parents do.

As for cognitive competence, teachers generally rated children more positively than parents do, they again differentiated more between boys and girls, with better ratings for girls.

As for self control, teachers as well as parents attributed a much better self control to girls, compared to their ratings for boys.

As for active problem solving, girls again were rated as more active problem solvers than boys, the teachers in general rated more positively than the parents. If parents rated the child's competencies less favourably, they rated their child more insecure in respect to school.

In summary, girls were rated more positively than boys, and the teachers rated the children more favourably than parents do. As for the child's attitude towards getting into school, we found generally very positive ratings (4.5 on the 5-point-scale), with no effects by gender or rater.

### Playing school

School play deals with school expectations, regarding knowledge and emotions (for a psychoanalytical interpretation vd.: Moosmann, 1977). In our study not all children played school. In many cases, teacher and parent(s) did not agree in answering the question if the child plays school or not; probably because the child did not show the same play activities in both settings.

Teachers tended to observe more often role playing teachers, parents observed children playing pupils. This probably depended on the role partners available - the parent playing rather the teacher than a (younger) peer in the group. In general children preferred the teacher role.

Girls played more often school than boys did, and they played teacher as well as pupil. They mostly played the friendly teacher, and the good girl in school.

Of those who played school, only very few took over problematic roles, i.e. a strict, unfriendly teacher, or a naughty school child.

If boys played school, they preferred the role of the pupil; teacher - presumably the female teacher - did not seem to be an attractive model to them.

If role play is understood as anticipation of school culture this could mean that boys and girls enter school with a different level of preparedness (or even school readiness) which is also reflected in the teacher's ratings regarding cognitive-, social-, and problem solving competencies as reported above (cf. Niesel, 1999).

#### Additional family transitions

If removals of the family, death of a family member, birth of a sibling, mother starting a job had happened within a shorter time period prior to school entry our data showed a correlation with less positive ratings of the child's competencies by parents. This was in accordance to ratings by teachers. We found a lack of agreement between parent and teacher in respect to information about family transitions.<sup>3</sup>

Here surely is a need for closer communication between Kindergarten and family, because these events are meaningful family transitions that may influence the transition into school as well.

#### Parental involvement in Kindergarten

We asked, if parents were involved in Kindergarten, if they had kept close contact to the teacher, if they had expressed appreciation in respect to the teacher's work.

Parents who were satisfied with the cognitive development of their child expressed more often appreciation to the teacher. If children were rated as socially competent or rated highly self controlling, parents did not comparably express appreciation of the teacher's work. Parents who expressed appreciation, showed less divergences with teachers as for ratings of children's competencies.

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<sup>3</sup> 22 mothers had started to work, and the teacher did not know about it, loss of a job often was not realised by the teacher (7 failures), out of 15 divorces one was not known to the teacher, whereas in two cases only the teacher reported a divorce. 8 parents reported a new partnership, in 7 cases we find agreement with the teacher's reports, but in four additional cases teachers reported new partnerships and the parents did not.

Cognitive competencies and their promotion in this phase of the child's biography seemed to be more important and cognitive competence of the child might be regarded as a consequence of successful teacher's work. Social competence might have been regarded as self evident in Kindergarten - not taking into consideration the importance of social competence for further learning in a new setting.

Parents that were involved showed fewer differences to teachers in ratings of their child's cognitive competencies.

The closer contact between parents and teachers was, the less differences in ratings they showed. Close contact was more important than general Kindergarten involvement.

The higher the agreement of parents and teachers in ratings about the child was, the more optimistic expectations parents had for the child's school entry.

The less positively parents rated their children's competencies, the less optimistic they were in respect to their child entering school - that did not relate to the teacher's rating of that child.

### What the children told us:

Children liked to be interviewed; maybe they felt that they should tell us something good about school.

Before school started, all children were strongly looking forward to school. Some seemed a little bit anxious about what would come. Their imaginations about what school really means were vague, they did not report much concrete information about school even if they had visited a school with their Kindergarten group. They were convinced that they would do well at school. They felt supported by parents and by Kindergarten teachers.

After they had attended school for some weeks, children felt that entering school in some ways was different from what they had expected. They were impressed by the big number of other children in classroom and in school, they were overwhelmed by many new impressions. Now they learned that they must do things, whereas before they were allowed to do things they wanted themselves, and this difference they did not like so much. All of them were very fond of their teacher, if she was not very strict or if she was strict. They enjoyed learning new things all the time and they felt supported by the teacher.

They were not afraid of older children who might bully them. Interesting were remarks about relations to older children (Griebel, Niesel & Minsel, 1998), that the new school children easily developed if they had day care after school. (14 children not only entered school, but simultaneously day care for school children.) Older children in school and day-care were role models for the younger, who sometimes actively seek them. Some sought them as protection against threatening older children. They used these relations as a strategy in coping with transition into school. Day-care seemed to be an important resource for friendships in schools.

Half a year later, they had arranged themselves with school demands. They all had found friends there, they felt fine in general, maybe no longer euphoric. They said that doing homework was a burden to them, about one hour or more a day. When asked what they would like to change, they claimed for less school hours and more free time in the morning, about two hours of lessons and the rest free. Some teachers had changed, and children found that very bad. They had got their first report from school, had talked about it with their parents and found it correct and were satisfied with it.

In general they had turned out to be competent school children who had learned a lot within that transition phase of intensified and accelerated developmental demands.

#### Experiences of parents:

Answers in our questionnaires at the end of Kindergarten time showed, that parents in general expressed optimism, but also some scepticism and concern, regarding their first child entering school. Recalling the first day of school parents reported strong emotional arousal, a mixture of joy and pride about their “big” daughters or sons, but also some sadness and feelings of loss. They said that a part of untroubled childhood was over then. They very often used the phrase that “seriousness of life would start” then. They confirmed, that the children were very optimistic about school, that they could hardly wait to get there and enjoyed the idea of being able to read and write very soon.

Dealing with parental scepticism is an additional transitional task for the children.

#### *Changes in role expectations*

Parental fears about school entry also has a role aspect: Parents are expected to be concerned on the one side and faithful into school on the other side. Parents often get the teacher’s message: ”Do not call us - we will call you in case we think it is necessary.” So if there is a feedback to wait for, it probably will be a bad one.

All parents in our study felt a strong sense of responsibility for their child’s accomplishments in school from the very beginning (cf. Paetzold, 1988). This was most clearly expressed in their involvement in the child’s homework.

Homework represents the influence of school on the family (cf. Krumm, 1995). Mothers organised, supervised and supported homework in many ways. Most parents accepted the extent of homework without protest. Fathers liked to get informed about school affairs in the evening, some of them also looked into the homework, some of them additionally trained reading with the child. In most families this was a main source of conflict as children’s enthusiasm for school started to decline when they experienced homework was real work, time consuming and shortened playtime.

Parents acted as the school’s agents at home. They tried to give a positive representation of school and the teacher at home to keep the children motivated for working. This is considered to be an important way of preparation for transition to school (Kienig, 1999). But the parents also used the teacher and the expectation of failure and criticism as threat against the children, if he or she

would not obey to parental expectations or commands. Sometimes it seemed that the mothers are more demanding than the teachers (cf. Paetzold, 1988).

### *Changes in relationship*

Homework turned out to be a new domain, where parents exerted caring - and control. And achievement, academic skills of the child got a new field in which the child is confronted with criticism - a new experience compared to a child in Kindergarten. It can be understood as a shift to a more traditional relationship between child and parent.

A strong gain in autonomy also changed the relations with parents - in several aspects the children rejected parental caring and control, as for being allowed to go out alone, make their way to school alone, choose their dress alone. Some parents said that they were surprised how fast their child had developed, how strong the efforts to gain autonomy were and that it was not always easy for them to let go.

Concerns about separation from their children, the safety and care aspects of the setting might cause anxiety, that can be transmitted to the child (Fabian, 1998, 1999).

Some children strove for dominance in regard to younger siblings stronger than before. That could generate conflicts in the family system. Another problem was jealousy towards younger sibling because the younger one did not experience so many constraints in his activities than the schoolchild bound in duty - jealousy being the parents' interpretation, what might better be understood as envy.

Besides the changes of relationships within the family the parents had to establish some form of relationship with the teacher. Also they had to find a position within the group of parents who sometimes functioned as a support system and as a source of information.

### *Integrating the demands of two settings: school and family*

Parents experience their child before and after school, teachers experience them after and before family. After school the transition to being a school child is continued. The setting is quite different, of course: group setting in school, child being single or in sibling context at home.

The daily routine, labour division and parental roles and functions were reorganised. In general the family atmosphere got stricter - new duties required, that more often something had to be done against the child's wishes. Regularity, even punctuality got more meaning in relation to the child's daily routine. Some parents told that their child was exhausted when he/she came home from school and the mother sometimes had problems to integrate household chores and care for younger siblings into the morning hours while the afternoon was to some extent busy with homework.

### *Changes in identity*

In the eyes of their parents, the children had gained in independence during the transition. This is an aspect of reducing parental caring and control gaining a new parental identity as parent of a school child. The parents reported that the children had developed a new picture of themselves, as a “big schoolchild”. They were curious (also see Paetzold, 1988), they were self-confident and self-assertive. These are aspects of children’s wellbeing. Wellbeing, in turn, is an important prerequisite for successful social and cognitive learning (Fabian, 1998, 1999 citing Laevers et al. 1997). All changes, as they occur in transitions, carry conflicts with them, because changes occur not simultaneously or harmoniously in all areas.

### **Coping strategies in transition to school**

#### Before school started

At the end of Kindergarten parents were *looking for security* in regard to school-readiness of their child.

One criterion for the child’s readiness often mentioned by parents and by Kindergarten teachers was that the child felt bored in the last months in Kindergarten. Parents said: My child was longing for new things, he/she was intellectually under-demanded.

*Keeping close contact with Kindergarten teacher* is one strategy. In our study it went along with similar - and more positive - ratings of child’s competencies. Gaining more optimism in regard to school seems to be a promising strategy to cope with the transition (see also Kienig, 1999).

For some parents it seemed difficult to believe that their child was ready for school – even if the Kindergarten teachers said so. In some cases expertise opinion was obtained.<sup>4</sup> The parents did not contact school in this respect.

Amongst parents, their *stressing of cognitive competencies* before the transition can also be seen as an anticipation of change.

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<sup>4</sup> We have a discussion in Germany among education experts that children may be too old when they enter and when they leave the educational system. The majority of parents seem to prefer their child to be a little older in order to be sure that the child is ready and strong enough to meet the demands. Statistically age of children entering schools has risen in the last few years.

*Seeking for continuity: Parents and children felt more comfortable if they knew at least one friend from Kindergarten would join child. Some parents made active attempts to ensure that friends will enter the same class. This can be understood as seeking for some continuity within a situation of change (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Fabian, 1998; Petzold, 1992).*

Information about school initially was taken from indirect sources, i.e. the opinions of other parents rather than from direct resources, i.e. the school itself (see also Petzold, 1992). Feeling to have sufficient information during transition is important for the parents' and thereby for the children's well-being (Fabian, 1998, 1999).

### After school had started

#### *Developing a positive picture of the teacher*

We found that nearly all parents called it good luck that the child had just got the teacher he or she had got. The parents thought just this teacher to be the best one the child could find - they referred to opinions of other parents, their own first impression, the impression of the child, or whatever. It seemed very important to the parents that they have such a good teacher in the beginning, and there was very little criticism, if any. And this happened despite the fact that some parents felt sad about somebody else getting influence over their child and losing close and exclusive contact with him. One could call that phenomenon a "Mary-Poppins-Phenomenon" - she is just perfect. Developing a positive picture of the teacher and feeling it good luck to have just this teacher seems to be a coping strategy in the transition to school. It makes the parents feel good about a person that takes over a lot of control about the child.

#### *Developing and keeping a clear structure of the daily and the weekly routine is a coping strategy in the same time.*

In most cases this required an active reorganisation - especially in the morning hours when Kindergarten children and parents had been used to a relaxed start at their favourite time. Parents insisted on long enough sleeping hours for the child to ensure hers/his fitness. This meant earlier bedtime hours what some parents enjoyed. Afternoon hours were arranged according to homework. Mothers often tried different approaches to find the most optimal time arrangement to integrate the child's need for play and leisure time as well as the school's demand. In most families it took some weeks to find the way children and mothers felt comfortable with.

*Against the societal norm about educational goals of autonomy for the child, an autonomy the child himself is striving after, in this transition grows a domain for parental control, claim for obedience and clear submission. This kind of traditionalization in the parent-child-relationship is an aspect, that we can observe in other transitions as well - for example, in respect to division of labour amongst the couple, when the first baby is born and a transition from couple to family takes place. Some sort of a more traditional orientation in attitude and in behaviour might be regarded as a coping strategy with transitions.*

#### *Traditionalization in attitude or role division between spouses*

A parallel development can be seen in traditionalization in attitude or role division between spouses in parental roles. Entering school of the first child can

mean change of parental role: In their study of 135 fathers and their spouses 1 month before and 6 months after their child had started school, Minsel, Fthenakis & Deppe (1999) studied in the concept of fatherhood that occurred along with this family transition. They found that high marital quality and especially good marital communication lead to higher paternal involvement during the child's transition to school. When a father felt that he should take his time to be together with the child, to talk to him, and to be present at important occasions, he also was ready to do something for his child - teaching him, being concerned about school career, earning the living for the family. Some fathers changed their attitude in direction of "father as worker". This was defined to mean that he stressed more his function as breadwinner and stressed less to putting career behind child's interest. This change went along with an increased measure of depression. The only group of fathers who kept a relatively low level of depression over time were those who stayed in the type "fathers as educators", i.e. fathers who felt that social and instrumental functions were more important than breadwinning and child's interest more important than their own career. These fathers had been close to the child all the time and therefore adjusted to the transition more easily than other fathers (Minsel, Fthenakis & Deppe, 1999). Fathers who stayed in the type "father as educator" kept a low level of marital conflict, whereas fathers who changed to the type "father as worker" showed an increased level of marital conflict.

#### *Trying to over-fulfil the task*

Especially with homework parents (mothers) were eager to ensure a good performance of the child to reduce concern and anxiety - the latter being influenced by high aspirations. Mothers tried to cope by over-fulfilling the task (see also Paetzold, 1988). Mothers revealed a broad spectrum of approaches from sitting with the child, taking active influence when either the results were not correct or the presentation not neat enough, just looking after what the child had done (controlling) to even forcing the child to do more than he said he had to, accompanied by praising, rewarding, threatening. After 6 months most mothers granted more autonomy to their children. Either the children practised active resistance or the teacher's feedback eased the mothers' ambitions. Most developed more realistic expectations. As one mother put it: "Before school I thought I had a little Einstein at home. Now I have to take back myself to avoid too much pressure on my child".

#### *Adapting to different institutional norms*

Many mothers criticised a lack of information about what and how the child is doing in the morning. Mothers tried to compensate by asking her children intensively (with different success), seeing the teacher e.g. every Monday morning, talking to other mothers while others accepted this loss of control as a school-immanent fact. Adapting to different institutional norms eased their discomfort and lack of control.

Fabian (1998) points out that parents want information during transitions. Insufficient information decreases parents' emotional harmony and indirectly affects their children in a negative way. Too much information (or bad information) may hinder transitions, it causes anxiety. She stresses the importance of communication two-way directional flow in her conceptual framework.

*Appreciation of the new, by selecting good aspects*

Although parents reported on many new aspects in their lives they felt they had to adapt to, they also enjoyed the new competencies of their children and that they were parents of a school child. Stressing the positive aspects is important to cope with transition to school (see also Kienig, 1999).

*Keeping some scepticism*

The picture the parents draw about their children's development generally had been very positive. Surprisingly when parents were asked to imagine the future years of their school child, scepticism sometimes even fear was expressed. Parents expect increasing demands connected with a stronger selection in educational careers, which might put a lot of pressure on their child in the future. Keeping some scepticism can also be understood as a coping strategy. It works as a protection against the lessening the efforts in uncompleted transitions.

Coping with transition from Kindergarten into school evidently for our families was a lot of work.

Outlook

Our results have to be completed, a careful comparison with other studies as well as a detailed discussion of results have to be achieved in a next step, followed by the conceptualisation of pedagogical support in Kindergarten and school.

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