

EARLY YEARS TRANSITION PROGRAMME

TRANSITION FROM PRE-SCHOOL TO SCHOOL: EMPHASIZING EARLY LITERACY

The education of the child shall be directed to...
the development 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

The Relationship between Family and Kindergarten

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8.1 Abstract

According to the child-focused concept parents should be involved in the institutional education of their children. The basis of the partnership is the understanding of the families' needs. Differentiated communication with families means building partnership knowing about the needs, values, structures of the families and of the educational traditions, the way of life and the activities of parents. It is very important to adapt communication to the family structure. There is a rich variety of contact in the kindergartens, e.g. parents' meetings, open day, family room... etc. The positive effect of a good partnership (inclusion of parents into kindergarten life) is part of everyday life in a way that the family-centered views, the sense of responsibility and the awareness of the indispensable role of family education can be reinforced.

8.2 Hungarian values and traditions of the past

The relationship between institutions of small children's education and families were influenced by the political principles of the given social systems during the 180 years long past of Hungarian small child education.

In the institutions called "Angels' garden", founded by Terez Brunszvik in 1828 the positive aim was "*inclusion and protection*" while mothers were working. Education had a secondary role (Adolf, 1891, p. 198). Education—under the influence of Pestalozzi and Fröbel—however was already among the principles of Terez Brunszvik together with her early ideas of small children's special collective education.

The Hungarian infant educators, especially Ferenc Ney, pointed out very aptly that "some educators see the kindergarten as a school, others as a playground while only a few of them find the golden mean" (Ferenc, 1847) which unfortunately is still the case today.

In the period of the two World Wars the reformist pedagogic trends only had a partial influence on small child education. The *Parents' School* headed by Laszlo Nagy was operating in this period. The efficiency of the Montessori methods was perceptible in few institutions and in professional training. The aim was mainly taking care of children and teaching basic knowledge to improve the life of school drop-outs and under-educated children (with only 4 years of education).

Parents' associations were founded after the Second World War. The Parent Academy was managed by the Hungarian Women's Democratic Association till 1956. In the 1970s the Parents' Committee of the Patriotic Popular Front helped family education with book series. In a publication for the improvement of cooperation between parents and kindergartens the following can be read: "the common elaboration and realization of educational tasks should be set as the main aim of the relationship between parents and kindergartens." (Népfront, 1977, p. 5). The publication focuses on the harmonization of the family and the kindergarten agenda. Each of the Central Content Regulators (in 1971 and in 1989) dedicated a special chapter to the forms and special features of the family-kindergarten relationship and even methods were defined. Since the political transformation of 1989 the principles of the National Basic Program of Kindergarten Education are embedded in the Hungarian educational traditions. At the same time these principles assure the enforcement of local educational principles, traditions and parents' needs through a double level of content regulation. This type of professional guidance allows the accomplishment of the currently adequate education in communities and the realization of a child-focused approach keeping in mind the differentiated needs of children.

8.3 The strength and weaknesses of the present situation

The basis of the efficient development is the comprehensive view of small child development and of the appropriate methods that are laid down in the local education programs of kindergartens. The notion of learning at the age of small children can be interpreted widely and its meaning is gradually enriching during the first school years: from occasional (spontaneous) learning in a broad spectrum of the whole of the personality till targeted conscious acquisition of knowledge. Naturally the adult, the educator leading and organizing this learning process is also changing. The cooperation between the family and the educating kindergarten as well as with the educating teaching school and their supporting methods can all help the transition between the different stages of the process.

The partnership established in the interest of children is the basis of the natural process that brings the joy of successful achievement and growth to small children when they can participate in activities that correspond to their age. Good pedagogical sense, skills and attitude are needed for all this. Pressure, bringing forward tasks and "extra-large" requirements are considered as serious professional errors. The appropriate activities are varying with age. We live every minute of our lives at different ages and it is not a "preparation" for the next minute. Attitude changes among parents and kindergarten educators are needed for the acceptance and realization of these principles.

Leaving the family, entering the first institution and spending a large part of the day among strangers is a much larger shock than leaving the kindergarten for the school. The groups of 20–25, sometimes even 30 are frightening and confusing and for a child strongly attached to his/her family this can be an even more difficult trial. From this perspective the open, all-encompassing and accepting attitude of the kindergarten educator, the harmonization of the customs of the family and the kindergarten as well as the

understanding of the difficulties and the methods of establishing relations with parents are of exceptional importance. Pedagogic principles laid down in the local educational program can promote all that.

According to the child-focused concept parents should be involved in the institutional education of their children. Due to the bilateral communication situation difficulties may occur. Building trust is the basis of the successful concept focusing on the child whose interests are important for both sides. To assure a successful change from one institution to another, both, the kindergarten and the school must establish trust relations with families. The education programs of the project aim at the creation of pedagogic competences that can help to have such trust relations with the families of children from different backgrounds and to establish good long term cooperation with them. A helpful, supportive attitude among the parents is also needed and it can be stimulated by the educator experienced in community building.

In kindergarten education the background processes promoting linguistic (mother tongue) learning are realized in affectionate caring, in free play in which the educator is participating (but not managing and not teaching directly) based on the ideas of children and in everyday listening of fairy-tales. Plays and tales are the appropriate forms of learning at that age, they are the agents to develop all senses and think about experiences followed with curiosity and observed closely. In fact, gradually more and more complex forms of plays and tales together with rhythmically repeated speeches and conversations in the framework of the daily program prepare children for school learning. The child educated according to his/her age in kindergarten can fulfill the well designed school requirements. Most forms of playing contain movements, singing, children's poems, imagination, collective experiences, "free speech" and associating ideas. Plays and tales are natural methods of the reception and understanding of the world. Mixed age groups are best from this point of view. In such groups, both playing and following speeches are more diversified which makes learning by imitation easier.

The speaking behavior of the kindergarten educator that shows acceptance and warm feelings is extremely important as linguistic experience/reminiscences are attached to cold and warm sentimental poles. Intellectual maturity can reach the desired level only in a caring and secure atmosphere.

The continuous joint education, the establishment of *partnership* as formulated in the 1993 Public Education Law is more and more needed due to the social developments influencing families. This law reinforces the relation between the family and the institution. Parents have the right to participate in the decision making concerning caring, education and the development of their child. The task of educators is to initiate building up mutual understanding and a good relationship. Parents can not be excluded from the discussion of common development tasks. This cooperation is especially important to ease transition from kindergarten to school. The good relationship between the kindergarten educator and the parents assures self-confidence and protection for the child.

The basis of the partnership is the understanding of the families' needs. The task of the educator is to make the first steps and initiate the partnership with the parents. An important basic principle: the educator helps, advises, supports and hints at possible problems. The educator's sensitivity towards special problems is a precondition of the *open institution model*. In the past decades the concept of the role of educators in Hungary has undergone some changes. The earlier "knowledge-organizer-clerk" role has been enriched with the desired attitudes. The educator's role consists of three components:

- educator
- professional

- clerk

The educator needs authority to work efficiently and influence children and parents successfully. Authority depends first of all on the quality of the relationship that is influenced by the attitude and style of the educator, by interactions and communication, by professional skills, capacities of contacting people, by the facility of consensus and cooperation.

The positive effect of a good partnership (inclusion of parents in kindergarten life) is part of everyday life:

- Parents can observe their child in the community, they may transfer the most appropriate methods.
- They have a better understanding of the educational process, of the age characteristics of children and they can get acquainted with individual development features.
- They may witness good practices of dealing with children and of collective plays.
- They can follow the methods of kindergarten educators and enlarge their own educational capacities.

The parents gain experiences with the development of children coming from different family environments. Their family centered views, their sense of responsibility and the awareness of the indispensable role of family education can be reinforced. It's a pity that not enough attention is paid to all these activities and sometimes the emphasis is not strong enough. This needs to change.

Differentiated communication with families: Differentiation means building partnership in the knowledge of the needs, values, structures of the families and of the educational traditions, way of lives and activities of parents. Kindergarten educators knowing the children should convince the parents in the course of their cooperation in which area their child needs special, more intensive development to become mature for schooling.

Communication adapted to family structure: Cooperation needs an appropriate partner from among the family members. The kindergarten educator should value who has the utmost authority in the family, who represents the main resource. A single mother, if she has a job, can hardly meet the kindergarten educator. A grandmother replacing her can be a partner. The situation can be similar in the case of a multi-generational family. There are families where the mother, in others where the father has the stronger role. In such cases it might be most efficient to co-operate with the parent having the stronger authority, however excluding the other parent completely can in no way be the right solution.

Parents meeting, open day, family room... there is a rich variety of building up contacts in the kindergartens:

The general pedagogical issues concern first of all the specifics of age. But given that beside age similarities there are many individual differences, this is not enough information for the parents. Parents can be partners in education when they get support in solving the problems connected to their children and when the educator values their contributing help.

8.4 Strategy, plans, tasks

The government decree No.137/1996 (VIII.28.) on content regulation, issued more than 10 years ago has been modified by a new government decree 255/2009 (XI.20.).

This decree contains and reinforces certain elements that are of special importance in the successful education of children within the families, in the kindergartens as well as in schools.

Some elements from the Basic Program:

1. *Priority areas of linguistic (mother tongue) education during the transition from kindergarten to school are the following: the way of thinking, internal image construction, and duplication of the world by a complex system of signs. The attainment of the mother tongue (internal image construction, the duplication of the world by a complex system of signs) is a result of a learning process based on strong motivation and serious efforts assured by internal harmonization. The cognitive competences supporting linguistic learning must be developed for this result:*
2. *“Kindergarten education serves the development of the child together with and complementing family education. Cooperation with the family is a precondition for that. The forms of cooperation are varying, from personal contact to different events. There are different possibilities created by the kindergarten and by the family. The kindergarten educator takes into consideration the specifics and customs of families and realizes during cooperation the interventionist practice, that is, the solutions of support designed for the family.”*
3. *“The kindergarten keeps contact with the organizations before entering kindergarten (crèches and other social institutions), during kindergarten life (institutions of pedagogic services, child welfare services, caring shelters, health or public education institutions) and after kindergarten life (schools) that play a decisive role in children’s lives. The forms and methods how these contacts are kept correspond to the respective tasks and needs. Kindergarten should be open and develop plenty of initiatives.”*
4. *“The kindergartens educating children of different national and ethnic minorities keep contact with the respective local minority governments and minority organizations.”*

Family functions as a system, its atmosphere, the effectiveness of its functions are influenced by several factors. The educating activity of the educator depends on his/her acquaintance with the child, on his/her capacity to have a vision of the child in the family context (intervention). No success can be achieved without coherent education together with the family.

Differences between the institutional (kindergarten – school) education and family customs may present obstacles to a harmonious development of children. In the course of cooperation kindergarten educators and teachers may transfer such psychological, educational knowledge and practical experiences to the parents that can result in children’s education to be more successful.

The family–institution relation is especially important in transitions. When this cooperation is based on trust, the difficulties of integration into the kindergarten and during the kindergarten-school transition can be better overcome with the help of the parents.

Children arrive at the institutions (kindergartens, schools) from different socio-cultural backgrounds. Poverty, multiple handicaps, cultural differences may often lead to distancing, to mistrust and to prejudices on both sides. Cooperation can be successful, if it is not based on differences, but on a respect for the dignity of all human beings. The task of educators is to get acquainted with the social patterns transmitted by the child’s family and direct environment as well as by the different family value systems. Tolerance and understanding may help in the construction of the partnership. Without a family environment that stimulates learning the effectiveness of kindergarten-school education can hardly be assured.

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