TRANSITION FROM SECONDARY SCHOOL TO SECONDARY MODERN SCHOOL WITHIN THE GERMAN EDUCATION SYSTEM

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Abstract
This longitudinal study examined the transition-experience among 82 pupils (12-14 years) who transferred from secondary school to secondary modern school in Germany, compared with 1123 participants, who attended secondary modern school from the beginning. Data were collected over a 1-year period beginning immediately after the transition to secondary modern school. The most interesting questions were: How do the students perceive the transition to secondary modern school? Is it a challenge? Is it a threat? How is their integration within the (already existing) class-structure? What are the behaviors and interactions between the students and the new teaching staff like? How do they prevail in the new type of school? Results confirmed that the transfer was an important life event for the students and revealed, among the significance of peer-relations, the importance of social support in various ways.

Introduction
Students in the German education system, usually at the age of ten years, together with their parents and guided by recommendations of their primary school teachers, have to decide which type of school they will attend in the upcoming school years. This is a critical and meaningful decision as the students are steered in different directions for future working options, professions and later income. While graduation from secondary school (grades 5 – 12) ranks highest in respect to chances for attending university and is considered to be preferable as a prerequisite for future education in the tertiary sector, the secondary modern school (grades 5 – 10) equips students for professions usually below the level of university graduation. The general-education comprehensive school up to grade 9 has a relatively low reputation in respect to future participation in higher valued positions in the labor market. The word ‘low’ in respect to secondary school unfortunately may give the impression that the secondary modern school is a low-order type of school. However, this is definitely not the case. The secondary modern school is more propaedeutic compared to the overly theoretical secondary school. While there are various ways in Germany to achieve university qualification without attending secondary school in the first place, it is this route that has a strong public reputation and is seen by parents and students to be the most effective.

This study, investigated students who commenced secondary school after primary school, but two years later made a change to secondary modern school. This change within the educational system is not in line with typical students’ school trajectories as students in Germany usually remain within the one type of school and proceed from one educational level to the next highest one.

The question is how this change of school type fits into the body of existing research of educational transitions and if it may be considered to be a transition in this perspective.

Transition theory
In the present transition research that has mainly dealt with transitions from preschool education to formal school, two principal directions may be differentiated. A sociological-anthropological approach referring to the works of Bronfenbrenner (1979), van Gennep (1986), Bourdieu (1990), Elder (1985), and others looks at children who move into a new culture of a different educational setting. This approach can be found in the works on educational transitions predominantly from UK (e.g. Brooker, 2008; Dunlop, 2007; Fabian,
A distinction is made between vertical transitions, that is, the change from preschool to school and further sections within the educational system, and horizontal transitions such as the transitions a child experiences within a day from family to school, to after-school care and back into the family. There is also a similar distinction made between transitions in the vertical sense and transfers, meaning a change from one nursery school or one school to another, for instance if a family moves.

In Germany, a developmental-psychological approach to transition has been applied by Griebel and Niesel (2004). This also refers to Bronfenbrenner’s social systems theory, and includes critical life events (Filipp, 1995), stress theory (Lazarus, 1995), theory on family transitions (Cowan, 1991) and in relation to development – to constructivism (Rogoff, 1990; Valsiner, 1989). Whereas the theoretical roots of both approaches and others are interlaced in many ways and there have been many communalities in the growing body of transition research, the main difference between these two approaches is that from the development-psychological perspective, horizontal transitions or transfers are not considered to be transitions if there are no significant changes on the individual level in the development of identity, competences and coping with strong emotions; on the interactional level - changes in relations; and on the contextual level - changes in the educational setting and the philosophy connected with it (Griebel, 2004). Transition research has typically been undertaken in respect to normative educational transitions that all children face; a non-normative change such as from a higher level educational setting to a lower level setting seems to be new in this research context.

In regards to the already existing literature and theories, transition is now considered to involve a significant life situation or phase, a break of continuity, and a changing life context in ones biography. The transition is a long-term process in which several agents are involved from family, educational setting, social environment, and especially the children themselves. The priority objective of transitions is the re-establishment of the formerly existing balance between subject and environment to cope with the break of continuity - the transition.

Results of research on transition to secondary schooling

Given the large number of students involved in the transition from primary school to the larger and more complex secondary schooling, it is not surprising that the transition to secondary school has also been the focus of extensive research (Beelmann 2006; Eccles, Midgley 1989; Sirsch, 2003). These transition can bring about an increase in self-esteem, self-concept or even in physical health (Büchner & Koch, 2001; Fenzel, 1989; Hirsch & Rapkin, 1987). Lord, Eccles and McCarthy (1994) report an alleviating effect and an increase in both academic and social self-concept. Simmons, Carlton-Ford and Blyth (1987), Crockett, Petersen, Graber, Schulenberg and Ebata (1989) and McDougall and Hymel (1998) have thus raised the same question: What differentiates those who cope well in transition from those who do not?

By only examining markers of adjustment across the transition year, researchers have failed to directly assess the transition experience itself, as the students´ adjustment may be affected by a number of factors, including, but not limited to, the transition experience itself.

That educational transition is an important life-event in early adolescence is beyond controversy. Filipp (1995) has described the transition as a normative critical life-event that, according to Leonard and Elias (1993), comes along with many changes in academic and social aspects. The transition appears during a time in which rapid physical and interpersonal changes occur (Brooks-Gunn, 1983; Hamburg, 1974). The increasing number of simultaneous life changes that exist during this period are predictive of greater risk of declines in
adjustment (Simmons, Burgeson, Carlton-Ford & Blythe, 1987). On the other hand, it has to be noted that besides the negative effects on later adjustment and slight increase in adjustment, transition can have no differences in adjustment at all (Beelmann, 2006). Therefore, the transition experiences are most likely not universal but rather, unique (Eccles & Midgley, 1989). Without assessing the impact of each of the multiple life changes, it becomes difficult to determine whether the positive versus negative adjustment observed can be attributed solely to transition problems or to the effects of other life changes.

Considering the ‘voice of the consumer’ is a first major step in this direction, namely not to generalise transition experiences but to closely examine adolescents’ expectations, concerns, emotions, perceptions as well as their individual needs (Berndt & Mekos, 1995; Causey & Dubow, 1993; Cotterell, 1992; Elias, Gara & Ubriaco, 1985; Fenzel, 1989; Forgan & Vaughn, 2000; McDougall & Hymel, 1998).

Schwarzer, Lange and Jerusalem (1982) found that students in Germany perceive a more positive transition experience when they move from primary school to secondary modern or comprehensive school rather than to secondary school.

Apart from the type of school, gender differences can be of importance (Büchner & Koch 2001; Kolip 1994; Schwarzer et al., 1982) as the adjustment to the new social environment of the secondary modern school can vary between boys and girls (Fenzel & Blyth, 1986). Even though the puberty level did not emerge as a significant predictor of adjustment following transition, it has to be acknowledged that the assessment of pubertal development was not a good discriminator among boys.

Moving beyond gender, other researchers like Bernd and Hawkins (1991) and Fenzel and Blyth (1986) have addressed individual differences in transition by examining the role of supportive peer relationships. Although unfortunately often neglected in literature, social adjustment is a vital component of the adjustment at school (Hymel, Comfort, Schonert-Reichl & McDougall, 1996). Its meaning is special as the transition does not just affect the consequences that occur within a certain age group or form (Eccles & Midgley, 1989). Disturbances in the day-to-day social regularities require a reorganisation of an individual’s social role (Seidman, 1988; Pearlin, 1983). According to Berndt (1989), the existence of a social network for adolescents can nevertheless have a positive influence on them while undergoing new circumstances. Fenzel and Blyth (1983) reported that boys who demonstrated gains in adjustment also reported greater frequency and greater intimacy of contact with important peers during the transition period.

Moos and Trickett (1974) were the first to discern by means of a questionnaire, which was later modified by Berndt (1988), how far it is significant that teachers show an interest in and support their students. Feedback on performance is important for the development of one’s personality (Helmke 1998). A study conducted by the OECD (OECD, 2001, p. 161) as well as scientific results by Baumert (2001) point out that students attending a secondary school perceived the support and help given by the teachers as insufficient.

Berndt and Mekos (1995) found that students who reported a negative transition experience performed better than those who reported differently. Grades are an important measure within the German school system. However, as marks have a selective function at school, they mirror only the classroom internal standards and not the performance of one individual on a broader level of assessment. Therefore, it is questionable whether marks can be considered as an indicator to what extent the future transition will be perceived as a challenge or a threat. As a result, Valtin and Wagner (2004) argued that grades may play a rather subordinated role compared to personal circumstances, attitudes and feelings.
Findings regarding a horizontal movement (within the same type of school) or a downwards movement (transition to a ‘lower’ type of school as well as grade retention) are still missing in the present research landscape. Based on the concern that such a transition to a ‘lower’ type of school may be difficult for at least some students, this study focuses on the transition from secondary to secondary modern school.

Method
The project was a joint school-university project. As a longitudinal survey was intended, two survey periods were designed.

Participants and Procedure
In period one (T1; September 2007), data were collected in the 7th and 8th grade of eight different secondary modern schools in Bavaria, Germany, with a total sample size of 1770 students aged 12 to 14 years. Of these students, 1651 were continuing students and 119 had transferred to the school from secondary school. The second survey period (T2) followed one year later in September 2008 when the students from the first period were in 8th and 9th class. The participating schools represented a cross-section of urban and suburban schools.

In both survey periods teachers handed out the questionnaires for the students to complete. Parents were informed that research was taking place and they could request their child’s exclusion from this study. Students not wishing to participate could withdraw from the study at any time. Illness, absence, changing schools, moving house, etc. reduced the number of students who could be tracked longitudinally to 1205 (82 continuing students and 1123 transfer students). Of the 1205 grade 7 and grade 8 students, 655 were girls and 550 were boys – the difference is ascribable to one of the schools being a girls’ school. Thirty two of these boys and girls were not born in Germany and in 61 cases, German was not the main language at home.

Measures
The survey questionnaire contained 32 questions on 12 pages and covered 132 items. In the first survey period students the questionnaire contained two main sections.

The first section of the questionnaire was completed by all students in the study and obtained background information about the students’ such as gender, place of birth and socio-economic background. Students also answered questions about their parental and peer support as well as the climate in class and school. In addition, the questionnaire contained items regarding the students’ feelings of pressure to get higher marks, performance anxiety, and their actual marks in their last annual report. The first section of the questionnaire concluded with an enquiry about adolescents’ self-reports including work attitude, self-efficacy and self-esteem.

The second section of the questionnaire was only for former students of secondary schools who had transferred to secondary modern schools at Grades 7 and 8. These questions were designed to reveal whether the transition experience was perceived as a challenge or a threat.

Most questions could be answered using a four level rating scale ranging from ‘agree strongly’ to ‘do not agree’.

The questionnaire was pretested with 50 students to test the understandability and quality, and to estimate the time needed for German native speakers as well as non-native speakers to complete it. As a consequence of the pretest, some items had to be modified.
In order to identify the matching questionnaires of the students during the first and second period, they were asked to fill in a four figure code consisting of (mostly) permanent items such as the first letters of their mother’s name. Putting the coding in first place was decided because students’ concentration is naturally high at the beginning of a lesson, so that errors during this process could be minimized.

**Results**

The following section reveals the preliminary results regarding social and educational topics like school achievement, expenditure of time on school work, considering the voice of the students, self-efficacy expectations regarding school topics, general self-efficacy expectations, school anxiety, pressure to perform, parental expectations of school performing, as well as group integration.

School achievement: The first analysis involved an examination and comparison of the average marks in the main school subjects, which were German, Mathematics, and the first foreign language, for both survey periods, as well as the average mark for these three subjects. Marks in the German educational systems are categorized in the following way: 1 is the highest mark to achieve and 6 is the lowest one can get. Table 1 provides an overview of mean marks in both survey periods.

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<th>TABLE 1 Average marks in the main school subjects</th>
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The results revealed that the average mark of those students who had made a transition from secondary school to secondary modern school improved by nearly one mark ($p = .000$). The biggest increase appeared in the subject of the first foreign language. This may reflect the advantage in grammar and the existing vocabulary the students had gained at their former school. On the other hand, the comparison group neither increased nor decreased significantly.

Expenditure of time on school work: Students who transferred to the new school experienced a significant decrease in the time they had to spend on homework and studying per day during the year and schooldays, from one survey period to the next. It is not surprising that this expenditure of time also decreased in holidays and weekends.

Consideration of the voice of the students: In the first survey period straight after the transition to secondary modern school, 58.0 per cent of the students stated that they had been happy to leave secondary school, 69.9 per cent had been excited to be part of the new environment in secondary modern school, 64.5 per cent had been looking forward to showing their skills, 68.5 per cent had been excited about the peer group in the new class structure, and 80.2 per cent had had no worries that they would not catch up in the new class.
Self-efficacy expectations regarding school topics: In comparing the attitudes of both groups of students in the second survey period, the students who transferred from secondary school showed an increase in their attitude towards the new school (eg. ‘I like going to school’), while the attitude of the comparison group decreased. The difference between groups was highly significant \( p = .000 \).

General self-efficacy expectations: The general self-efficacy expectations such as: ‘I feel fine’ increased from one survey period to the other within both groups, with the comparison group experiencing a minor increase regarding this topic.

School anxiety: Students who transferred from secondary school showed a significant decrease in the perceived anxiety and excitement towards school from one survey period to the other, while these components changed only marginally within the comparison group.

Pressure to Perform: The perceived pressure on the students regarding academic subject matter decreased significantly \( p = .000 \) within the group of former secondary school students, while it rose within the comparison group. An attempt was made to show a correlation between pressure and physical distress, but the findings were not significant.

Parental expectations of school performance: Surprisingly, the expectations of parents towards their children’s performance in school, as perceived by the students, rose only within the group of former secondary school students, while it did not change within the comparison group. A possible explanation could be that parents believed their children should have to perform better in a ‘lower’ type of school.

Group integration: Both groups of students reported an increase in their integration within the (existing) classroom structure from one year to the next one.

Primary Analyses

In an effort to protect against multicollinearity, a single/multiple regression analysis was conducted to reduce the number of predictors considered while examining the following hypotheses:

a) The first hypothesis was that there would be an increase of marks in the major subjects of the former students of the secondary school from one testing period to the following. This hypothesis was confirmed. The direction of the regression coefficients suggested that there was an interrelation between the average mark and the mark of the investigated subjects (German, Maths, Foreign language) and the pressure to perform. The average mark decreased, if students reported too much pressure in class which maybe through the teachers’ expectations and subject content. The variable of classroom climate contributed 10.3 per cent to the pressure to perform.

b) The second hypothesis was that parental support would increase the motivation towards school of the former secondary school students. The results of the multiple regression analysis indicated that parental support contributed 23.9 per cent to the self-efficacy expectations of the students. The higher the perceived support, the higher was the self-efficacy of the student. Parental support was also correlated with the socioeconomic background of the family. The higher this background, the higher the perceived parental support.

c) The third hypothesis expected that a positive integration of the former secondary school students within the new class structure would be associated with a positive transition experience. Both groups of students perceived an increase in group-integration. The regression analysis revealed that a cooperative and helpful class
community contributed 21 per cent to an increase towards students perceived integration into their class.

d) The fourth hypothesis claimed that the perceived stress in school would increase after one year in the new school. This hypothesis was partly supported. Perceived pressure within the new school decreased significantly. However, pressure is just one of many variables to explain stress. Therefore, a reduction of the different dimensions (such as anxiety, social environment, pressure to perform) that might be influencing stress was made and the results revealed that the main influencing factors were reduction of pressure, reduction of anxiety aspects and increase of social life satisfaction. The three factors explained 41 per cent of the perceived stress.

e) Hypothesis five stated that students would report an increase of self-esteem one year after the transition to secondary modern school. Factors influencing self-esteem were split into internal (eg. motivation, coping) and external (eg. peer groups, pressure to perform) influences. This hypothesis was only partly supported as the multiple regression analysis showed only an interrelation between social life satisfaction (considered to be an external influence) and self-esteem (corrected $R^2 = 41\%$). Therefore students reported a significant increase of self-esteem from one year to the other during the transition period.

f) The sixth hypothesis expected that the time students spent doing homework would decrease one year after the transition to secondary modern school. The preliminary analysis revealed that there was a significant decrease in the expenditure time for school issues. So this hypothesis was actually confirmed. The attempt to identify if this hypothesis was influenced by whether the transition to secondary modern school was perceived in a positive or negative way, failed.

Discussion

Results indicate that the self-esteem of former secondary school students increased (although not remarkably) during the transition process from T1 to T2, while the self-esteem of the comparison group declined during the same time period.

The results of Büchner (2001), Hirsch (1987), Fenzel (1989) and Lord et al. (1994) are confirmed by these findings, whereas the conclusions drawn by Wigfield (1991), Chung, Elias and Schneider (1998), Wigfield and Eccles (1994) and Seidman (1994) do not correspond with results at hand. Rather than reporting a negative effect regarding the psychological adjustment and self-esteem due to the transition experience, they report a positive effect.

Given the importance placed on peer relationships in early adolescence, it should not be surprising that social adjustment would play a major role in the transition experience. This is the reason why, in accordance with Savin-Williams (2000), peer relations are considered to play a key role in my research. However, an immediate influence could not be found towards adjustment to the new school and thereby confirmed Sirsch’s (2003) findings. With regards to Berndt (1989), the thesis that peers have a substantial influence on transition experience can be confirmed. Several studies of individual variations in transition experience demonstrated a strong link between indices of social functioning and adjustment to the new school. Unfortunately, it remains speculative to what extent such connections are decisive for a successful adjustment. Further studies should examine not only friendship and peer relations but also the kind of support provided by those networks.
Students who had made a transition from secondary school to secondary modern school showed an improvement in main academic subjects and their average mark. One year after their transition, former secondary school students achieved higher average marks than students of the comparison group whose marks showed hardly any changes. A possible explanation might be that former secondary school students had to cope with a far more intensive curriculum at their previous school than the comparison group. Thus, students did not generally need to build up new knowledge but can rather refresh it, which clearly takes less effort.

Taking all the above mentioned categories into account and the increase in educational and general self-efficacy expectations, social self-efficacy on the individual level represented in the sense of identity of subjects, class room satisfaction on the interactional level and change of the educational setting and culture with different curriculum and philosophy including a different societal status of school types, it can be stated that regarding the basic sample of surveyed students those affected by a non-normative transition within the system of different types of secondary schooling, underwent a positive transition experience also in a developmental perspective.

Of course, we would need more research about other forms of non-normative transitions within the educational system, and also about connected relations with biographic transitions of the subjects in other fields, like changes that come along with puberty of boys and girls and with changes in their families.

References


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