

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 12

Analysis of the Questionnaire

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12.1 Abstract

As part of the evaluation process we gave the participants questionnaires, before and after the courses they were involved in, altogether about 400. The questions were centred round literacy learning and what the role of pre-school could be in this regard, but also considered documentation as an issue in early childhood education. The results from the analyses of each country's questionnaire (pre- and/or primary school teachers and parents) are presented mainly in terms of the most important results drawn from all the statistics behind them. The most important result is however the change from the first to the second questionnaire, which means that a lot of the participants in **EASE** have been influenced in their way of looking at issues of transition related to literacy. A difference between some of the counties is whether pre-school should prepare for primary school as a main aim, or just be for the joy of children's play.

People's conceptions of different aspects of the world around them are often an expression coming through when talking about every-day situations. Their ways of expressing themselves rest on perspectives that are taken for granted. These perspectives can however be more or less reflected or conscious in each individual. In a phenomenographic (Marton & Booth, 1997) approach researching the analysis becomes a question of understanding each individual's perception of what he or she is expressing. The results are descriptions of categories of conceptions. How many categories there will appear in the analysis is a question of how close one is to what the informants say, or vice versa, how abstract the categories are. In this analysis we have decided to be quite close to what the participants say. The number of categories will also vary depending on the kind of questions asked. The focus of the analysis is: "What

does this person mean by what he or she says?” In what way does he or she relate to each question? It is often possible to sort people’s conceptions into more than one category, which we can here see is more the rule and exceptions in the table of frequencies follow after all the qualitatively different categories.

12.2 Participating teachers and parents

We have conducted a survey in the **EASE** project where the persons who participate in the different courses have answered a questionnaire, which will be analysed here. But let us first say that in total there are about 300 persons filed from the ECE who participated. From Sweden there are 23, half of them teachers in practice, and the other half teacher students. Many of the teachers in practice had problems to follow the course through depending on luck for support from their headmasters. Because of this we also chose a group of 12 teacher students when they were involved in a course about literacy. In the Swedish analysis we talk about teachers since they all have the same education (3.5 years university degree), although some of them work in pre-schools and others in pre-school-classes.

From *Iceland* 10 teachers answered the questionnaire; six pre-school teachers and four primary school teachers.

From *Greece* the questionnaire was answered by five teachers, three of whom were pre-school teachers working with children 4–6 years old, and two were primary school teachers working this year (2009/2010) with first graders, 6–7 years old.

In the *Danish EASE* project, there were 17 participants and all of them were educated professionals. All of them have participated in a literacy-course, and they also participated in an action research project, in developing a learning story template, literacy indicators and context indicators. And they produced learning stories in their practice. And all of them answered the questionnaires that will be analysed below. The **EASE** literacy-course was planned as in-service training, and the present municipalities supported the participation. One of the participants was a trained primary school teacher, and practised in primary school. The rest were educated pre-school teachers, and two of them practised in pre-school class. Two practised in leisure time centres and 12 practised in pre-school. But in order to keep the Danish analysis clear and understandable, all participants are named professionals. A group of parents answered the questionnaire as well, and their answers are analysed separately.

The survey in *Poland* was completed prior to the course by a total of 35 teachers (15 of these were pre-school teachers and 20 primary school teachers). Furthermore, the study included 18 parents. After the course 20 teachers (8 pre-school teachers, and 13 primary school teachers) participated in the study. The questionnaire was additionally completed by 10 parents.

From *Austria* the questionnaire was given before the courses started; the Austrian sample includes the views of 11 teachers of Kindergarten (Five-years-education as a professional from the countryside [Burgenland]) 11 teachers of primary school (Education at college/university level from the countryside [Burgenland]) 11 parents (middle class from the countryside [Burgenland]) (The education of pre-school teachers lasts 5 years in Austria and is located at a school; primary school teachers are educated at the “Pädagogische Hochschule” (until 2007 “Pädagogische Akademie”) in 6 terms of study.

In *Germany* the pre-school teachers’ education takes place in vocational training colleges and includes one year of traineeship in pre-schools (Kindertagesstätte) under supervision of teachers. Five vocational training colleges in the region of Cologne participated in the **EASE** project, in each of them about 15 students participated in the “**EASE** -courses” and applied their competences to the practical work in the

pre-schools. It was planned that all of them should have interviewed at least one pre-school teacher, one primary-school teacher and one parent with whom they worked together. In fact, altogether the questionnaire was completed by 159 persons.

12.3 Teachers' and parents' perceptions

Here follows a qualitative analysis for the answers of the participants in the **EASE** courses in our 8 countries, question by question. We will only highlight the most important aspects from each country, and will then in the end make a comparison. Under each heading (the question) the qualitative analysis will be presented first, and after each of these a short description from each country will follow.

12.4 1) What should children be learning in pre-school/1st grade?

We could here distinguish 8 qualitatively different categories. Some of those are close in meaning, but we have anyhow decided to distinguish between for example, social aspects and democracy.

1. **Social aspects:** These could stand for social competence as such or more direct social interaction and cooperation in terms of taking turns in play or communication.
2. **Democracy:** This relates to notions like equality, responsibility for other people, the nature and the world around us (this could be linked to education for sustainable development).
3. **3 Rs:** The focus is here on literacy in a broad sense, like becoming skilled in expressing themselves, listening to and interpreting stories and symbols. There are also expressions of mathematics, like numbers, form and shape, measuring etc. It is here more common that language is focussed on than mathematics.
4. **Individual and personal:** Here a whole conglomerate of aspects is meant, like becoming independent, feeling secure, and safe in their identity, feeling loved, feeling they are good enough as they are and confident in what they are, developing curiosity and getting to know that their interests are valuable.
5. **Knowledge content:** Aspects such as nature, culture or art are referred to here. This can be linked to learning about their neighbourhood, the nature or culture in terms of learning about museums, theatre or cinema, but also about techniques for drawing, painting etc.
6. **Learning:** This illustrates the idea of life-long learning and gets children interested and willing to learn, they enjoy learning and find their own strategies or test hypotheses. This also includes creativity as a main factor for learning.
7. **School readiness:** The idea with pre-school-classes seems to be to ensure a smooth transition to school. And it will help each child if he or she has learnt the things necessary for school, like more self-confidence or being able to take instructions by the teacher.
8. **Motor skills:**

Austria: Mostly named by all people: To prepare the children for reading, writing and counting, language skills (also in the mother-tongue), social skills and physical skills. All teachers and pre-school-teachers answered, that working towards the preparation for primary school is the most important content.

Denmark: *Professionals:* 82 % focus on social aspects as the most important category, emphasizing solidarity, consideration and ability to care for others. 41 % focus on the 3R's, while 35 % focus on school readiness. Democracy, knowledge content and learning are all less than 11 %. *Parents:* 100 % focus on social aspects as most important and individual and personal capacities as the second most important (50 %) content.

Germany: All three groups focus on social aspects, the 3Rs and individual and personal development. After the course, learning and school readiness became more important for pre-school and primary-school teachers as well as for parents.

Greece: The teacher's answers before the course as well as after the course differ on the individual level and on the educational level. This means that the three pre-school teachers say, although in a different ranking order, that it is important for the children to develop everyday life-skills, motor skills, and to be prepared for a smooth transition from pre-school to primary school, and to learn about the culture and art. The last point is the only one that was mentioned also by the two primary school teachers in the first questionnaire. The answers of the primary school teachers however differ from those of the pre-school teachers concerning the other points. Concerning the answers after the course the pre-school teachers repeat what they said before the course and add that the children should learn democratic practices and become prepared for the 3Rs. The two primary school teachers agree among themselves concerning their answers to this question in the second questionnaire and with the pre-school teachers concerning what is important for the children to learn in the pre-school but they put them in a different order.

Hungary: 40 pedagogues, 40 primary school teachers and 20 parents participate. Almost all respondents (student and kindergarten pedagogues) focus on the 3Rs (12 %), school readiness (47 %) and motor skills (57 %). A change occurs after the course: There is a focus on social aspects as well as individual and personal development. Parents: motor skills (60 %), learning (50 %), democracy (50 %).

Iceland: In the beginning of the project most of the pre-school teachers emphasized social development (85 %) and individual and personal development (80 %). The primary school teachers also focused on social development and democracy (85 %) but they also mentioned learning and school readiness. After the course the primary school teachers mentioned learning and the 3Rs as most important and two of the pre-school teachers also mentioned the 3Rs and learning as well.

Poland: In the case of the "social aspects" category (1) the results received after the course were the same as those obtained before. 100 % of the respondents indicated the need for development of this exact skill. The same is true in the case of the "democracy" category (2). In the remaining categories, differences were observed in responses given by respondents prior to and after the course. After the course, a greater number of respondents, both teachers and parents, indicated a need for "development of reading, writing and arithmetic skills" (3). Furthermore, categories such as "personal skills" (4), "knowledge content" (5), "learning skills" (6), "school readiness" (7) and "motor skills" (8) were indicated far more often by respondents after the completion of the course. This was particularly evident in the case of category (5). Prior to the course this was indicated by only 20 % of the pre-school teachers, 70 % of the primary school teachers and 39 % of the parents, whereas after the course these figures were 75 %, 85 % and 80 % respectively.

Sweden: Looking at question no 12.4, almost all *teachers* focus on social aspects, democracy as well as individual and personal development (85 %), while about 62 % focus on the 3Rs, knowledge content and learning. Less than 10 % focus on school readiness. 64 % of the teacher students focused on social aspects before the course while 100 % after. The other main change for this group was an increase in focussing on the 3Rs and individual and personal development, while no one talked about knowledge content or motor skills.

12.5 2) What are the most important issues?

We can here distinguish 5 categories. These are however equal to the categories above! It was also a question many participants did not answer, it seems like they thought it was similar to the question above.

1. Social skills
2. Literacy enrichments of different kinds, specifically for the immigrant children.
3. Democracy
4. Learning, that is getting children interested, engaged, curious and have them find joy and safety etc.
5. Motor skills
6. All the things said above

Austria: Social and individual skills but also physical exercise are the most important skills for the Austrian participants. So in Austria most people (teachers and parents) see the Kindergarten as a preparation for primary school and for the social dimension it is very important for them. In contrast to the Scandinavian countries, where education to democracy is important for all, in Austria the idea of democracy has a more political meaning.

Denmark: *Professionals:* 88 % focus on social aspects; getting children interested and engaged 46 %, but also motor skills and literacy enrichment (both 41 %), are mentioned. *Parents:* Social skills and getting children interested and engaged (both 75 %) are important to the parents.

Greece: The answers to the second question are similar to those of the first question but they are more explicit.

Germany: Although social skills are considered to be most important, learning gets a higher importance after the courses.

Iceland: Most of the pre-school teachers saw social issues and democracy as the most important issues in the beginning as well as at the end of the project. Most of the primary school teachers mentioned issues that fall under democracy.

Poland: Both prior and after the course, 100 % of the respondents indicated the “social skills” category (1). After the course, far more of the respondents seem to be aware of the fact that apart from the social skills, there are other significant issues such as: supporting linguistic development (2), democracy (3), learning skills (4). Prior to the course, the final category—“all above-mentioned” (6)

was not marked by any of the respondents, whereas after the course this was indicated by 12.5 % of pre-school teachers, 15.4 % of primary school teachers and 10 % of parents.

Sweden: When the *teachers* talk about what is most important the results are similar to the answers in question 12.4, while the *teacher students* said that all aspects were equally important.

12.6 3) In what way do you think literacy education can be realized in pre-school?

We have distinguished 5 categories here:

1. **Follow the children's own strategies and challenge them:** Teachers talk about how children write in their own ways and they should be allowed to do this by being given support and encouragement, but also being offered situations which will motivate children through their inherent creative potential. It is also a question of arousing the desire in children to become literate by challenging them positively.
2. **Language development:** This could be related to just using correct language or speaking a lot with the children, but it can also be illustrated by reading a lot of stories to children. Some teachers say that it should not be focused on the alphabet only.
3. **Specific aspect of literacy:** A very specific aspect mentioned by some teachers is that the function of literacy has to be in the foreground of literacy learning.
4. **The physical environment:** Here teachers talk about the important role of having an environment where there are texts in all forms, but also where the teacher should act as a role-model by writing visually for children on children's drawings or the blackboard.
5. **Train fine motor skills:** This means that children have to become skilful in using their fingers and hand for being good writers, this can be practiced in a lot of every-days tasks.

Austria: The learning-environment is mostly named: it should stimulate the children but (important for teachers and parents) there should be no tasks for the children; "Learning by playing" should be realized.

Denmark: *Professionals:* 65 % focus on following and challenging the children's own strategies, and give them opportunity to experience the excitement in exploring new phenomena. 46 % of the answers focus on language development. And 30 % answer that the physical environment is important. *Parents:* Also the parents (75 %) focus on following and challenging the children's own strategies, 50 % on language development and 25 % focus on motor skills.

Greece: The two pre-school teachers and one of the primary school teachers reply to the third question that the most important thing is the development of a positive stance towards the literacy education. This means: follow children's own strategies and challenge them. Also, the three pre-school teachers and one of the primary school teachers answer firstly, that the teacher should act as a role-model by writing visually for children on children's drawings and secondly, that the physical environment should function like the "third teacher" in the Reggio approach.

Germany: “Language development” is in the focus of all three groups but “following the children’s own strategies and challenging them” and “specific aspects of literacy” gain importance for the parents in the out-questionnaire. The physical environment becomes less important for the pre-school teachers after the course.

Iceland: Both pre-school teachers and primary school teachers focused on following the children’s own strategies and language development as an approach to literacy learning.

Poland: In the first questionnaire *pre-school teachers* focused on the physical environment and the ability to follow the children’s own strategies and challenge them is considered to be equally important by pre-school teachers. Language development is being mentioned as the third one of the most important issues. 73 % of the pre-school teachers mentioned training motor skills as useful. *Primary School teachers* are of the opinion that the specific aspect of literacy is not considered as so important in this respect. Primary school teachers considered following children’s own strategies and challenging them as the most important factor. Language development seems to be also very important for this group as well. Primary school teachers pay less attention to: the specific aspect of literacy, the physical environment and training the fine motor skills. *Parents* say that the children’s own strategies, language development and the specific aspect of literacy are the most important factors. Motor skills are hardly being mentioned. In the second questionnaire all groups (pre-school teachers, primary school teachers and parents) pay most attention to following the children’s own strategies. Additionally 100 % of parents considered language development and the specific aspect of literacy as very important. This group pays the least attention to motor skills. Motor skills are being defined as important by 69 % of primary school teachers and by 87 % of pre-school teachers. Additionally 100 % of pre-school teachers mentioned the physical environment as very important. Specific aspects of literacy don’t get much recognition.

Sweden: The *teachers* mainly (92 %) focused on following children’s own strategies as an approach to literacy learning in ECE. Among the *teacher students* the conceptions changed dramatically after the course. All held the idea following children’s own strategies in the second questionnaire. But they also focused on language development (75 %), specific aspects of literacy (50 %) and the relevance of the physical environment (50 %).

12.7 4) What can early childhood services do to facilitate children’s development in literacy learning?

We can here see 4 categories.

1. **To recognise and meet children’s interests:** Within this category the teachers talk about respecting each child’s own way of beginning to communicate on paper.
2. **The environment:** There should be many books available and other kinds of materials, ICT is recognised here as a source and inspiration for literacy development. But also the environment in general is of importance.
3. **Communication and interaction:** It is of great importance to communicate extensively with children, not just when books are read there has to be a dialogue about the content, but someone

also mentions making texts visible by talking about them. Someone else mentions book talking as a specific model by Chambers aiming at making children aware of language, but also about Big Books!

4. **Work with small groups:** One teacher mentions the importance of working close to children which means that the groups have to be small in order for communication to be possible with all participants on their own level of knowledge. There is also another teacher's opinion included saying that one has to experiment on each individual child's level.

Austria: "Working together with the parents" and "working professionally" are most answers, although "working professionally" is not defined. Reading with children, reading aloud and having books in the classes, which can be used by the children (most of them with a lot of pictures) are all suitable methods for early literacy education.

Denmark: *Professionals:* 82 % focus on communication and interaction, by storytelling, theatre, word-games, singing and rhyming. And 41 % focus on the environment. And 24 % answer that it is important to recognize and meet children's interests. Only 6 % answer that it is important to work in small groups. *Parents:* Also the parents (100 %) focus on communication and interactions.

Greece: To the fourth question the respondents repeat their answers given to the third question but with a different ranking order. Both groups of teachers particularly stress the point that communication and interaction is very important for children's development in literacy learning, and this development in literacy must take place with *appropriately educated teachers* in cooperation with actively involved parents.

Germany: Whereas in the beginning "communication and interaction" are mainly in the focus of the pre-school teachers, after the course "recognizing and meeting children's interests" became more important for them as well as for parents and primary school teachers. Also working in small groups is considered more important.

Hungary: According to each of the participants the most important categories are: communication (87 %) and interaction/work with small group (87 %), the recognising and meeting of children's interests (75 %).

Iceland: Both pre-school and primary school teachers focused on the environment and communication and interaction. After the course they also mentioned "recognizing and meeting children's interests".

Poland: Recognising and meeting children's interests are the most frequently mentioned issues by the pre-school teachers. Working with small groups does not seem to be so important. The most important factors for the primary school teachers are: Working with small groups and the environment. Parents (100 %) wish teachers recognised and met children's interests and 89 % of the parents want kids to learn in small groups. There are no differences in the answers the second time.

Sweden: Here the *teachers* mainly focus on the environment (77 %) and on recognising and meeting children's interests (69 %) and thirdly on communication and interactions (54 %). All the *teacher students* after the course point at recognising and meeting children's interests, they also become more aware of the role of communication.

12.8 5) What do you think about making observations and keeping track of children's learning in early childhood services?

All teachers have a positive attitude towards observation and documentation, also some claim that they have always done so, but how to use it does not seem to be clear to them. We found 6 categories to describe their ideas about observations and documentation.

1. **To know what children can achieve:** This is expressed in many different ways. Some teachers talk about development while others talk about learning.
2. **To become a more professional teacher:** This means that when one as a teacher learns about children's knowledge, he or she simultaneously learns about her or his own work, and therefore is better prepared to meet or challenge each child.
3. **For communication with parents or transition to pre-school-classes:** The idea is here to make children's progress in learning visible for parents in the transition process. Visibility is the key word.
4. **For children to become aware of their own learning:** By participating in the documentation process, children will themselves become aware of their achieved learning which is important in Swedish pre-schools.
5. **Good, but lack of time:** Some teachers point to the fact that it takes a lot of time away from something else. And they also state that it has to be part of every-day life, but still it is difficult to carry it out the way they want to.
6. **Nothing negative:** Finally some teachers note clearly that there should be nothing written in the documentation which is negative for the child. This means that the documentation should be done carefully and with respect for each child.

Austria: Some teachers (Primary school and pre-school) are afraid, that the observations and keeping track of these observations can be misused: Each child should have the same starting point at the primary school. From the Austrian point of view children (as a result of the questionnaire) up to primary school have a right to be children, to play and to develop without any pressure—maybe this opinion is influenced by the law, that the parents are responsible for education and that school and pre-school only need to support the education of the parents. But there is also a big engagement by pre-school teachers to encourage and strengthen the children's individuality.

Denmark: *Professionals:* 41% find the observations good, but they lack time. They see learning stories as a good opportunity to reflect the child's abilities (18%), and to anticipate possible problems for the child. They use the observations, both as a pedagogical tool and in dialogue with parents (18%). *Parents:* All the parents find that the observations enrich the quality of the dialogue with the professionals (c. 100%). And the parents are satisfied with the opportunity to follow the children's progress.

Greece: All the five teachers take a positive stance towards observation and documentation, but each of them gives a different meaning to the terms "observation" and "documentation". They insist, however, that the pre-school and the primary school teachers should have a *common understanding* and a *common frame of observation* in order to be able to use it in the same way. In conclusion, we

underline the finding that the responses of the primary school teachers in the second questionnaire have changed dramatically and have converged with those of the pre-school teachers.

Germany: After the courses especially the pre-school teachers but also the primary school teachers became more aware of the importance of making observations of children’s learning process to increase their own professionalism. In addition, this supports the dialogue with parents.

Hungary: According to each of the participants the most important categories are to know what children can do (75 %), to communicate with parents or the transition to pre-school-classes (87 %), to become a more professional teacher (62 %) and for children to become aware of their own learning 87 %).

Iceland: The main reason why the teachers said it was important to make observations and keep track of children’s learning was to know what children can do and to become a more professional teacher. This did not change after the course.

Sweden: To observe and keep track of children’s learning seems to be important for ECE staff in Sweden, but the main reason given in the questionnaire by the *teachers* is to use this for becoming a professional teacher (46 %), but they also point out as an objective for keeping track, to know what children can achieve (38 %) and for getting information to share with parents (38 %), as well as for children themselves to become aware of their own learning (38 %). 23 % of the teachers claim it takes too much time to make systematic observations and documentations. As far as the *teacher students* are concerned, there is a large change noticeable in their conceptions. In the first questionnaire 58 % said it was for knowing what children are able to do, while after the course 100 % pointed at becoming a professional teacher as an objective for keeping track of children’s learning.

12.9 Comparison between the different countries

To make a comparison between the counties becomes quite difficult, since as you can see in the table below, the number of participants from the different countries varies from 9 to 100. It will also become complicated if there should be a comparison on the statistical level between the first and second questionnaire, which also varies in numbers. Another reason for the difficulties of a comparison is the fact that the teachers or pedagogues working in Early Childhood Education have completed their training at various educational levels, from not at all to a university degree.

Project participants	AT	DK	DE	GR	HU	IS	PO	SE
Primary school teachers	11	1	38	2	40	4	20	
Pre-school teachers	11	16	80	3	40	6	15	11
Teacher students								12
Parents	11		41		20		18	
Total	33	17	159	5	100	10	53	23

But let us instead see what the trends in their perspectives are, and what change is possible to trace. One can see a slight difference between countries where the focus lies on school readiness towards countries where school readiness is not an issue, but social aspects and the 3Rs are focused on when working

with literacy in pre-school. When methods for working with literacy come up, there is on the one hand how children should train motor skills to just follow children and their strategies. Also the question of what pre-school can do to influence literacy varies in importance in different countries, from focussing on artefacts like books and the environment to communication and children's own strategies. Also the answers to the question of the use of documentation show various attitudes, from a hesitation towards evaluating children's knowledge to the consideration as a tool for the professionals' development.

There seems to be an effect of the courses, although the length and dept of them varies. It looks as if the teachers become more aware of what literacy can be in early years, and that they see the child more clearly and his or her own strategies and the importance of following the child's initiatives. Maybe Sweden, Denmark and Iceland are the countries changing the least, which may be due to the fact that there are very well anchored perspectives of a child-centred pedagogy (Sommer, Pramling Samuelsson, & Hundeide, 2010).

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