

# COMMUNICATION & CONTINUITY IN THE TRANSITION FROM KINDERGARTEN TO SCHOOL IN DENMARK<sup>1</sup>

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## **Introduction**

A child's entry into school has long been associated with special expectations and excitement, as well as varying degrees of tension and anxiety. International research on school start calls attention once again to the rapid and often unanticipated changes children face in a compressed period of time when they begin school (Margett, 2000). Parents and teachers recognise the importance of helping children make smooth transitions into school. Smooth school transitions help children feel secure, relaxed, and comfortable in their new environments. A fundamental goal of a school-start transition is to help young children feel *suitable* in school, that is, to have a feeling of well being and belonging.

The child feels suitable when he successfully negotiates the daily challenges of kindergarten life, including both social (peer related) and academic (content related) challenges. Feeling suitable is crucial to the child's learning and development, as well as to his fundamental and continuous sense of well being. Research on school start shows that children who feel suitable, relaxed, well adjusted in kindergarten are much more likely than children who do not feel well adjusted to experience school success beyond kindergarten (Thomsen, 1975; Ladd & Preece, 1987).

However, very much research on school start has focused on teacher and parent's view on children's skills and knowledge at school entry. In other words an interest to define the concept school readiness (e.g. Pianta & McCoy, 1997; Davies & North, 1990; Haines et al., 1989; Lewit & Baker, 1995).

Most research on school start has focused on the knowledge and skill children need to be "ready" for school. This school readiness research has been predominate from the perspectives of educational theorists, teachers, and parents from (e.g. Pianta & McCoy, 1997; Davies & North, 1990; Haines et al., 1989; Lewit & Baker, 1995).

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<sup>1</sup> In Denmark in general children start in compulsory school in grade 1, when they turn to seven years. However 97% of all six years old children participate in kindergarten class in school (UK: reception class; USA: Kindergarten). The kindergarten class teacher in school is not a primary school teacher, but an educated pedagogue with 3.5 years education. Thus in this chapter I use the term school start as start in kindergarten class, and in general I differ between kindergarten teacher (USA: pre-school teacher), kindergarten class teacher, leisure time teacher (after school teacher) and grade 1 & 2 teacher.

Obviously, it is important for parents, kindergarten class teachers, and especially kindergarten teachers, to have a shared understanding of the school readiness concept and to agree on what kinds of knowledge, skills and behaviour are prerequisite to a child's likely success in his or her first year of school.

However, because the predominant research is from the adult perspective, it can lead to a limited definition of readiness and to adult-centred rather than child-centred or balanced approaches to school transition. Nevertheless smooth and successful transition from kindergarten to school requires attention to several related elements:

1. Child readiness or the extent to which the child has developed personal, social and intellectual competence which adults view as necessary for success in the first year of school. Children, who are not deemed "ready," especially by their teachers in the first year of school, will be less likely to feel well suited to the environment or capable of meeting its expectations.

2. Support from parents, family and community. These adults must be equipped to help the child with all aspects of his new experience, including academic, social, and psychological.

3. Third a system of high quality kindergartens for children aged 3-5, which provides a rich daily life carrying its own reward. This include learning and development as an essential ingredient, along with satisfying peer interactions, engaging interactions between children and adults, meaningful play opportunities, etc.

4. Not only do the children need to be "school ready", but even more, kindergarten class need to be "child ready." That is, the teacher and the environment she creates must take the child's perspectives, interests and needs into account. By "environment" here, I am referring not only to the physical environment, which must include appropriate materials for instruction and play, but also to the psychological environment, which must assist children in developing a sense of "suitability" for kindergarten, a feeling of belonging, well-being, and capacity to succeed in this new place.

5. A critical aspect of being "child ready" is the school's approach to helping children make the transition from home or kindergarten to school. Such a child ready approach is called "ready school" in the US document *National Education Goal Panel* (1998), that among other things stipulated the need for continuity in curricula, home-school communication, and a welcoming environment for family and children.

These related elements, taken together, provide direction for the development of activities on transition, combination of activities to help the child transition from kindergarten to school. Such activities taken by families, kindergartens and school are an important part of ecological processes before and after children's start in school. Using the term ecological means to relate and combine the most important areas in the child's life. Concerning school start an ecological model highlights connections between families, schools, kindergarten, and communities. Examples of

ecological models or perspectives from the American context are described in Pianta & Walsh, (1996) and La Paro, Pianta & Cox (2000).

Pianta & Walsh (1996) emphasise positive connections between home, kindergarten, and school that are based on personal contact prior to school entry followed by ongoing communication concerning curriculum and activities. Such transition activities have increased rapidly in recent years in Denmark. In USA Ramey & Ramey (1998) refer to the transition question as a “hot topic”, and Love et al. (1992) reported that roughly 20% of U.S. schools have a range of transition activities that meet the needs of families and students for information about and personal contact with the school.

### **Problems to overcome**

Most children have predominantly positive experiences when they enter school. They meet new academic and social challenges. These challenges mobilise the potentials the skills and talents the children brought with them to school (readiness). However, for some children, starting school is not a generally positive experience. For these children, each day brings too many challenges or the wrong kinds of challenges. In spite of all good intentions several typical problems remain:

- Kindergarten teachers have limited knowledge of what happens in kindergarten class in school. Many have a diffuse orientation concerning activities in school or they think school has not changed since their own school time. Kindergarten teachers often express an understanding, that in school children are sitting at a chair the whole day. Kindergarten teachers often suggest that learning in school is laborious, while learning in kindergarten is free and playful.
- Similarly, in Denmark kindergarten class teachers’ understanding of life in kindergarten is vague. First of all, they see kindergarten as a place where children are mostly cared for in a custodial sense, but not as an educational culture analogous to “real” school. It is interesting to note here that during the last 5-7 years, Danish kindergarten teachers have begun to produce written activity plans, which, seen collectively, represent their own “curriculum.” However, specific learning goals and outcomes often remain buried within these plans. For example, many teachers write plans including general references to the value of play (“children develop themselves through play”), but they seldom describe how or what the children will learn through play.
- In general, kindergarten class teachers often claim that school starters lack basic skills and competencies they need for success in school. The criticism is that life in kindergarten does not contribute to the level of development, necessary for being able to make use of the learning environment in kindergarten class. In other words too many children have not obtained the necessary level of school readiness.

- Kindergarten teachers and kindergarten class teachers have different definitions of school readiness (Hains et al., 1989). Kindergarten teachers seem to stress personal development, action competence, and general skills, whereas the teachers in kindergarten class weight children's abilities to adjust school, to fit in with the other children, and to function in class (Perry, Dockett & Howard, 2000).
- Among parents there is an increasing tendency to enrol children too early in kindergarten class, which results in too many children without basis skills and sufficient personal development. Earlier international investigations (e.g. Mortimore et al., 1988; Russel & Startrup, 1986) show that young school starters, compared with few month older children, have more behaviour and learning problems. However, the literature is mixed with regard to the lasting effects of a poor school start. A Danish study indicated that children with problems in school start often have problems later in school. On the other hand, an Australian longitudinal investigation of 698 children did not confirm this finding (de Lemos & Mellor, 1994).
- Educational contradictions between today's kindergarten and kindergarten class are significant (Broström, 1998 & 1999). In Denmark kindergarten and kindergarten classes in school are rooted in a shared historical, educational, and ideological tradition. As recently as the early 1990s, kindergarten classes were very similar to kindergarten (Broström, 1998). However, during the last decade, fundamental differences in educational goals, content and principles may have emerged. The common practice in kindergarten to day seems to stress play and to de-emphasise creative-aesthetic activities as well as the teachers' active role in supporting learning. Opposite a school-like curriculum is often seen in today's kindergarten class (Broström, 1999).
- There is a lack of communication between kindergarten teachers and teachers from kindergarten class in the period leading up to children's transition. Thus the teachers from kindergarten class meet the children without prior knowledge about the individual children or the group as a whole. This lack of communication is particularly disturbing with regard to children at risk, since the kindergarten class teacher can not prepare in advance to provide them with the additional support they need to enter school successfully.
- In a recent study I found that some of the kindergarten children had diffuse expectations or no expectations about what they would experience in kindergarten class. However, 75% of the children reported a correlation between what they expected when they entered kindergarten class and what they actually experienced.
- This study also revealed that some children had an outdated picture of the school as a place where children have to sit down and behave quietly or, the teacher will scold and smack. Children with such a view are at high risk for school-related anxiety and nervousness. This can drain the child's energy to such an extent that he can't mobilise his existing skills and talents in his own behalf when he enters

school. From this perspective, we might say that such a child is not ready for school. A Danish study from 1995 of 565 five-six-year-old children's expectations about the first year of school shows that 12% seemed to be marked by insecurity and nervousness. A parallel investigation in spring 1999 of 375 five-six-year-old kindergarten children's expectations about school shows a similar or heightened tendency. Here 24% expressed an expectation characterised by a scolding teacher, who commands children to sit still and be quiet. And more problematic is the fact that among the anxiety-answers, 5% of the children expected to meet an *authoritarian* school in which the teacher has power and uses his power to oppress children. Probably these children are nervousness starting school. However, recent research presents mixed views on whether most children look forward to starting school. According to one Norwegian study (Lillemyr, 2001) a third of 6-7 years old children feared starting school. However a German research on 162 children produced different results, indicating that kindergarten children have generally positive attitudes about school and look forward to starting kindergarten class (Griebel & Niesel, 1999). A major difference in the German study and the Nordic studies mentioned is that the German study asked children more directly about their positive and negative views. Perhaps Danish children would also express more positive expectations if the interviews were reconstructed to solicit them.

In the following some data from the study of children's expectations to school will be given.

### **Nervousness before start in school**

If a child is dominated of an out of date picture of the school, which produce insecurity and nervousness it will be drain for energy, and you might say the child is not ready for school.

A Danish study of 565 children's expectations from 1995 (Broström, 1999a) shows that 12% seem to be marked of insecurity and nervousness. A parallel investigation of 375 six year old pre-school children's expectations to school carried through in spring 1999 shows a similar or tighten tendency (Broström, 2000a). Here 24% expressed an expectation characterised by a scolding teacher, who commands children to sit still, and be quiet. And more problematic is the fact, that among these 19% anxiety-answers 5% of the children expect to meet an *authoritarian* school in which the teacher has power and use his power oppressing children. The children were asked two questions: "What do you think, you shall *do* in kindergarten class", an "what do you think, you shall *learn* in kindergarten class?" An example showing an anxiety-answer, which at the same time holds the authoritarian view is expressed of a boy 5.11 year:

*What do you think, you shall do in kindergarten class?*

I don't know. Learn to write. My bigger brother says it is a hell. May be

I will miss the pre-school. I will go there to see how life is. I think my brother likes the break.

*What do you think, you shall learn in kindergarten class?*

I will learn to write and learn to read. I will learn to make weapon of tree like my bigger brother.

The example illustrates a school expectation characterised by scepticism a bit of anxiety. More it also signals that they have knowledge of school from persons around them. Not only parents and pedagogues prepare children to school. They also pick up “school-stories” from the culture in general.

In below example a boy 6.9 years illustrate a negative expectation to school:

*What do you think, you shall do in kindergarten class?*

I have no idea. Play. I do not look forward to school. I will not go there.

*What do you think, you shall learn in kindergarten class?*

I will learn to read and write “Daniel”. I need to be nice and do what the teacher says. Walk to the playground, when the teacher tells me. Also learn to draw pictures.

The last example illustrates the mentioned 5% of answers, which characterise school as an authoritarian place, where the teacher commands the children. A 6.5 years old boy says:

*What do you think, you shall do in kindergarten class?*

Music, homework, and play outside.

*What do you think, you shall learn in kindergarten class?*

Draw correctly, do homework correctly, play correctly, play outside in a good matter, eat correctly, learn to play with plaything correctly. You will be should, if you do not play correctly. If people do not like to play with me, you have to play with yourself. You will get smack from the teacher.

Above quotations are all expressed of boys. Especially the boys view the school as a place, where you have to sit still, be quiet, and to follow the teacher’s ideas. And in relation to the view school as “an authoritarian place”, mostly only the boy’s voices are heard. Viewing school in above way together the boys appear three third of the answers.

The fact that not all children look forward to start in school is also expressed in a Norwegian investigation, which shows that a third of 6-7 years old children had a

fear for to start in school (Lillemyr et al., 1998). However, opposite the Nordic investigations a German research on 162 children shows, that yet they were keen in general they look forward to start in school (Griebel & Niesel, 1999). May be also Danish children will express a more positive expectation in a research interview, which more directly calls for positive and negative expectations.

### **Transition activities**

The problems described above, especially some children's fear for school, advocate for the establishment of transition activities, which will bring greater continuity to children's lives as they move from kindergarten into the first few years of formal education in school. This implies that parents, kindergarten teachers, kindergarten class teachers, grade 1 & 2 teachers, and leisure time teacher's work in close co-operation. During the last decade, educators in many countries have made concerted efforts to build such collaborations among kindergarten and primary teachers as well parents of children entering school. An example from the United States can be found in California's school transition document (California Departments of Education and Child Development, 1997). New investigations show that such a developed relationship and ongoing communication is pivotal for a good start in school (Pianta & Walsh, 1996; Christenson, in press; Epstein, 1996).

International literature and reports from practice describe in detail various approaches to school transition. Most approaches emphasise both kindergartens that help children become school ready (school ready kindergartens) and child-ready schools.

Among other things, *school ready kindergartens* develop curriculum and instructional practices which, on the one hand, meet the child's interest, and has its own value, and, on the other hand, fosters an appropriate educational culture to help children become school ready. Thus there is a co-ordination of and continuity between the kindergarten and school curriculum. Here recent research advocates for developmentally based practice with play, co-operative roles, and social interaction with other children as the foundation for the comprehensive development, as well as development of skills and abilities more closely related to school readiness (Love et al., 1992).

*Child ready schools* meet children as they are. Through meetings with the kindergarten teacher, the kindergarten class teachers gain knowledge about the individual child, relations between children, and group dynamics. Another strategy, which helps kindergarten class teachers become more familiar with each new group of children is for the kindergarten teacher to forward photographs, drawings, and favourite stories from the kindergarten.

Children cope better in situations when they receive support from teachers and parents as well as from peers whom they view as friends (Ladd, 1990). Therefore, teachers can create classrooms that are secure bases for incoming school starters by building upon children's previously existing friendships. Especially in the first few

weeks in the new school setting, many children are more willing to handle and explore new challenges, when can hold a friend's hand, both literally and figuratively (Bernd & Perry, 1986; Ladd & Price, 1987; Schwarz, 1972; Griebel & Niesel, 1999). Compared to children without friends, children with friends in the classroom during the first weeks developed more positive views on school (Ladd, 1990). The importance of proximity to a friend can be explained in the light of the fact, that especially in a situation characterised by changes, people seek continuity (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Fabian, 1998; Griebel & Niesel, 1999).

In Denmark during the last two years, we have seen a cascade of transition activities, including those mentioned briefly above, the different kind of teachers have developed many variations on the themes of mutual visits and collaborations between home and school.

It seems obvious that such transition practices should prove to be beneficial for children, teachers, and parents. At first blush, it may also appear that systematic and appropriate transition schemes should be relatively easy to implement. In fact, however, such transition practices are both time consuming and covered with problems. Barriers include lack of time and resources in general. However, perhaps the most salient and challenging barrier often goes unacknowledged: differences in the educational traditions and understandings of kindergarten teachers and school teachers often makes it difficult for them to communicate and co-operate in actual practice. However, in spite of these hindrances, teachers still seem to have an optimistic view on the challenges and possibilities associated with developing school transition schemes.

### **Teachers understanding of transition activities**

To gain knowledge about teachers' understanding of and attitudes about school transition practice, the author developed a questionnaire survey in which teachers were asked to reflect on and judge a numbers of transition activities. Included in the study were kindergarten teachers, kindergarten class teachers, and teachers from grades 1 and 2, and leisure-time teachers.

The survey was based on an extensive review of literature on transition to school, an American survey conducted by the National Transition Study (Love et al., 1992), an American survey involving 3,595 kindergarten teachers (Pianta et al., 1999), and a Danish evaluation study on transition activities.

The result from this study will be described in a chapter in following book:

Fabian, H. & Dunlop, A.-W. (Ed.). *Debating Transitions for Young Children*. Routledge, Falmer Publishers. 2001. (In press).

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