HOW TO ORGANISE TRANSITIONS BETWEEN UNITS IN PRESCHOOL. DOES IT MATTER?

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to deepen our understanding of what transitions within a preschool institution mean from the perspective of those involved. The issue is important to focus on, since an overview of research shows, that there are hardly any studies made on transitions within preschools. In the study presented nine preschool teachers were interviewed, representing two preschools differing in approach regarding how the transitions between different units were organised. One of the preschools had “marked” transitions between four units for groups of children strictly based on age. The transitions were perceived as a matter of course, as something natural. The other preschool with only two groups, one for younger children and one for older children, had “smoother” transitions based on individual considerations. Here, the maturity of the individual child was taken into account. In the interpretation of the results, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the meaning of the transitions for the people involved, using the concept of rites of passage, two approaches were revealed. The first regarded transitions to be a part of the pedagogy, supporting the natural development of the child, as a rite of passage, leaving one social stage in their life and move over to another. The second saw transitions as necessary due to external factors, trying to attain a pedagogical environment, where transitions were as smooth as possible, with no marked rites of passage, not for the individual, not for the collective.

Introduction

Transitions in the educational system are organised in different ways around the world, but for most countries, children pass through several marked transitions. They might be due to age group, between different stages in the same school, or between different types of schools (European Commission, 2009; Marlow-Ferguson, 2001). In this article, the point of departure will be taken in the Swedish educational system, where there has been important changes concerning the transitions children pass through during their years in early childhood education.

Since the 1970s in Sweden there has been a trend toward no longer dividing up the preschool (1-6 years of age) and the compulsory school (7–16 years of age) into stages/levels with marked transitions. In the early 70’s, starting with the official report on Swedish daycare (SOU 1972:26, 1972:27), sibling groups for children up to 6 years of age became more and more common, and even widened sibling groups with children up to 12 years of age in after-school recreation centres (Johansson & Sundell, 1989; Garpelin, 2003). A similar trend as in preschool occurred in the compulsory school, especially regarding the first years (Vinterek, 2001). With a new national curriculum in 1994 (Skolverket, 2006), the traditional division of compulsory school into three levels was formally put to an end. The aim was to obtain smooth transitions, and in some schools a consistently transition-free concept was developed (Garpelin, 2003).

In Swedish preschools of today there is a tendency to reintroduce more marked transitions (Skolverket, 2004), and in 1998 the preschool class was introduced (6 years of age). Usually, the work in preschool is organised by dividing the children into groups of younger children up to 3 years of age and groups of children between 3 and 5 years of age. There might be pedagogical motives behind this trend, but the change might also be explained by the efforts of the preschool institutions to manage their task, due to a reform resulting in a drastic decrease of the average age of their children (Ekström, 2007). Whatever the reason, it is of concern to ask on the one hand, what the transitions between these two age groups mean from
the perspective of the children; and on the other hand, what importance the transitions have for other people involved as well as the for the work at the preschool institutions.

Research on transitions in early childhood education

Our review of international research on early childhood education (Ekström, Garpelin & Kallberg, 2008) disclosed a number of studies of the transition from home to preschool, even though transitions from preschool to school dominated. Like others (Stephen, 2006; Dunlop & Fabian, 2007; Broström & Wagner, 2003), our review (Ekström et al., 2008) showed that much research is closely tied to school readiness, with the aim to make the transitions from informal systems (family/preschool) to more formal systems (school) as smooth as possible.

We also found that perspectives have changed in research from studying institutional practises and how the institutions prepare the transition, to studies on the experiences of parents, children and teachers. In many cases these studies are designed to give voice to more than one perspective.

The focus is mainly on transitions between institutions, especially to school. How transitions within institutions affect children’s lives is seldom asked. An exception is a study conducted by Merry (2007), who interviewed preschool teachers about two-year-old children’s transition between two units in a day-care centre. Different hidden curricula in the respective units put different expectations on children’s behaviour. The children who had been little ‘masters’ in the unit for ‘toddlers’ had to make sense of a new social environment and start as ‘novices’ in the new unit. The transition was not viewed as a learning process, but rather as something that delayed development. Merry claims that transition practices within preschool need to be addressed and discussed in relation to children’s identities, expectations and social relations.

Even though it concerns the transition to school, the research conducted by Corsaro and his colleagues on children’s experiences in the transition from preschool to school in Italy (Corsaro & Molianri, 2000; Corsaro, Molianri, Gold Hadley & Sugioka 2003) has interest for our study. By observations and interviews with children and parents, they investigated transition activities as well as friendships and made comparisons with practices in the US. The research group (Corsaro, Molianri & Rosier Brown 2002; Corsaro et al., 2003) put their emphasis on collective processes by which children make friends, socialise and develop by taking active part in and contributing to cultural production and change (interpretive reproduction). The concept ‘priming events’ (Corsaro et al., 2000) is used to describe and analyse activities in which children by their involvement attend prospectively to ongoing or expected changes in their lives. Teachers and children create a community together in which transitions become meaningful as a collective production of new identities. The children are gradually separated from the initial status and group in preschool to become members in a new group with a new status. Children in Italy developed friendships in the peer group with strong group orientation and lack of status and gender differentiation, a process that continued in school (Corsaro et al., 2003). The research group (Corsaro et al. 2000) found that in the US both children and parents found the transition more difficult than expected, and the children expressed negative emotions, fear and anxiety especially shortly before entry or in the first weeks of school.

Most of the studies in our review were characterised as empirical, with little theoretical basis except from two directions (Ekström et al., 2008). One is built on Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model in which Rimm-Kaufmann and Pianta (2000) have constructed a dynamic, ecologically oriented model to study the transition into formal schooling. The other is represented by the research group tied to Corsaro (Corsaro et al. 2000, 2002, 2003). They
have developed the interpretive perspective in order to understand children’s acts and development as a social event.

To summarise, we have found that studies of the transition from home to preschool, but above all, from preschool to school, dominate. Studies of transitions within preschool institutions such as between units with different age groupings are rare, and, there are few studies of transitions as critical events in general and for children with special needs in particular. Due to the background of our own and others’ experiences of transitions within preschool, we found it vital to increase our understanding of the meaning and impact of these transition practices.

Aim and method

We conducted a study with the aim, to deepen our understanding of what the transitions within a preschool institution mean from the perspective of those involved.

Our research questions were:
What characterises the transitions children pass through in preschool?
What intentions does the preschool institution have with these transitions?
What do these transitions mean for the children and the preschool teachers?

Method

To meet the aim, we applied an interpretive approach (Denzin, 1997; Erickson, 1986; Mehan, 1992; also cf. Garpelin 1997, 2003) with its roots in hermeneutics and phenomenology (Dilthey, 1976; Giorgi, 1985; Ricoeur, 1981). The main focus was on getting a deeper understanding of the perspectives as expressed by those involved.

We chose qualitative interviews with teachers in order to obtain a picture of the kind of understanding they might give about transitions in their preschools. Two preschools willing to participate, The Ship and The Butterfly, were selected. That their work was based on the pedagogical philosophy of Reggio Emila, was a selection criterion. In that philosophy, there is emphasis on the importance of transitions between different ‘pedagogical environments’, created to help the adjustment of those children that form the group (Corsaro et al., 2000). The child is to be challenged to take responsibility. The choice of material and how it is presented should clearly signal what the function is, be accessible to, and create opportunities for investigating. There is a trust in the child as a competent individual.

The interviews were conducted when most preschools have a period of transitions and acclimatisation. In advance, an exploratory interview was made, in order to test the interview plan. Three teachers at The Ship (all with between 15 and 30 years experience) and six teachers at The Butterfly (three with 5 years experience and the others with more than 25 years experience) were willing to take part. Two of the teachers (both at the Butterfly) had been employed for just a short period, while all the other seven teachers had been employed at their preschool for at least 4 years.

The interviews followed the interview plan, and the research questions were the focus of the interviews. The interviewer was a trained preschool teacher with experience in Reggio Emilia preschool work.

The procedure of analysis was first listening to the interviews, then transcribing them, and finally analysing them in relation to the aim and research questions. The interviews were first analysed separately and then every interview was compared to the other interviews to identify what was in common, what differed, and what was unique.
The results are presented, first for each preschool separately, then in relation to the main results of the study. The study was conducted in line with the guiding principles on ethics established by the Swedish Council of Research. The research fulfils demands on informed consent. All subjects interviewed could end their participation in the study whenever they liked. Anonymity was guaranteed.

Two preschools – two different approaches on transitions in preschool

Although both preschools, The Ship and The Butterfly, based their pedagogical work on Reggio Emilia pedagogical philosophy, the teachers expressed two different approaches to transitions within the preschools.

The preschools were organised differently. For the children at The Ship, there were transitions between four units, one for each age group (between 14 and 21 children per group, 1-5 years of age). At The Butterfly, there was one transition between two units, one group for young children (13 children, 1-3 years of age) and the other for older children (21 children, 3-5 years of age).

In the first approach (The Ship), the transitions were regarded as natural rites that everyone in the age group passes through at one and the same moment. The emphasis is on the pedagogical environment, how it is prepared to offer opportunities to challenge stimulate and recognise every child. The receiving unit is emptied of children who in turn go on to the next unit. The idea is that the teachers make the transition together with their age group of children. Each age group stays one year per unit. The transitions are meant to be clear, ‘natural’, and obvious to all involved.

The second approach (The Butterfly) stresses the importance of external factors (economy and politics), when they explain the need for transitions. Maturity plays a central role in forming an opinion of whether the child is ‘mature’ enough to be able to adapt themself to the new pedagogical environment and the conditions that prevail in the new unit. It is a question of being able to feel confident in the new unit, together with those teachers and the older children remaining in that unit. These children undergo one transition during their years in preschool, and the pedagogical idea is that it should be smooth, unnoticed and adjusted to the abilities of the individual child.

At The Ship, the transition is something that concerns the whole group of children. The children’s group is regarded as a resource in the transition and the encounter with the new environment, as “Gunnel” explained:

... the group is important, that we don’t, we don’t want to be so important, and the older they get the more, we hand over to the group so that, ehh, so that if they want help with something, then they should ask their mates. We want them to become dependent on each other, and I think that this makes, that, yeah, that they have each other, that they are in... that they are quite independent, but still it’s not like that, that there is insecurity in this, instead I think that there, that there is an enormous confidence in this, to be dependent on each other, and to feel we can manage, and I don’t have to run away to the teacher as soon as I have a problem, instead I can ask mates to help, even if this is a process, you’ve got to work on it a lot too.

The transition is observed as a rite wherein the children take their personal belongings with them, and they move on a special day – they have a moving in party, clearly drawing the children’s attention to the fact that they are taking over the room, the unit. At the same time, the departing children’s group move over to their new unit or leave the preschool for good.
In the unit for younger children at The Butterfly, only a part of the group moves to the next unit. At the same time, a part of the group in the new unit leaves the preschool for good, meaning that a large group of children and their teachers remain in that unit. Thus the new arrivals have to adjust to the existing culture, attitudes, rules and norms. The teachers strive to attain a transition as smooth and unnoticed as possible for all involved, as if the child were ‘floating over’. Also in this case, the group as a whole is affected by the new arrivals, and there is a considerable stress on the teachers to handle the very different needs that are represented within the whole group.

At The Ship, the idea is that the transition brings the individual a new pedagogical environment to respond to and to be challenged and inspired by, or as “Anna” expressed it:

*And the idea with these units is like, that they have their rooms their material that is suitable for that very age, and then they meet something new every year, they grow up together with the rooms so to say.*

All pedagogical work is permeated by a striving that the individual should feel secure and be able to develop their self-esteem, so that they will be curious to meet the new pedagogical environment. From this perspective, transitions are regarded as something completely natural in line with the pedagogical work, expressed by the teachers at The Ship.

At The Butterfly, the idea is that the individual should manage the transition to the new unit. For the children involved, the transition is much about adjusting to a new environment, new older children and new teachers. This is also a criterion the teachers apply when they decide who will move up. “Jenny” describes such a situation:

... because he has no language and he, he was smaller than them, we thought that he wouldn’t make it at the Caterpillar, because there are more activities, more noise, he didn’t play with the other children, well, he was with us teachers, yeah such a decision we made too, and she was way ahead of her age, and very go-ahead, and she was almost too big to be in a group for smaller children, so then she could move up while he stayed, but the parents agreed, they understood, they were a bit like “isn’t he older than her ?” but we explained, yeah ...

A way of interpreting this could be that the teachers view the transition as ‘a necessary evil’ the children have deal with and the parents have to adjust to. Consequently, as in the example, they strive to make smooth transitions at a time when the individual child is ‘mature’ enough.

At The Ship, at least one teacher accompanies the group of children in the transition, contributing to the continuity: a way of doing things they have developed based on experience. Transitions occur every year and are regarded to be a natural part of the pedagogy. The parents have hardly any influence over the transitions, but they are informed about the transitions and the role they play in the pedagogy.

At The Butterfly, the children involved in the transition meet an entirely new group of teachers at the new unit. Together, the old and the new group of teachers plan and prepare for the transition. The emphasis is on making preparations so that the transition will be as natural and smooth as possible. In these preparations, the parents play an important part.

At both preschools, it is evident how external frames, mostly due to economy, influence the conditions for the pedagogical work.

At The Ship, they have not consistently been able to follow their intention to keep the group intact through all transitions. The transition to the unit for children of 4 years of age was especially affected, since in the organisation, there were fewer children in the unit for children of 3 years of age. In that transition, the former group had to be complemented for economical reasons.
At The Butterfly, the number leaving the unit for older children determines the conditions for the transition. The children regarded as most ‘mature’ in the unit for younger children move up. ‘Moa’ explains it:

Yes, but certainly it can be like that, a child that is younger can move up then, because it really has followed these mates or is very mature in many ways, perhaps socially, or has all its mates it has been close to there. Well, you try all the time to have an eye to the children’s group, what’s best more than about age

The teachers use of the concept ‘mature’, means different competencies they consider to be important to take into consideration, for instance, play, social competence and being able to express themselves. However even if the teachers first formed an opinion that a child was not ‘mature’ enough, the next moment the child might be regarded as ‘mature’ if a vacancy suddenly appeared.

The teachers at both preschools were anxious, after the transition, to allow children to visit their former unit, even if the conditions differed. For The Ship, the visit to the former unit means a visit to the old unit where neither the children nor the teachers are the same as before. For The Butterfly children, the visit is to a unit where both teachers and many of the children have remained. The aim of these visits is to make sure that the transition is as safe and smooth as possible. This flexibility might become a problem for the teachers at the old unit, since they have to concentrate on newcomers as well as on children who actually have already left the unit.

Discussion

The aim with our study was to deepen our understanding of what the transitions within a preschool institution mean from the perspective of those involved.

In order to get a grasp of this problem, we interviewed teachers at two preschools. The preschools were chosen due to how the work was organised, so that the children went through transitions during their years at the preschool.

A hundred years ago, the anthropologist van Gennep (1960/1908), introduced the concept ‘les rites de passage’ (Rites of passage) for ceremonies in different cultures that have the form of rituals and occur with regularity in the life of individuals. He saw how the culturally bound ceremonies were linked to different life crises in relation to transitions between different stages in the life of individuals. van Gennep divided passages into three phases: separation; transition; and incorporation. Turner (1969, 1982) has developed the theory of rites of passage, focusing on human relations during the transition phase (the middle phase of rites of passage). He talked about sometimes being in a ‘liminoid’ position, when someone is going through a liminal phase together with others. During this phase, individuals could experience being part of a movement, a collective, with shared experiences where otherwise important issues might be set aside.

Former studies conducted within our research group (Garpelin 1997, 2003, 2004) have shown that the way young people express the importance of the transition to the senior level of the Swedish compulsory school (at the age of 13 years) might well be interpreted as a collective rite between childhood and adolescence, organised and recognised by the world of grownups. The transition could be regarded as a modern form of a rite of passage (van Gennep, 1960/1908; Turner 1969, 1982). The young people expressed how the transition was a critical incident that meant a great deal in their lives, something that seemed to be valid for other transitions during the school years as well. This might be even more important, since traditional rites of
passages in Swedish society, such as baptism (christening) and confirmation, have lost their significance.

The results in the present study have also been examined with respect to the interpretation of transitions as rites of passage (van Gennep, 1960/1908; Turner 1969, 1982) in trying to deepen what they mean for those involved.

We interpret the approach of The Ship preschool as being positive to the transitions, regarding them to be a part of their pedagogy and as important elements of the pedagogical work. The transitions were supporting the natural development of all children concerned as they went through a rite of passage together, leaving one social stage in their life and moving over to another. This was obvious for all involved as the group of children took over the new room as noted also by Corsaro et al. (2000). A moving-in party to celebrate the incorporation phase of the passage was held. Children left a social stage in their life and moved over to another, being members of a unit for older children. As the whole collective moved over, regardless of their experiences and abilities, it was the new pedagogical environment that was put to the test: was the environment able to accommodate all the children with their various qualities and needs?

The other approach, represented by The Butterfly preschool, was characterised by trying to attain a transition as smooth and unremarkable as possible, where individual considerations were taken, whether the child was or was not ‘mature’ enough. There was no marked rite of passage: not for the individual; not for the collective. In the incorporation phase, in the transition to the new unit, the individual child was put to the test, whether it was capable to meet the challenges. Since the pressure was on the individual, the focus was not on the pedagogical environment. Children left a social position as the oldest in their former unit to become the youngest in the new unit. If they had difficulties in managing this transition they were regarded to be the cause of the problem, not being ‘ready’ for the new unit. No pressure was on the pedagogical environment to be ‘ready’ for all children.

The teachers interviewed from both preschools expressed what the transitions meant from the perspectives of those involved as well as from the preschool as an institution and two quite different perspectives on transitions were revealed. However, the selection of interviewees is limited, nine teachers from two preschools, and only the teachers perceptions of the transitions has been explored. Thus, there is a need for more research where also the views of parents and children are included, and in addition a comparative study involving other countries.

References


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