TRANSITION FROM PRIMARY SCHOOL TO SECONDARY SCHOOL IN GERMANY

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Abstract
Described for practitioners is an analysis of the transition from primary to secondary school, in regard to the German school system and under referral to German empirical research, with respect to the “Transition Model”. From a perspective of family development, it brings into the equation not only the children but also the parents in coping with the transition, with support from teaching staff(s). Challenges in transition to secondary school are defined on individual, interactional and contextual levels. The Transition Model can contribute to a successful transition for all parties involved. It is integrated in the Bavarian curriculum for children from birth to six years as well as in the curriculum for 0 to 10 year old children in Hesse.

Transition to secondary school
The transition from primary to secondary school is a milestone in educational life, however about half of children (and their parents) make the transition without appreciable problems. Others will find the move stressful and challenging, exhibiting their responses in many differing ways (Griebel & Niesel, 2004).

There are positive as well as negative effects attached to the transition to secondary school with respect to the awareness of one’s individuality, self ability and the mental health of the child (Griebel & Niesel, 2004). As stated often, the emotional relationship between the parent and child, also the support given by the parents, determines how easily the transition will be achieved.

The aim of the paper is to discuss an approach which brings into the equation not only the children but also the parents in dealing with the transition, with support from teaching staff and other professionals. This “Transition Model” is exemplified by the transition from primary to secondary school, which is one of the most critical transitions for allocation of educational and professional chances in German school system. Although this transition has hitherto not been explored in respect to a more comprehensive theoretical framework of transitions in family development, there exists a body of empirical evidence and normative writing on this topic (Schumacher, 2004) that asks for a synopsis of identified challenges and ways to cope with them that will help practitioners to understand and develop purposeful support for the child and his/her parents.

Choosing the type of secondary school as a problem
In Germany, schoolchildren spend four years in primary education (six years in Berlin and Brandenburg), prior to advancing to secondary education. Parents make the choice, based on advice from the teaching staff, whether the child should continue his/her school career in junior high school, secondary school, grammar school, or continue on to a comprehensive school. This choice is seen by both parents and children as serious and irrevocable as it has long term repercussions upon the child’s further education and future career options. The school types offer specific vocational curricula, for this reason they each have a very different sociological prestige, with the grammar school taking pride of place. Transferring between
school types after the initial move from primary school is uncommon. Nationally, one sixth of the children in fifth year education change from one school type to another and of this number almost 90% transfer to a lower school type than that originally chosen (Baumert Trautwein & Artelt, 2003).

The reason for the figures above could be attributed to parental expectations and their past personal educational experiences. Many parents invest much energy in placing their children scholastically (Avenarius, Ditton, Döbert, Klemm, Klieme, Rürup, Tenorth, Weishaupt, & Weiß, 2003), putting most emphasis on teaching staff’s professional advice. In general, there is a high correlation between social background of parents and school outcomes of children in Germany; higher than in many other countries (Baumert; 2004).

Apart from this publicly debated problem, however, decisions about transition to type of secondary school is not unproblematic as a considerable percentage of pupils achieve higher academic results than had been expected when deciding at the primary school stage which type of secondary education would be appropriate.

Despite children having the necessary learning ability and developmental potential indications at the primary school stage, teachers’ recommendations may not refer to the appropriate type of secondary school. Substantial overlapping was found in achievement of pupils in different types of secondary schools. Within particular developmental environments these pupils could demonstrate a considerable increase in academic performance. This ability develops over a period of time correlating with the additional time attending school. Grammar schools apparently offer a better developmental environment than do modern secondary schools or junior high schools. Region and conditions also play a part, as does the quality of the education and the child’s developmental influences (Baumert, Köller & Schnabel, 1999).

The question is, if there is an approach that could make a better fit between the educational potential of the child and secondary school environment, or which better takes into account a perspective of the children’s development during the passage from primary school to secondary school.

The Transition Model

The “Transition Model” has been integrated in the Bavarian curriculum for children from birth to six years (Bayerisches Staatsministerium für Arbeit und Sozialordnung, Familien und Frauen & Staatsinstitut für Frühpädagogik, 2006), and in the curriculum for 0 to 10 year old children in Hesse (Hessisches Sozialministerium & Hessisches Kultusministerium, 2005).

Transitions are complex processes of changes within the individual, embedded in communication with his/her social environment. They are phases of life associated with heightened demands and changing environments which mean an accumulation of stress factors (Welzer, 1993). Bronfenbrenner (1979) defined an individual’s transition from family to an educational institution as an ecological transition. Commuting between family setting as the primary developmental context and school setting as a secondary developmental context, demands adjustment and brings about changes in identity, relations, and roles.

Adaptation to new demands has been studied within the stress paradigm. Theories on stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987) as well as on critical life events (Filipp, 1995) consider the appraisal of the critical event – challenge or threat or loss - as being important. It is not the event alone, but the coping process that makes it a transition. Development over the life-span takes into consideration not only the development of the child, but also of the transition on parents. From a background of family developmental theory, Cowan’s (1991) concept of family transition is adaptable to the multiple demands concerning transitions between the
family and the educational system. In a socio-constructivist perspective, transition is a process of co-construction through communication and participation between institution and family (Griebel & Niesel, 2002). Parents support their child’s transition and undergo a transition themselves to being the parent of a school child.

Staff members in early childhood institutions and in school co-construct the transition, but are not directly affected by the developmental tasks themselves (Griebel & Niesel, 2002, 2003, 2004). While this approach is common in the transition from home to primary school, we argue that it can also be applied to transition from primary to secondary school.

To make the transition process clear, to be able to describe the respective demands more exactly, as well as understand the behavioural symptoms of all concerned and comprehend educational procedures, the Transition Model (Griebel & Niesel, 2004) has been developed. In line with Lazarus and Folkman (1987) it focuses on motivational aspects of the demands and not primarily on connected strains.

The success of any transition is understood as a process of coping, it is achieved when all parties involved in the transition understand and accept it. The wellbeing of the child (and his/her parents) within the new school is then a prerequisite for successful interaction and learning, i.e. they make optimal use of the chances for academic and personal growth that are offered in the new environment.

Challenges which must be addressed within the transition process are:

- on the individual level - identity, emotions and ability,
- on the interactional level – loss of and forming new relationships, social roles,
- on the environmental level - new surroundings, curricula, and learning experiences.

Parents have a twofold function during the transitional period, managing to cope with the process for themselves and also to support the child through the process. Tables 1 to 3 provide both an overview of the challenges and the strategies at different levels – individual, interpersonal and contextual, for children and parent who are experiencing transition to secondary school.

**TABLE 1** Coping with challenges in transition to secondary schools: Individual level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenges</th>
<th>Strategies</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Optimise academic (the child is capable of learning and achieving in different fields) and social self-concept (the child is competent in interactions with others) is optimised.</td>
<td>Reflect and communicate what educational expectations the parents have.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Optimise key competences of emotional development, communicate and cooperate optimally.</td>
<td>Reflect long term perspectives of the child’s education with regard to different categories of school.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Optimise reading ability as being an important key competence prior to the transition to higher schooling.</td>
<td>Collect information and gain skills to permit discussion of educational profiles and goals of different school categories.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Highlight challenge (the pleasure of learning, curiosity, prepared to make the effort and achieve) instead of threat (fear of poor achievement, social fears and low self esteem) through the transition.</td>
<td>Overcome insecurity and fear of new surroundings, i.e. the unknown school type, overcome feelings of guilt, failure and anger regarding prospect of poor educational results are addressed thus preventing frustration.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Focus on success rather than failure.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Develop more problem-solving coping style and less emotion-regulating coping style.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Develop a positive attitude regarding the transition to a new school and an identity as a schoolchild in the appropriate type of school.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
### TABLE 2  Coping with challenges in transition to secondary schools: Interactional level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adjust to relationships within the family that change at times (e.g. based on a pressure to achieve).</th>
<th>Confirm well-being and a sense of one’s own self esteem brought about by the child’s advancement; convey security in the child-parent relationship.</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cope with loss through leaving behind primary school (e.g. school friends, teaching staff, the primary school environment).</td>
<td>Negotiation of the respective participation of both the father and mother.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Develop relationships in new student group. During competition, and pressures from competition, an effort should be made to form friendships with others who transfer to the same school and also continue friendships from primary school.</td>
<td>Sound out with the child the options and expectations he/she has.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning from, and with colleagues, building and cultivating social networks.</td>
<td>Reflect on the pressure to achieve on the child and address claims made by the teaching staff.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Find teachers to trust and for understanding amongst the greater number of teaching staff.</td>
<td>Establish social networks with other parents experiencing the transition from primary to secondary school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make use of the relationship with both parents and teaching staff with reference to clarifying the expectations of the secondary school and using these relationships to find the best possible information.</td>
<td>Be involved with the primary school and also start to participate within secondary school.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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| Adjust to a new role: | |
| Even more independence in work performance, more independent of the teacher’s personal caring attitude and adjustment to the learning framework of the recommended/chosen school type. | |

### TABLE 3  Coping with challenges in transition to secondary schools: Contextual level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adjust to the changes in basic conditions connected with changing school e.g. bigger school, greater number of pupils in class, more impersonal, different class room layouts, older children and teenagers, different route to school.</th>
<th>Accept and value involvement of school management and teaching staff of the secondary school at the time of transition.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adjustment to being taught by subject, more subject teachers and subject teachers spending less time during the week in class.</td>
<td>Recognise and achieve one’s own contribution to the transition to secondary school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjust to increased requests for homework, greater importance given to examinations and results.</td>
<td>Develop parental competences with regard to the child’s allocation to a particular type of secondary school: Develop skills in discussing parents’ and child’s wishes, knowledge of the primary school staff, admission examination, trial period, further grades, further planning and school medical examination.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cope with the changes in the teaching method, cope with the educational targets.</td>
<td>Bring own appropriate expectations and resources into discussions and whilst otherwise participating.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Consider private coaching as a resource.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Champion the child’s rights to educational opportunities and equality of opportunities.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
These should not be read in the sense of tasking individual persons involved in a particular transition. Rather these roles are negotiable and it is necessary to agree that the contribution each individual makes to facilitate a successful outcome of the transition may vary. A successful transition means that the child will feel good and profit from the transition to a new school environment. The child will, in such a scenario, be motivated by challenge and not by threat (Sirsch, 2000).

The transition process is managed by the parents and children working in co-construction (Rogoff, 1990) with the teaching staff of both, the primary and secondary school. Cooperation between staffs of elementary schools and of secondary schools cannot at all be taken for granted; indeed, it seems to be as difficult as cooperation between nursery school and elementary school. To make coping with transition of the schoolchild and his/her parents easier, cooperation between teachers and parents has to be developed. At this time, for example, the teaching staffs can give the following support and guidance (Schumacher, 2004).

### TABLE 4 Roles of teaching staff in the transition to secondary schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary school teaching staff</th>
<th>Secondary school teaching staff</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discuss with, and give information to the parents and children regarding further education and the secondary school options. Also discuss the pending changes and the management of them.</td>
<td>Give information about the school’s procedures and layout. Help to cope with the transition and professionally monitor the transition.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exchange information regarding the individual educational progression of children whose education is noted to be affected by special problems.</td>
<td>Collaborate with the parents with regard to further development.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Monitor the pupil’s social development.</td>
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### Results and outlook

The children, parents, teaching staff and the admitting educational facility all have to achieve a successful transition. On such an occasion learning and development can be understood to be a co-construction within which all parties involved in the transition, the child and his/her family as well as teaching staff get aware of the meaning and content of the transition from primary to secondary school. The ability to manage a successful transition therefore characterises not only the individual child but also, collectively, the social systems involved.

When it is applied to the transition from primary to secondary school, the transition model can, for example, contribute to the successful transition of all parties involved. If the successful transition is seen as a common goal in pedagogic work, it implies a developmental process, in which children, parents and teachers (of both primary and secondary schools) are involved and represent an incremental stage of learning for the child.

A precondition for transition is an intensified cooperation between primary school, secondary school and the parental home which is orientated towards the child’s principles and maxims. The cooperation is organised in such a way that the child can expect assistance with greater assurance in accordance with his opportunities (Griebel & Niesel 2006).

The cooperation allows itself to improve through this cooperation and this is not seen to be an additional pressure but is rather experienced as a bonus for pedagogic work as it increases the satisfaction achieved by all parties concerned. These were the experiences of professional and teaching staff in child day care facilities and primary schools in the German Laender (federal
states) of Hesse and Bavaria, who tested a reorganised model of the transition (also vd. Berwanger, 2006; Minsel, Lorenz & Becker-Gebhard, 2004). Examples of excellent practise have emerged (Netta & Weigl, 2006; Griebel & Niesel, 2006).

There exists a body of literature and empirical evidence of the difficulties of transition of primary school to different types of secondary school in Germany (Schumacher 2004, Denner & Schumacher 2004). Further research and analysis of the transition from primary to secondary school with respect to the “Transition Model” are suggested.

References


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