EARLY YEARS TRANSITION PROGRAMME

TRANSITION FROM PRE-SCHOOL TO SCHOOL: EMPHASIZING EARLY LITERACY

The education of the child shall be directed to…
the developement of the child's personality,
talents and mental and physical abilities
to their fullest potential.

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)

COMMENTS AND REFLECTIONS BY RESEARCHERS FROM EIGHT EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

CHAPTER **2**

Transitions from Preschool to Primary School

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2.1   Abstract

This article deals with transition from pre-school to primary school. Starting with a historical overview presenting Fröbel's understanding of transition from 1852, it continues with European politics in the 1960s and 1970s and recommendations by the Council of Europe from the 1990s. It finishes with the current political understanding expressed by the OECD. Then the authors define and reflect the word transition in theoretical terms using Bronfenbrenner's ecological development model. Starting with a short review of international research on transition, the article focuses on depicting the research on children's transition problems and furthermore outlines a number of so-called transition activities in order to ease children's transition to school.

2.2   Introduction

Within the framework of international pedagogic discussions, the subject of children's transition from pre-school to primary school as an issue of educational practice, a subject of research, or a question of educational policy is not new. From its beginning to the present, it has now been discussed for over a century and a half. In 1852, Friedrich Fröbel submitted a detailed plan for the *organic linking of pre-school with primary school education*, thus laying the groundwork for a systematic discussion of the issue of discontinuity and how to bridge the existing gap in the transition from one level to the next (Grossmann, 1987).

It has also been known since the 1960s that for many European countries the question of children's smooth transition from pre-school to primary education was directly linked with the demand for achieving a *unified curriculum* involving kindergarten, primary school, gymnasium [junior high school], and lyceum [senior high school], as well as with the broader question of *bottom-up reform* of the educational

system from kindergarten to lyceum (Dunlop & Fabian, 2007; Horn & Thiemel, 1982). Arguments for this were drawn from what were new results at the time from the humanities and above all the social sciences concerning the relation between environment and school success. They were closely linked with the demand for *equal opportunities at the outset of legislated compulsory education* (Husén, 1977), in the sense of ensuring the necessary presuppositions for the *equality of results*. Possible negative mid- and long-term consequences from interruptions of the continuity in the process of teaching and learning in the transition from one educational setting to another, such as school phobia, functional illiteracy, drop-out rates, etc., were in the majority of cases interpreted as results also stemming from unequal opportunities at the outset of legislated compulsory education. Nearly 40 years have now passed since the 6th summit of European education ministers in Venice (1971), where the problem of educational transitions was for the first time discussed at such a high level, though the various countries had not yet managed to find satisfactory solutions. This of course does not mean that these countries have not gone their separate ways regarding the search for, and discovery of, "satisfactory solutions" (Carle & Daiber, 2008; Neuman, 2002; Oberhuemer, 2006; Organization for Economic Coperation and Development, 2006).

Recommendations by the Council of Europe to member countries (Fthenakis, 1979) during the era characterized as a period of "reform euphoria"[1], with the goal of an *organic linkage*[2], and collaboration between pre-school and primary school, were shown to be inadequate regarding a number of key points during the decade of "reform sobriety"[3] for these countries in the attempt to implement them. For most of these countries, the lack of an institutional framework to ensure the presuppositions for an obligatory collaboration between pre-school and primary school institutions was considered one key point of inadequacy (Woodhead, 1981).

From the mid-1990s and onward, the subject of transition and collaboration came into focus of research again and flourished (Woodhead, 1981). Contributing to this on the one hand were old, but for many countries still unfulfilled, recommendations by the Council of Europe. On the other hand there were the more generally favorable circumstances obtained during the last fifteen years, created by the following: (1) the increase in professional staff, both teaching and research personnel, involved with Early Childhood Education and Care; (2) the founding of scientific societies that made the subject of educational transition the focus of their research activities, e. g. the European Early Childhood Education and Research Association (EECERA); (3) the contribution of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD); (4) the Bologna Process (1999); and (5) the support by the European Union (Vrynioti, 2008).

During the last two decades there has been an increasing interest in educational transitions because the level of success during transition to school or transfer between phases of education, both socially and academically, can be a critical factor in determining children's future progress and development (Dockett & Perry, 2007; Dunlop & Fabian, 2002; Einarsdottir, 2007; Entwisle & Alexander, 1998; Fabian, 2007; Kagan & Neuman, 1998; Margetts, 2002).

The word transition is rather open; and, in spite of an increasing political and educational interest, it is not very well defined. It deals with border crossing, a physical movement from one physical context to another. Dunlop and Fabian (2002, p. 148) define transition as "being the passage from one place, stage, state, style or subject to another over time." Related more specifically to early childhood education,

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[1]From the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s.

[2]Here is meant the creation of an institutional framework for achieving coherence and continuity at the level of objectives, contents, teaching methodology (curriculum), and teacher training.

[3]From the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s.

transition can be defined as the time between the first visit in the new educational context and the final setting (Fabian, 2007; Kagan & Neuman, 1998; Griebel & Niesel, 2004).

Kagan distinguished between vertical and horizontal transitions (Kagan, 1991). Vertical transitions deal with moves and changes for the child between educational settings such as pre-school or school or between home and pre-school when children start pre-school. Horizontal transitions involve children's transitions during their everyday lives between, for instance, after school center and primary school.

2.3 Theoretical Perspective

There is no unified, coherent theory for an overall understanding of the issue of transitions that would be adequate for explaining the entire range of developmental challenges as well as problems brought about by the transition at the individual level for the child and his/her parents. Rather, there are various approaches arising from different scholarly fields that may be employed in complementary fashion for a detailed study of the different parameters of transitions (Dockett & Perry, 2007; Griebel & Niesel, 2004).

The ecological developmental model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) is the most fruitful model for studying every type of transition. The model of transitions in the family (Cowan, 1991; Fthenakis, 1998), the theory of critical life events (Filipp, 1995), and the results from research on stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987) are employed as complements to this model. Any form of transition can be viewed and analysed in the light of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological developmental model with the following four well-known nested and interrelated levels: macro-, exo-, micro-, and meso systems. Related to the child's transition, Dunlop and Fabian (2002) describe in detail how the model can be used to get information of the content of the three environments or microsystems: children's home world, the pre-school world and the school world. In addition, the interrelations between the three worlds which make up the meso system, where the three worlds are working together, exchange information and empower the children.

These related elements, taken together, provide direction for the development of activities on transition, which, when undertaken by families, pre-schools, and school, combine the most important areas in the child's life before and after starting school and support the transition. Such connections are highlighted in an ecological model of perspective. Through the interaction and connections between the different areas the adults strive for helping the child to experience continuity and seeing his or her life as a unified whole with an interior progression.

The ecological model helps to raise a number of important questions, and can serve as a tool for getting a better understanding of children's transition. For example, questions like the following may be raised: Does the child enter school alone or together with a friend? What kind of information does the pre-school and family give the teacher in school? What kind of cooperation do the families, pre-schools and primary schools carry through?

2.4 Transition Research

Adults' views on transitions have been studied widely (Broström, 2002; 2003b; Dunlop & Fabian, 2002; Einarsdottir, Perry, & Dockett, 2008; Griebel & Niesel, 2003; Johanson, 2002; Margetts, 2002; Peters, 2000; Pramling Samuelsson & Willams-Graneld, 1993). In recent years, interest in looking at transitions from children's perspectives has grown. Several studies have investigated children's views of their pre-school and school, and the differences between these settings. Review of the literature on children's views

on transition from pre-school to primary school reveals that children expect a change from being able to play and choose in pre-school to more academic work in primary school. They are also aware that there are new rules and norms that they have to learn and adapt to in primary school (Broström, 2001; 2008; Einarsdottir, 2003; 2007; Pramling Samuelsson, Klerfelt, & Graneld, 1995).

Dockett and Perry (Dockett & Perry, 2007) have summarized the main findings from transition research:

- A positive start at school is linked to positive school outcomes in both academic achievement and social competence.

- Children's images of themselves as learners are influenced greatly by their school experiences.

- Children who experience academic and social difficulties in the early school years are likely to continue having problems throughout their school careers, and indeed throughout their adult life.

- Children starting school bring with them a wide array of experiences and understandings. As a result they experience the transition to school in different ways.

- Children who experience similar environments and expectations at home and school are likely to find the transition to school an easier process.

- The expectations of participants shape the transition experiences of children starting school.

2.5   Problems in children's transition to school

International research on starting school suggests that moving from pre-school to school can be challenging, if not traumatic for some children, and especially for children with less than optimal circumstances, for example children with special educational needs or children from dysfunctional families (e. g. Broström, 2002; Napier, 2002; Wagner, 2003)

When children move from pre-school to primary school they experience a change of identity from being a child in pre-school to a student in school, which means they are expected to behave in a certain way and understand the classroom rules, to learn the language of the classroom and to "read" the teacher. When children enter school they often meet a larger physical environment—and it can be difficult to find their way. In pre-school the child belongs to the eldest group of children, and suddenly he is the youngest and is forced to relate to older children. In school the social environment is much more complex; there is a greater number of children compared with the number of children in pre-school, and with that there will be much more competition. In school there are fewer adults, which means less individual attention and interaction with adults than previously. In school children have less autonomy and they are often forced to discipline their own body movement. There is a shift in the academic demands of children; they now meet new, unfamiliar challenges (Dockett & Perry, 2007; Fabian, 2007; Merry, 2007).

The above mentioned changes do not only challenge children with less than optimal circumstances, but also children from supporting families. Thus, a case study (Broström, 2003a) showed that although pre-school teachers and primary school teachers during the last years had implemented so-called transition activities, like mutual visits before school starts plus conferences on children's life and development (Broström, 2002), too many children still experience problems when they transit from pre-school to school. The case study (Broström, 2003a) describes four children in their pre-school as independent, active, inquisitive, and exploring persons, each one interacting well with peers. However, during the

first weeks in school these children seemed to change. They exhibited less positive attitudes, became less active, and expressed insecurity. Although these children seemed to have obtained the necessary level of school readiness, they did not feel "suitable" for school. This spoiled their sense of well-being and hindered their engagement as active learners in the new environment and this (temporary) loss of competences might pave the way for poor self-esteem and insecurity in the new setting.

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