

The developmental and social ramifications of the transition from kindergarten to primary school

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Abstract. Transitions experienced early in life are having an increasingly deep effect upon the biographies of people of all ages. Socially these transitions are occurring within the framework of private family constellations, which are increasingly characterised by various upheavals and by earlier use of external care institutions. They are also being affected by transitions stipulated by the German education system. The transition from kindergarten to primary school is particularly significant, in that here the clash between entry norms and individual abilities is experienced for the first time. Discussions around child development and school-fitness serve as the basis for structuring daily educational practice in the kindergarten, while the findings of modern transition research increasingly stress the importance of the social system supporting the growing child. From a balanced perspective it can be stated that close co-operation among the systems of family, kindergarten and school can contribute to the success of the transition process.

Keywords: transitions, school-readiness, school-fitness, early childhood, education, kindergarten, primary school

Introduction: Biographical transitions in their social context

Experience of change and disruptions of one kind or another are affecting the lives of children and their families to an increasing degree. Among the reasons for this are divorce and the consequent founding of new families, or increased professional mobility, all involving, as they do, changes of residence (see e.g., Krack-Roberg, Krieger, Sommer & Weinmann, 2013). The child care and education systems are characterised by a series of transitions, which also begin early on in the lives of children. The increase referred to is thus directly attributable to a number of social trends, which are reflected in educational and family welfare policies.

Education is one of the central accomplishments demanded of members of modern civilised societies. For a long time now, both in Germany and internationally, there has been a clear trend towards the social glorification of knowledge. The term “knowledge society” (Greubel, 2007; Marotzki, Nohl & Ortlepp, 2005; Stehr, 1995) has been the focus of lively discussion. Höhne (2003) points to the fact that a basic consequence of this development is the concentration of responsibility upon the single individual, and that knowledge acquisition is one of the central elements in attaining a secure livelihood. Running in parallel with these tendencies is the public debate around the issue of early learning, both in and outside the home, and the whole drive towards making sure that pre-schooling is accorded its full relevance, is well supported, and that its quality is measurable. By pre-school age at the very latest it is felt – if current discussions on educational policy are anything to go by – that the foundation stones for educational success, in the first year of school and in the child’s whole school career, will have been laid. Feeling themselves justified by certain findings of neuroscience, parents, whose time-horizons have been narrowed through professional commitments, tend

to see themselves as agents of their children's development, their task being to provide a whole programme of the choicest optimal developmental stimuli available (see Röhr-Sendlmeier, 2007; Zeiher, 2005). Röhr-Sendlmeier (2007) points out that these modes of behaviour are in need of serious scientific evaluation, although this may well be something of a tall order. In a co-authored article she also stresses the importance of an informal educational style that encourages learning motivation, and can act as a positive influence upon academic achievement (Röhr-Sendlmeier, Joris & Pache, 2012).

Associated with early acquisition of knowledge what we see is a "competence gap" between the generations. This puts children ahead of adults in terms of what they know (for instance, in everything to do with electronic media). In the face of such phenomena some commentators fear the *disappearance of childhood* (see e.g., Postman, 2000; Hurrelmann, 1999; Leu, 1990), and describe the erosion of time-honoured limits which established a clear separation between children's developmental age and their social age. This erosion, they maintain, places children before entirely new challenges (see e.g., Hengst, 1999; BMFSFJ, 2005). According to the latest findings of developmental psychology, however, child development is a highly individual process. Children do not pass through particular developmental phases all according to the same timing, but asynchronously in keeping with individual interests and social influences (see e.g., Berk, 2011). Also, figures from the *3rd World Vision Child Study 2013* (World Vision Deutschland e. V., 2013) show that the majority of children are coping well with these challenges: more than 90% of the 6-11-year-olds in the sample said they were either happy or very happy with their life (ibid.). The DJI Survey *Growing up in Germany*, which documents the lives of children in very good but changing living conditions, arrives at very similar outcomes. Both of these representative studies, however, also show very clearly that these positive findings do not apply to all children in Germany and that, due partly to lower social status, "a not inconsiderable proportion of children and young people are temporarily or permanently in danger of being excluded from participation in society and from having any prospect of an average life scenario" (ibid. p. 10).

International and national studies that focus on academic achievement (e.g., PISA, PIRLS/IGLU, TIMMS) attest to the dependence of particular differences in academic achievement upon national, social and cultural factors (cf. Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung, 2008 & 2012; Braun, 2006). These international comparisons, in which Germany did not make a good showing, have set the tone of all subsequent policy decisions as regards changes to the German education system. Together with the intention to make education more accessible to children by integrating them earlier into the education system, economic considerations have figured large in creating a perceived need for parents to be in full professional employment and for pupils and students to be integrated much earlier into professional life. Politically these perceptions are evident in, among other things, the proliferation of early-learning institutions in parallel with measures encouraging parents to go out to work, in the lowering of the age at which children start school, and the reducing of the school-leaving age to the point just before "Abitur". All these measures have been provided for in a range of new, national laws (e.g., Kifög 2008; KiBiz, 2013; Bundeselterngeld- und Elternzeitgesetz, 2014; Schulgesetz für das Land NRW, 2014).

These developments affect family life on several levels: there is a greater chance of children and their families experiencing drastic changes in the course of their lives. According to figures from the micro-census, since 2007 the national average of the number of children under three in day-care has almost doubled (2007: 15%; 2012: 27.6%) (Krack-Roberg, Krieger, Sommer & Weinmann, 2013). This means that very early in their lives children are experiencing transitions between their families and care institutions of varying pedagogical quality. Just how positive this early transition is will have a decisive influence upon whether subsequent transitions also turn out positive. Badly managed early transitions, on the other hand, can make subsequent ones much more of a challenge. This is what makes the transition from kindergarten to primary school especially important. Predisposed by former transitions, the child, which on account of the lowering of school commencement age will be faced with this at an ever younger age, must demonstrate here for the first time that he or she is mature enough for this next transition. The whole process of transition takes the form of an obstacle course of tests on the child's physical, cognitive and affective constitution, and making a diagnosis from this is no easy matter. What follows, therefore, will focus particularly upon the transition from kindergarten to primary school. From a consideration of competing concepts of school-readiness we

will proceed to a first attempt to address the question of what processes are involved in effecting a successful transition. Then, having looked in passing at current educational practice in kindergartens, there follows an intensive investigation of the facets of individual development within its social context. This culminates in the formulation of what consequences this implies for educational practice.

Objective and subjective aspects of school-readiness

The concept of school-readiness was originally regarded as an instance of development understood as an endogenous process. This school of thinking was based on the conviction that changes throughout the course of childhood and youth are brought about by the unfolding of an inherent structural plan, upon which external influences have very little effect. According to this view development can generally be divided into a series of phases, the completion of each of which automatically ushers in the next one, thus forming the basis for healthy development (see Flammer, 1999). Such endogenous views have been known since classical antiquity, and culminated in the so-called normative approach introduced by Stanley Hall and Arnold Gesell in the early 20th century. This approach, based as it was upon countless observations of behaviour and statistical averages associated with different ages, produced a model of the typical course of development, which was at the same time a set of guidelines for parents (see Berk, 2011).

In the 1950's it was mainly the debate around the issue of school entry which brought the concept of inherently determined maturation to the fore. In 1951 Arthur Kern received much acclaim for his book *Sitzenbleiberelend und Schulreife*. In it he maintained that failure at school resulted from lack of school-readiness associated with incomplete intrinsic maturation processes. According to his lead, school-entry diagnostics were to be used as a selection instrument: children found to be mature enough were allowed into school, the others were held back without the implementation of any "catch-up" measures (cf. Kammermeyer, 2001).

By the end of the 1960's at the very latest this strict view had been refuted (see Schenk-Danzinger, 1969; Wittmann, 1978), and since then the concept of school-fitness has taken precedence. In addition to biological processes, it takes environmentally determined learning processes into account as among the necessary requirements for a successful school career: "By now it has been recognised that development is a process involving the complex interplay of many causal factors. Thus the timing of structural (age-related) maturation can be modified by individual, genetic maturation impulses of varying intensity (intelligence, talents), by helpful or detrimental influences in the surrounding milieu and finally by the kind and degree of personal regulatory involvement. Thus it is better to speak of school-fitness (in the objective sense) and school-willingness (in the subjective sense)." (Schenk-Danzinger, 1969, p. 9).

This interpretation is strengthened through ever more refined knowledge of human development, and through a new way of looking at the child. Accordingly, the child is no longer seen just as someone in process of becoming an adult, but much more as a constructive agent of his or her own development. Universally determined developmental phases have given way to individual developmental pathways composed of a variety of mutually interacting impulses. This interactive view of development stems from Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1981), which first appeared in the 1970's. Bronfenbrenner speaks of an ecological model, in which the human being ranges among a variety of dynamic systems, which are characterised by shifts and transitional overlaps. Horst Nickel used this model in the late 1980's in order to turn it into a tool of educational diagnostics, and out of it developed an "ecological systems model" of school fitness (cf. Nickel, 1990). This model offers a list of categories, with the help of which the transition from kindergarten to school can be analysed in terms of school-fitness. These categories encompass the school system to which the child is to be admitted, general requirements, special teaching framework conditions as well as school, pre-school and family ecology. In Nickel's model the things that are significant for current transition research are, as Carle and Hegemann-Fonger (2012) point out, its incorporation of the web of relationships among home, kindergarten and school, and the thought (which comes rather later on) that we must speak not only of the school-fitness of the child but also of the "child-fitness" of the school. In view of the concepts of development just put forward, it would therefore seem to be a logical conclusion that

school-fitness is to be regarded as the concern of society as a whole. Already in 1978 Wittmann pointed out that the concept of school-fitness, and with it the underlying assumption that well-targeted pedagogical measures can have a beneficial effect, is directly related to the requirements of the school system to which a given child is to be admitted.

Fitness for school, therefore, also implies knowing what the school expects and what sort of didactic profile it might have. This is part and parcel of a discussion that has been going on for more than thirty years and still has not come to an end, and shows clearly that, on the one hand, developmental processes and, on the other, fixed entry requirements are seen as a ticket into school.

Thus it is that the debate around the two concepts of school-readiness and school-fitness continues to create controversy, the reason being that each type of education will stress a different side of the argument. On the one hand, the process of maturation or development itself, on the other, the envisaged aim of the developmental process, will be seen as definitive. For instance, in the dictionary of educational terms a child who is *fit for school* is defined as one “who is capable of coping with a school’s educational programme, with all its attendant requirements as regards content and social skills” (Vollmer, 2012, p. 176). Here Waldorf education would speak of a child being *ready for school*, without this implying that a purely endogenous process had led to this ability (cf. Patzlaff & Sassmannshausen, 2012). These days, therefore, while educational systems that come from the point of view of school-readiness tend not to envisage any “delays”, they do favour phases of repose in which children have – in surroundings that are nonetheless stimulating – the peace to unfold their capabilities in their own time.

To sum up, then, school-readiness and school-fitness are two sides of the same coin, and this being the case, the old idea of purely internal developmental processes has lost its hold, and the emphasis now is on the mutual interplay of endogenous, exogenous and social causative factors.

Educational processes in the kindergarten

The tussle between the concepts of school-readiness and school-fitness has shown that development is susceptible to targeted support. A look at the history and stated purpose of the kindergarten, however, reveals that the idea of childcare institutions as places of learning is by no means a product of modern thinking, but rather has been implemented as a matter of course from the very beginning (cf. Dollase, 2011; Rossbach & Kluczniok, 2013).

In recent decades changes of emphasis in pre-school education have followed social trends. While cognitive skills were highly prized in the 1970’s as essential for school-entry and their associated preparatory materials were to be found in kindergarten work-books, nowadays the approach is more multi-faceted and comprehensive. In addition to cognitive skills it mainly focuses upon social behaviour, together with emotional, physical, mental and verbal developmental parameters. The focus is also upon the acquisition of so-called provisional abilities, otherwise known as proximal school-fitness criteria, which are necessary for the subsequent learning of reading, writing and arithmetic. Among these are phonological awareness as well as number and set-related knowledge (cf. Vollmer, 2012; Bründel, 2012; Kammermeyer, 2013).

The range of applicable methods and educational priorities is as wide as ever. In association with the newly revived and revised federal education plans uncertainties have arisen in regard to responsibilities and suitable ways of facilitating learning. It is also repeatedly stressed that education begins with (or even before) birth. Nevertheless, the last year of kindergarten tends to be singled out for special attention, the strong feeling being that something like a *last minute campaign* is necessary so that things relevant for school can quickly be learnt. This feeling is called forth in the minds of parents largely by the prospect of the assessments and school-entry tests their children need to get through to have their school-fitness confirmed. At the same time it remains increasingly unclear exactly which abilities from the above-mentioned range of possibilities parents and kindergarten teachers should be focusing on, and what abilities school teachers expect children to have. Exploratory research in connection with a study by the present author suggests that, in the last year of kindergarten, there is a discrepancy between what kindergarten teachers actually teach and what is asked

of them by parents. Concretely, the fact is that the teachers' concern is to strengthen the child's personality, while the parents are gently pushing for the training of cognitive skills. At the same time it was discovered that primary school teachers' main desire is for children with a trained ability to concentrate (Greubel, 2013). Two other nifbe studies (Sauerhering, 2013) also corroborate these findings. The answers obtained from the sample of primary school teachers surveyed in these studies, however, make clear that the aims of kindergarten and primary school teachers are by no means as radically divergent as they might seem. Quite the contrary, both groups placed a high value upon the development of social competence. Similarly, these studies indicate that the encouraging of provisional abilities makes sense particularly when it is directed towards achieving basic understanding rather than the practising of numbers and letters.

This example clearly demonstrates how necessary better communication between kindergarten and primary school is. Here two distinct poles are evident: on the one hand the abilities and personal motivation of the child, and on the other the requirements of the transitional process.

Psychological and sociological perspectives. Transitions: acts of individual adaptation, or outcomes of social organisation?

By now it is clear that the transition from kindergarten to primary school is a process involving both individual and social components.

From the point of view of Waldorf education it is primarily the inherent sequence of physical changes that make for a successful transition from one phase of schooling to the next. According to Rudolf Steiner "the change of teeth is the outward expression of the fact that the child has replaced his or her inherited body with one of his or her own" (Kummer, 1999, p. 136). In the course of the first seven year phase of life the rudimentary attributes that everyone is born with are transformed and individualised. With this bodily metamorphosis creative processes are unleashed and movements become more fluid. In connection with this, Kiel-Hinrichsen and Kviske (2013) describe, in addition to external changes, a series of further psychological processes which take the form of an overall widening of the hitherto limited view of the world, increasing individual detachment and growth of the experiential horizon, which is observable in a greater enjoyment of movement and a desire to *do* things. At the same time there are changes in likes and dislikes and these bring with them the possibility of boredom, social disharmony, uncertainty and anxiety, and together with all this the first inklings of a struggle with personal identity. Development is regarded as a delicate process, vulnerable to disturbance, "which requires repeated efforts to restore a healthy balance to the organism as a whole" (Patzlaff & Sassmannshausen, 2012, p. 9f). Thus each child comes with his or her own predispositions, which in the course of life are to be discovered and brought to expression.

The view just sketched (cf. Patzlaff & Sassmannshausen, 2012) is very much in line with other psychological theories of development, both old and modern. For instance, Erikson (1966) put forward a crisis-based model of identity development, while Havighurst (1972) spoke in terms of a concept of developmental tasks. Both models rest upon the assumption that in the course of their lives human beings have to face certain challenges, characterised by targeted outcomes of a social, biological or individual nature. Successfully overcoming these is the prerequisite for mastering crises in the future and developing an integrated identity. Recent psychological theories of development also base themselves upon crises in the sense of adaptive struggles between the person and the environment. The aim is the creation of a renewed state of balance, which involves effort (cf. Filipp, 1995). Generally in psychological theories the changes from one phase to another are regarded – according to how well they are coped with – either as opportunities for, or risks to, development. Thus challenges offer children possibilities for growth and the development of basic strengths that enable them to approach new tasks with pride and confidence. For many children, however, transitions are crisis situations. The loss of, or changes in, established bonds must be overcome. Accepting new relationships can be a difficult matter.

Further modern theories addressing the issue of transitions stem from the disciplines of sociology and anthropology. The leading examples here are Pierre Bourdieu (1987) with his theory of the social and cultural

capital that confers the ability to master crises, Norbert Elias (1987) with his theory of the transition process as a changing web of relationships, or Arnold van Genneep (1909, cited 2005) with his idea of transitions as rites of passage. What these all have in common is their view of the social milieu as the main active and supportive element (cf. Griebel & Niesel, 2011).

In reviewing the different perspectives, Dollase (2011) speaks on the one hand of the psychological approach, in which transitions are regarded as an “individual problem of adaptation” (ibid. p. 54), and on the other of the sociological approach, which sees the problem as a question of “organisational adaptation” (ibid.). Then at the very heart of current transition research there are two distinct propositions about how to manage them. The one, the continuity thesis, is based on the conviction that transitions may involve negative consequences for the individual and that these negative consequences can be alleviated by continuity. The other, by contrast, is the discontinuity thesis, which works on the assumption that transitions are adaptation problems which, through their stimulating effects, can encourage development (ibid.). Whichever view is taken here will have a decisive effect upon how transitions are managed. In the matter of the transition from kindergarten to primary school there are models which, for instance, seek to keep the gulf between the two institutions as narrow as possible by means of close cooperation contracts plus the associated opportunities for the parties to get to know one another, and yet others which concentrate upon increasing the child’s resilience and ability to overcome discontinuities.

A leading example of modern transition theory is the model put forward by Griebel and Niesel (2011), which takes its theoretical basis mainly from developmental psychology, defining transitions as real-life events which “demand the ability to cope with discontinuities on several levels, accelerate developmental processes, intensify learning, and are perceived as significant biographical experiences of change in relation to the development of identity” (ibid. p. 38). In spite of this psychological approach and its alliance to the discontinuity camp, this so-called IFP transition model (ibid.) – in addition to the focus on individual adaptive success – gives special consideration to social relationships and the efforts of those actively involved in a transition to achieve continuity. Griebel and Niesel (2011) specify changes as distinctive features of a transition, which are experienced at an individual, interactive and contextual level. From their perspective, it is not only the children going through the transition, but also the parents, who must cope with changes at all levels, and are thus equally in need of support. The role of active moderators in this process falls to the teachers, who on account of their professional qualifications are well-equipped as guides. Here it must also be pointed out, that these pedagogical mediators must first build a bridge between their respective institutions, and that professional communication and pedagogical coordination, in spite of educational differences, are essential. In addition to other social influences involved in a transition, however, the IFP model regards children and their parents above all as active shapers of the process: “Children and parents need to have the basic conviction that they are not at the mercy of the changes happening in their lives, but can be active co-constructors in the process” (ibid. p. 117). By the same token it is a prime necessity to regard the parents and children involved in the transition process as individual cases and to treat them according to their correspondingly differing needs. This is all the more important in that evidence exists showing that a) successful adaptations to the transition process by children depend, among other things, upon family climate and parenting style; b) previous experience and personality traits play a role within the transitional context and c) adaptation problems exacerbate already existing problems (cf. Caspi & Moffit, 1993; Beelmann, 2006).

Taking up the discussion of school-readiness and school-fitness once again, therefore, Griebel and Niesel (2011) stress the aspect of the effectiveness of the social system. In this sense school-fitness cannot be seen as an achievement of the individual alone, but, in keeping with Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems model (1981), as an achievement of the social system and its participants. What this precisely implies is that in a co-constructive process the realms of family, kindergarten and school, as regards their function, may be termed an “educational mesosystem” with its relevant individual and social spheres of action. For the realm of the family the focus is on the child’s individual areas of competence (positive idea of self, self-confidence, provisional skills) and on the family’s areas of competence as a system (how closely knit, adaptability, family coping strategies). In the realms of kindergarten and school what is of concern are the individual abilities and

qualifications of the teachers together with the structure and suitability of the curriculum, the structure of co-operation and personal communication. All three realms in their co-operation and mutual support make for the possibility of a child's being fit or willing to undertake the transition to school. A transition process will thus be successful when the systems involved in it are capable of full mutual adjustment. School-fitness is here understood as the pedagogical aim of a community. This aim is not defined by any entry-norm, but is to be seen as a developmental process, which is not complete until the child has had a certain amount of school experience (ibid.). These insights have consequences for the practice of parental co-operation, the efficient composition of professional working groups between school and kindergarten, and last but definitely not least, for the practice of school-entry diagnostics and the structuring of the first year of primary school.

Consequence: Preparation for school through experience and social relationships

Is my child ready for school? Even after all the foregoing deliberations this burning question is still hard to answer. Successfully coping with such educational and social challenges depends less upon the attainment of a fixed state before school-entry, than upon the successful interplay among inner processes of maturity, an inner willingness and the social support network. All this begins before school-entry and continues throughout the first year of school. Essentially, this interpretation implies a need for action in the three outlined systems of family, kindergarten and school.

The primary task of the family (and also, of course, of the kindergarten) – and this is nothing new – is to give the child security, familiarity and the experience of bonding through a style of upbringing based on adult authority. In the practice of Waldorf education this is done, for instance, through close attention to the individual needs of the children (cf. Patzlaff & Sassmannshausen, 2012). According to Rudolf Steiner the task of education is not only to support and guide, but also to further development through the creation of a richly experiential educational environment. Education and self-education are an “inseparable twosome” (ibid.). The aim of the pedagogical process is to support the child in his or her strengths and abilities, so that he or she feels ready to meet the challenges of life. Especially important is the attainment of a feeling of coherence, i.e. a feeling of confidence in one's ability to learn about oneself and the world through experience. The aim of education, therefore, is to support autonomy in the child; autonomy which is “not created through intellectual learning processes, but through active primary experience of the world (. . .) in short, through all processes of self-education – the foundations of health in salutogenic terms” (ibid.). Both for the parental home and the pedagogical practice of the kindergarten this means the creation of spaces and situations which mediate living experiences:

Sometimes your place is among the small, sometimes among the very big. According to a poster in the Journal for Early Learning, this, along with innumerable others that could be specified, such as: *How wonderful it feels to have been brave, or how bad it feels to have been shouted at*, is among the “truly important things in life, that I learnt in kindergarten” (Klein & Gross, 2014). What we have here are practical experiences, which bring together aspects of self-experience and sensory experience, of social relationships, social structure and cognitive realisations (e.g., *that three balls are a lot for a game, while three bricks are very few*), and yet imply very little in the way of educational pressure or cognitive strain. Here learning is understood in Schäfer's (2011) terms of learning by every-day experience, rather than in the more usual sense of a skills-centred model (cf. Weinert, 1999). Here provisional skills are learned through play and not through rigid, cognitive repetition.

The school's task is to follow on from these experiences and achieve a gentle transition from implicit to explicit learning. The school must, in other words, be rendered *fit for the child*. This involves attention to the overall condition of the individual child and the enabling of individual rates of learning. This could mean putting into practice various models for a flexible first school year, such as teaching class one and two children together, or through creating bridging classes which provide the advantage of making individual preparation possible (cf. Kaiser & Boeddecker, 2008; Oehlmann, Manning-Chlechowicz & Sitter, 2011).

Apart from this fundamental pedagogical attitude, it is ultimately the creative interplay of the various systems that eases the process of transition. As examples of what is meant here the building up of a co-operation network, the encouragement of parental participation and content-related communication between institutions may be mentioned. Special attention must be paid to those structures which provide safeguards and support for children at risk (e.g., who come from an unstable family, are of low socio-economic status, or are in need of learning or social support). As Beelmann (2006) pointed out, the transition for this group can be particularly problematical and challenging.

The central task, then, is to render the communication between parental home, kindergarten and school sufficiently transparent and intense to create the best possible conditions for a successful start to schooling and an equally successful school career.

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