

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

CHAPTER 10

Early Literacy in Transition from Pre-School to Primary School: Connecting Curricula

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10.1 Abstract

This article is based on a research project which aimed at investigating the extent to which the creation of mixed groups of pre-schoolers and first grade students contributes to early literacy development as well as to record teachers' discoveries about the transition. For that purpose we designed a pilot research in two pre-schools and two primary schools in the prefecture of Thessaloniki, Greece, for a period of six months in 2009–2010. 64 students, who were separated into two groups, took part in the research. One group was the experimental group and the other one was the control group. The research was realized in two phases with one teaching intervention. At first a pretest was given to both groups. Then the teaching intervention took place and finally a post test was given to both groups. The research results which came into light after the appropriate statistical processing show the extent to which mixed age groups contribute to early literacy development.

10.2 Introduction

After three decades of research, the transition from pre-school to primary school still remains a central research issue in the field of pre-school and early school education. “We define transition as a complex process made up of continued social activity in which the individual lives and learns to cope by adapting to the given social conditions. We highlight that children do not learn in isolation, but belong to several microsystems and commute between these environments, adapting to their different demands and learning from each other” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Fabian, 2007, p. 13).

However, the effort to cope with the multi-level changes, imposed simultaneously by the prescriptions, the rules and the demands of the new environment, puts the mental strength of the individual on trial (Fabian, 2002). There is a gap in the continuity of the process, education and learning (Vrinioti & Matsagouras, 2005), which will probably have not only direct negative impact upon behavior and school performance during the early school years, but it will also have a short-term negative impact upon the formation of the person's traits (Kienig, 2002). Collaboration between pre-school, primary school and parents is considered the most important factor in confronting the difficulties of the transition (Broström, 2007; Dockett & Perry, 2007), while the directional idea for the normal transition is the development of "the continuity" between the two educational institutions (Dunlop & Fabian, 2002), i.e. to make sure that the aims, the goals and the curriculum of the pre-school and the primary school are compatible.

On the other hand, by the term "early literacy" we consider the experiences, points of view and attitudes that children build about reading and writing as they are continuously interacting with the social groups in real communication situations. Early literacy emerges from the child himself/herself, it involves the notion of dynamic movement and acquisition and is a continuous, ceaseless and lifelong process showing the following characteristics:

- It promotes the values of the written speech and highlights its social dimension.
- It accepts the relationship between oral and written speech.
- It emphasizes the interaction with the texts.
- It aims at the awareness of the form and function of the written speech.
- It emphasizes understanding.
- It calls for an active child participation.
- It adopts an interactive adult role.
- It promotes a rich environment in written speech stimuli (Sivropoulou, under publication; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2001).

Until the end of the 20th century in Greece the issue of transition of the child from pre-school to primary school has almost never interested the scientific community neither as an educational problem of practice nor as a matter of educational policy or as a research object. The few research efforts during the last years are still at an early stage and do not create any new knowledge (Vrinioti, 2008). Therefore, the goal of this research is to create a strong and equal partnership between pre-school and primary school and to promote educational continuity and flexibility in early childhood education. More precisely, the research aims were the following four.

- to develop a common pre-school and primary school, communicative-teaching approach in early literacy and language practice within a participatory approach.
- to encourage language acquisition and early literacy approaches in both pre-schools and primary schools.
- to assess children's literacy learning and thus encourage them to reflect on their own learning processes at the beginning of lifelong learning.
- to enable the participants to use the Learning- Stories method as a means of evaluation, in order to encourage language acquisition.

10.3 Method:

The research lasted six months from October 2009 to April 2010 with 64 students (32 pre-school students and 32 first grade students) as participants, as well as two primary school teachers and three pre-school teachers. The two pre-schools and the two primary schools were chosen for the following reasons:

- Teachers from pre-schools and primary schools were interested in participating.
- The pre-schools and the primary schools were chosen in pairs due to their close proximity to one another.

Other participants in the research included: One research assistant and two experts from the University of Western Macedonia; the latter two are the authors of the present paper.

Experimental group and Control group The 64 (pre-school and first grade) students were separated into two groups, the Experimental group (E. G.) and the Control group (C. G.) in the following way. The Experimental group consisted of 32 children (16 pre-schoolers and 16 first graders) and the teaching intervention involved creating mixed groups of pre-schoolers and first graders. The Control group consisted of 32 children. However, there was no teaching of mixed groups, that is the 16 pre-schoolers and the 16 first graders were taught in their own separate classrooms. 24 stories were chosen for the teaching intervention, which were used in the same order in both the Experimental and the Control group. The story selection criteria were the following:

- They shouldn't be too long.
- They should be close to the children's interests.
- There should be a possibility of text extension through activities.
- Meanings should be promoted for understanding.

Phases of the research The research was designed and realized in two phases with one teaching intervention. All students were assessed before and after the teaching intervention with pre and post tests (Bloom & Quint, 1999). In addition, the teachers kept journals recording their observations every day, while the assistant researcher was video-recording the teachings from both groups (E. G. and C. G.). Furthermore, all participants in the project met once a month to comment on the recorded teachings, to get feedback and reflect on the process.

10.3.1 First phase: Initial test

The diagnostic process of the initial test (pre-test) was applied in October 2009 for students of both groups with individual observation from the teacher. Every day the teacher was observing a child and then she recorded his/her performance on the observation sheet (initial and final test).

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Child's name and surname

Date

School

Experimental or control group

a/a	Indicators ^a 1	Always	Sometimes	Never
Spoken Language				
1	Plays with words/expressions			
2	Plays with rhythm in spoken words			
3	Telling others about personal opinions, pictures, texts and/or experiences			
4	Tells own stories			
5	Understands and uses new concepts			
6	Sings songs and rhythms			
7	Refers to objects in the surroundings			
8	Connects actions with words			
Written language-reading				
9	Is curious about letters and words			
10	Is aware of signs etc.			
11	Connects logos with meaning			
12	Performs "play reading"			
13	Is aware of the direction of reading			
14	Knows 'near and dear' letters/words			
Written language-writing				
15	Performs "playwriting"			
16	Puts text on drawings			
17	Writes letters/words/sentences			
18	Breaks up words into syllables			
19	Makes text-like doodles			
20	Writes "near and dear" letters/words			
21	Manipulates language and symbols using computer software			
22	Writes with-and different stuff			
Language communication and literature				
23	Participates in read-aloud activities			
24	Draws, paraphrases and in other ways processes a story			
25	Acts out/plays a story			

Table 10.1: DANMARKS PÆDAGOGISKE, UNIVERSITETSSKOLE , AARHUS UNIVERSITET, 2010

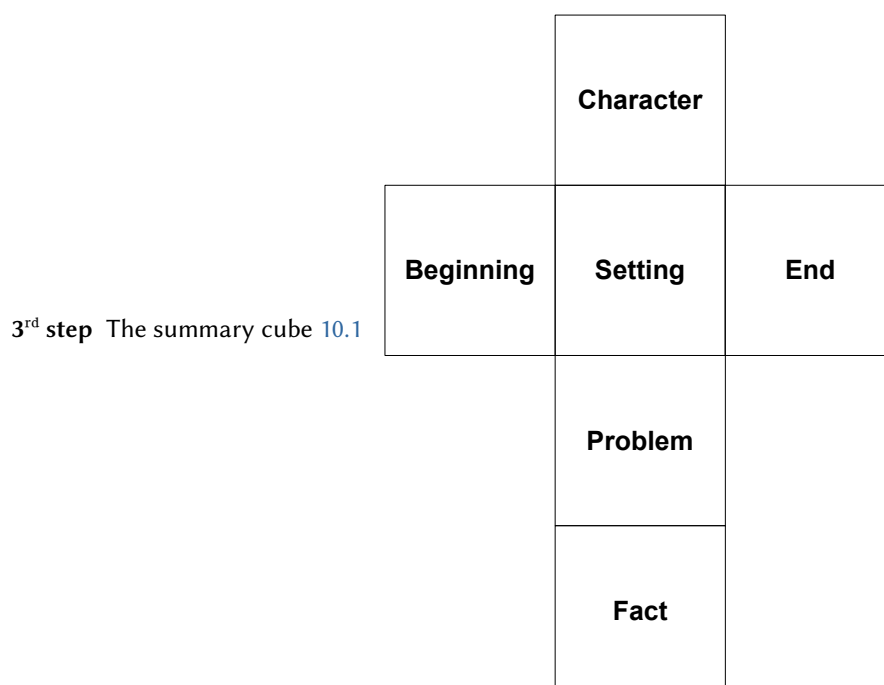
^aThe indicators were used in the framework suggested by Elisabeth Mellgren, Anders Skriver Jensen & Ole Henrik Hansen (<http://www.ease-eu.com>)

Teaching intervention The process of teaching intervention followed concisely the five steps.

1st step Introduction to the story. The teacher introduces the story to the children through a “surprise” (doll, puppet show, letter, cassette-recorder, overhead projector, photographs, computer, and so on).

2nd step Reading-aloud of the story. The teacher reads the story text aloud, pointing at the words, but stops wherever needed and presents her thoughts aloud, having as main aim the creation of pictures in the children’s minds, pictures which will help them to understand and interpret the text. Other times she stops in order for the children to guess/imagine and describe the hero. All students express their points of view. Then the teacher develops her own description aloud. Sometimes she comments on her and on the group’s predictions about the plot. She continues with the read-aloud and she stops again in order to ask about a word she doesn’t know. The children try to guess the word from the context. The teacher explains her opinion aloud. “This word must mean...” she continues to read aloud and she stops. What is a pumpkin and what can we do with it? The students express their opinions. The teacher provides her own point of view. I think we can make soup plates, water pots, decorations. Let’s see what the story says. When the reading is over, the teacher tries to diagnose if the children have understood the story. Therefore she goes on to the next step which is “the summary cube”.

Figure 10.1: The summary cube



The teacher holds a cube in her hands. Every side of the cube has one of the words (Character, Setting, Problem, Fact, Beginning, End) in order to encourage the children to read the words and understand the literary elements of the narration and summarize the story. The cube passes in front of every student, who throws it and when it stands the student who threw it tries to recognise/read

the word appearing on its upper side. For example the student recognises the word “Hero” and then he explains and describes the hero-protagonist of the story. The cube stops to be thrown when all the words written on its six sides have appeared. If the word “Hero” appears many times then the student who threw the cube throws it again or supplements the characteristics of the hero not noticed by his peer. In this way children describe, explain, understand the story better and they are led to the 4th step which is the extension of the story through activities chosen by the children themselves.

4th step Dramatizing/extending the story through activities chosen by the children themselves. The stories usually contained a problem, which students were invited to solve by working in groups. They sometimes chose role-play, other times they chose a puppet show, gallantry show, book creation, painting or writing, building, newspaper making or labels or posters or writing wishes or letters and so on.

5th step Assessment by children and teacher. When students have finished their work in groups, they come altogether in order to present their work to their friends/peers. Every group presents its work and comments on the work of the others.

At the end the teacher as a member of the group points out her own experiences. Sometimes she extends children’s knowledge, other times she comments, asks, explains, argues, etc. During the intervention teachers observe and record children’s reactions.

10.3.2 Second phase: final test (post test)

The final test followed the teaching intervention. During this phase, which took place in March 2010, the same process like with the initial test followed. The data collection was realized through the method of observation. Assessment of the program outcomes was based on the differences presented between the two groups in relation to the initial and final measurement, which, since other factors have been excluded, are due to the different organization of the groups.

10.4 Outcomes

If we look at Tables 10.2 and 10.3, we see that both groups, the experimental as well as the control group, show improvement in some of the indicators between the initial and the final test. It was to some extent expected that the control group would improve its performance because of attending pre-school/primary and also because of the age difference of six months. However, the expectation was that the improvement would be greater in the experimental group. This expectation was indeed confirmed. Looking, firstly, at Table 10.2, we observe that the experimental group shows *statistically significant resp. highly significant* differences of the means between the initial and the final test in 18 out of 25 indicators.

Now, looking at Table 10.3 we see that the control group has improved its means between the initial and the final test in 19 indicators with *statistically significant resp. highly significant* differences. We observe further that in the following 15 indicators both groups improved their means significantly; these are the indicators: 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 15, 17, 21, 22, 24, 25.

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		Paired Differences								
Indicators		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95 % Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	
					Lower	Upper				
Pair 1	Ind. 1 – Ind. 1	.531	.567	.100	.327	.736	5.299	31	.000	
Pair 2	Ind. 2 - Ind. 2	.438	.564	.100	.234	.641	4.385	31	.000	
Pair 3	Ind. 3 - Ind. 3	.438	.564	.100	.234	.641	4.385	31	.000	
Pair 4	Ind. 4 - Ind. 4	.688	.693	.122	.438	.937	5.614	31	.000	
Pair 5	Ind. 5 - Ind. 5	.688	.535	.095	.495	.880	7.268	31	.000	
Pair 6	Ind. 6 - Ind. 6	.344	.545	.096	.147	.540	3.566	31	.001	
Pair 7	Ind. 7 - Ind. 7	.594	.560	.099	.392	.796	5.999	31	.000	
Pair 8	Ind. 8 - Ind. 8	.563	.619	.109	.339	.786	5.141	31	.000	
Pair 9	Ind. 9 - Ind. 9	.563	.716	.127	.304	.821	4.447	31	.000	
Pair 10	Ind.10 - Ind.10	.469	.507	.090	.286	.652	5.230	31	.000	
Pair 11	Ind.11 - Ind.11	.375	.492	.087	.198	.552	4.313	31	.000	
Pair 12	Ind.12 - Ind.12	.469	.507	.090	.286	.652	5.230	31	.000	
Pair 13	Ind.13 - Ind.13	.031	.177	.031	-.032	.095	1.000	31	.325	
Pair 14	Ind.14 - Ind.14	.031	.309	.055	-.080	.143	.571	31	.572	
Pair 15	Ind.15 - Ind.15	.969	.782	.138	.687	1.251	7.006	31	.000	
Pair 16	Ind.16 - Ind.16	.031	.400	.071	-.113	.176	.442	31	.662	
Pair 17	Ind.17 - Ind.17	.750	.508	.090	.567	.933	8.352	31	.000	
Pair 18	Ind.18 - Ind.18	.125	1.314	.232	-.349	.599	.538	31	.594	
Pair 19	Ind.19 - Ind.19	.125	.660	.117	-.113	.363	1.072	31	.292	
Pair 20	Ind.20 - Ind.20	.094	.390	.069	-.047	.234	1.359	31	.184	
Pair 21	Ind.21 - Ind.21	.438	.504	.089	.256	.619	4.910	31	.000	
Pair 22	Ind.22 - Ind.22	.250	.568	.100	.045	.455	2.490	31	.018	
Pair 23	Ind.23 - Ind.23	.188	.471	.083	.018	.357	2.252	31	.032	
Pair 24	Ind.24 - Ind.24	.813	.471	.083	.643	.982	9.760	31	.000	
Pair 25	Ind.25 - Ind.25	.438	.669	.118	.196	.679	3.699	31	.001	

Table 10.2: Experimental Group (Paired Samples Test)

Table 10.4 shows the differences between the means of the experimental and the control group for the final test. We see that with the exception of only the first indicator the means of the experimental group are higher than the means of the control group. The differences are noticeable for 13 indicators (5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 12, 13, 15, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23) also *statistically significant* resp. *highly significant*.

	Indicators	Paired Differences				t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Ind. 1 - Ind. 1	.750	.718	.127	.491	1.009	5.906	31	.000
Pair 2	Ind. 2 - Ind. 2	.469	.567	.100	.264	.673	4.676	31	.000
Pair 3	Ind. 3 - Ind. 3	.531	.671	.119	.289	.773	4.477	31	.000
Pair 4	Ind. 4 - Ind. 4	.594	.712	.126	.337	.850	4.717	31	.000
Pair 5	Ind. 5 - Ind. 5	.188	.644	.114	-.045	.420	1.646	31	.110
Pair 6	Ind. 6 - Ind. 6	.219	.608	.108	.000	.438	2.034	31	.051
Pair 7	Ind. 7 - Ind. 7	.438	.716	.127	.179	.696	3.458	31	.002
Pair 8	Ind. 8 - Ind. 8	-.125	.793	.140	-.411	.161	-.892	31	.379
Pair 9	Ind. 9 - Ind. 9	.781	.659	.117	.544	1.019	6.705	31	.000
Pair 10	Ind.10 - Ind.10	.188	.471	.083	.018	.357	2.252	31	.032
Pair 11	Ind.11 - Ind.11	.219	.491	.087	.042	.396	2.521	31	.017
Pair 12	Ind.12 - Ind.12	.500	.508	.090	.317	.683	5.568	31	.000
Pair 13	Ind.13 - Ind.13	.500	.803	.142	.210	.790	3.521	31	.001
Pair 14	Ind.14 - Ind.14	.313	.535	.095	.120	.505	3.304	31	.002
Pair 15	Ind.15 - Ind.15	.531	.718	.127	.272	.790	4.187	31	.000
Pair 16	Ind.16 - Ind.16	.563	.716	.127	.304	.821	4.447	31	.000
Pair 17	Ind.17 - Ind.17	1.156	.767	.136	.880	1.433	8.532	31	.000
Pair 18	Ind.18 - Ind.18	.344	1.260	.223	-.111	.798	1.543	31	.133
Pair 19	Ind.19 - Ind.19	-.313	.592	.105	-.526	-.099	-2.985	31	.005
Pair 20	Ind.20 - Ind.20	.656	.971	.172	.306	1.006	3.824	31	.001
Pair 21	Ind.21 - Ind.21	.594	.756	.134	.321	.866	4.443	31	.000
Pair 22	Ind.22 - Ind.22	.594	.756	.134	.321	.866	4.443	31	.000
Pair 23	Ind.23 - Ind.23	.156	.628	.111	-.070	.383	1.408	31	.169
Pair 24	Ind.24 - Ind.24	.625	.554	.098	.425	.825	6.387	31	.000
Pair 25	Ind.25 - Ind.25	.563	.759	.134	.289	.836	4.190	31	.000

Table 10.3: Control Group (Paired Samples Test)

10.5 Discussion

The data allow us to draw certain conclusions concerning the main aim of the present study, which is to investigate the contribution of the mixed groups from pre-schoolers and first graders to the early literacy development. The main finding focused on the fact that there are significant differences between the two groups. There is a higher trend for improvement, in all indicators, in the experimental group, which can be attributed to the co-existence of mixed groups (pre-school and first grade students).

The quality observations from both teachers (primary school and pre-school teacher) resulted in the following:

Regarding the students: The development of social and communicative skills was reinforced by the mixed groups of pre-schoolers and first graders, as well as the initiative in starting interactions, the exchange of information and ideas, the question-posing, the following of instructions, the dedication to the work and the support given to each other at group level. The teacher notices “children have understood that, if they need help they can rely on their friends and peers”. And elsewhere “the children had the chance to express their ideas, comment on their peers’ opinions and points of view, think critically,

talk about themselves and their environment, argue, pose questions and put themselves in the “other’s” shoes. The inner motives like self-knowledge and self-respect were also reinforced. In this way non acceptable forms of behavior were minimized. The students themselves described their class atmosphere in a very positive way.

Regarding the teachers: In order to accomplish “continuity”, teachers of the experimental group drew the following conclusions.

Non directional teaching: Teachers of both levels pointed out that learning is more effective when it adapts itself to the students’ personal pace and that the more the issues and the depth to which the subjects are treated, the more the students feel like learning, which means that substantial learning is not tiring. Learning is substantial in the context of a relaxing environment which activates students. The first grade teacher points out: “I decided that I had to limit my own participation in children’s negotiations and encourage children to interact with each other and think in order to respond to communication demands. That is how I could see children as creators and producers of their language, in a climate of acceptance, mutual respect and self-designing carried out by the children themselves”.

Management of useful and appropriate literacy material: Teachers of the experimental group agreed that an environment rich in reading stimuli is needed in order to cultivate early literacy. Prints of the environment are one of the first sources of reading material for young children and they function as a foundation for the roots of literacy. When children “read” printed material from the environment they are influenced not only by the graphic, but by the social, contextual, grammatical and linguistic elements as well. The “summary cube” belonged to this kind of material, giving students the chance to “read” the proposed words of the cube, to process the narration elements and to create oral sentences. Consequently the environment (of the pre-school/primary school) must generate authentic and useful literacy material, comprehensive and appropriate, so that it helps children to understand the way written speech is organized and used.

Portfolios creation: Teachers of the experimental group noticed that children reveal their abilities and potential not always in distinct ways. They detected these ways through fine observations and interpretations and they decided to create assessment portfolios for the young students. This process promoted students’ success, giving them many opportunities to show their inclinations and potential and giving teachers opportunities to respect the students’ potential and reveal each one’s strong points. One of the two primary school teachers notices: “The creation of portfolios for my students helped me to realize how many things I know about them. I was given the chance to be able to refer to them having certain facts and situations to narrate. The observation and recording of my students’ participation in activities chosen by them also gave me the opportunity to form a more complete idea about every one of them. I knew at any time what every child could accomplish and so I could recognize their next step every time they succeeded in something they couldn’t do in a previous activity”.

The Greek effort has combined school centered staff development with the research attempt. It emphasized transition as a functional means for literacy development. However this research must be considered a first short-range investigation of the opinion that mixed groups of pre-schoolers and first graders improve students’ literacy to some extent.

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It would be useful to repeat the research by drawing a larger representative sample of children and over a longer period of time as well as to investigate other parameters like social learning and the role of educators ([Vrinioti & Matsagouras, 2005](#)).

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Indicators	t-test for Equality of Means					95 % Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Ind. 1	-.411	62	.682	-.063	.152	-.366	.241
	-.411	61.971	.682	-.063	.152	-.366	.241
Ind. 2	.701	62	.486	.094	.134	-.173	.361
	.701	61.422	.486	.094	.134	-.173	.361
Ind. 3	1.105	62	.273	.125	.113	-.101	.351
	1.105	60.842	.273	.125	.113	-.101	.351
Ind. 4	1.062	62	.292	.156	.147	-.138	.450
	1.062	61.686	.292	.156	.147	-.138	.450
Ind. 5	2.937	62	.005	.281	.096	.090	.473
	2.937	46.086	.005	.281	.096	.089	.474
Ind. 6	4.078	62	.000	.406	.100	.207	.605
	4.078	44.823	.000	.406	.100	.206	.607
Ind. 7	2.887	62	.005	.250	.087	.077	.423
	2.887	40.081	.006	.250	.087	.075	.425
Ind. 8	6.655	62	.000	.625	.094	.437	.813
	6.655	46.738	.000	.625	.094	.436	.814
Ind. 9	.661	62	.511	.094	.142	-.190	.377
	.661	61.854	.511	.094	.142	-.190	.377
Ind. 10	2.402	62	.019	.250	.104	.042	.458
	2.402	43.539	.021	.250	.104	.040	.460
Ind. 11	1.105	62	.273	.125	.113	-.101	.351
	1.105	55.745	.274	.125	.113	-.102	.352
Ind. 12	3.999	62	.000	.438	.109	.219	.656
	3.999	42.230	.000	.438	.109	.217	.658
Ind. 13	2.675	62	.010	.188	.070	.047	.328
	2.675	31.000	.012	.188	.070	.045	.330
Ind. 14	1.791	62	.078	.094	.052	-.011	.198
	1.791	31.000	.083	.094	.052	-.013	.201
Ind. 15	2.823	62	.006	.375	.133	.109	.641
	2.823	61.548	.006	.375	.133	.109	.641
Ind. 16	1.757	62	.084	.156	.089	-.022	.334
	1.757	39.566	.087	.156	.089	-.024	.336
Ind. 17	.527	62	.600	.063	.119	-.174	.299
	.527	59.255	.600	.063	.119	-.175	.300
Ind. 18	.263	62	.793	.063	.237	-.412	.537
	.263	61.980	.793	.063	.237	-.412	.537
Ind. 19	2.239	62	.029	.219	.098	.023	.414
	2.239	31.000	.032	.219	.098	.019	.418
Ind. 20	2.490	62	.015	.250	.100	.049	.451
	2.490	31.000	.018	.250	.100	.045	.455
Ind. 21	4.565	62	.000	.719	.157	.404	1.033
	4.565	54.452	.000	.719	.157	.403	1.034
Ind. 22	3.869	62	.000	.438	.113	.211	.664
	3.869	60.842	.000	.438	.113	.211	.664
Ind. 23	3.197	62	.002	.344	.108	.129	.559
	3.197	53.828	.002	.344	.108	.128	.559
Ind. 24	1.559	62	.124	.156	.100	-.044	.357
	1.559	56.949	.125	.156	.100	-.044	.357
Ind. 25	.611	62	.543	.063	.102	-.142	.267
	.611	56.067	.544	.063	.102	-.142	.267

Table 10.4: Differences between the Experimental and the Control-Group in the final Test

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