TIME FOR TRANSITION: THE USE OF FUTURE IN THE TRANSITION FROM PRESCHOOL CLASS TO FIRST GRADE

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Abstract

In this article the concept of future is used to create meaning about school transitions. Since education often focuses on what will be, it is important to understand the everyday use of future in educational settings. The use of future in the transition from preschool class to first grade was studied using ethnographic methods. The results demonstrate how children and teachers use future in everyday life, and how this usage can be seen as priming events in the construction of transition. Furthermore, the results show how orientation towards the future contributes to the construction of not only children as becoming, but also children as becoming in particular ways when the future interacts with other temporal aspects in the transition process.

Keywords: Transition, school start, preschool class, future, priming events

Introduction

School can be said to be a place where time, and especially the future, is present. This is a consequence of how school is organized, and is partly due to the purpose of education being change. One could stop at this point, noting that school is organized around time and change; however, this orientation towards the future must be made sense of in everyday life, and thus affects the ways in which school is done. This article, shows different ways in which future is used in everyday life to create meaning about the transition from preschool class to first grade. The focus is on how time is used and made visible by the participants. The starting point is that the meanings created are not fixed or given, but are constructed in interaction and in social situations (e.g., Hacking, 1999).

In 1998, the organization of children’s entry to school in Sweden changed with the introduction of the so-called ‘preschool class’. From the beginning, preschool class was intended to prepare children for school, a function that has been strengthened in recent years (SFS 2010:800). When preschool class was first introduced, it was also intended to influence the early years in school (SOU 2010, p.67). Prior to the introduction of preschool class, many six-year-olds took part in special activities at preschools. Unlike these activities, preschool class is in most cases located within a compulsory school, and is subject to parts of the school curriculum. Preschool class is not part of either preschool or compulsory school, but is its own type of schooling. Most Swedish children attend preschool class the year they turn six even though it is non-compulsory.

With the introduction of preschool class, the transition from preschool to school changed from a clearly marked transition between two types of schooling into two transitions between three types of schooling. Some researchers describe the latter transition, between preschool class and compulsory school, as less marked (Karlsson, Melander, Pérez Prieto & Sahlström 2006), while other research indicates that this transition should be seen as more marked (Ackesjö, 2013a; Lago, 2014).

The function of preschool class, to prepare children for compulsory school, makes the concept of future important to preschool class activities. However, future is also an important part of school in general, including transitions. School and education often focus on the future, change, and what will be. Much of what is done in school involves goals for the future: goals of learning and development (e.g. Hockey & James, 1993; Adam, 1995; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; Lee 2001; Närvänen & Näsman, 2007). Through education, children should become
something they are not currently believed to be, such as good citizens (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011). This makes it important to understand how future is used in everyday life to create meaning about transitions.

Theoretical frame: Temporality and priming events

The central concepts in this article are temporal order, temporal orientation, and priming events. A transition is a process that requires a ‘before’ and an ‘after’ in order to be conceived (e.g. Fabian, 2007); this makes time an important part of transition. The understanding and use of time can be referred to as temporality. In this article, temporal order and temporal orientation are used to understand the transition from preschool class to first grade. Temporal order refers to recognizable or expected use of time within an organization, such as school (Adam, 1995; Zerubavel, 1981). Here, temporal order is used to analyze the use of time in transition. Temporal order is what makes us recognize and define situations; what makes school recognizable as school.

The concept of temporal orientation is used to describe how people relate to and create meaning about temporal aspects such as past, present, and future. Orientation towards the future and children as becoming are also used to analyze the progression of school and transition (e.g. Hockey & James, 1993; Lee, 2001). This does not mean that children are considered merely as becoming, or as ‘not yet’s’. I argue that children live in a world where their growth and their future are made important; and that in a lived life, and especially in children’s lives, the future is an essential component (Uprichard, 2008; Colley, 2010). In this study, the concept of future is used as related to other temporal aspects such as being and having been; present and past.

Besides the concept of temporality, this article draws on Corsaro and Molinari’s (2000; 2005) concept of priming events to analyze transition activities. Priming events are preparatory activities associated with transitions. They can be described as ways of speaking of and activities focusing on future, pending, or completed transition. They involve both expectations (ideas about future social contexts) and concrete activities (e.g., school visits, schoolwork). Priming events also include talk about transition and transition practices. In this article, discussion about and usage of time and future are viewed as priming events and the concepts of temporality and priming events are used simultaneously.

Previous research

Some previous studies exist on preparatory practices such as preschool class, and their role in the start of school; a few are presented here. Lappalainen (2008) shows how different preparatory activities, such as school visits, are part of the start of Finnish school. She describes how adults refer to school’s stricter schedule in order to prepare children for school. Corsaro and Molinari (2000; 2005) write about similar activities as an important part of school transitions in Italy. They use the concept of priming events to discuss these activities, and show that priming events were introduced when transitions approached. In this way, ideas of the future became important in the transition from preschool to school. Ackesjö (2013b) studied similar preparatory activities in a Swedish context, involving the transition from preschool to preschool class. She argues that these activities lead to a prolonged transition. My earlier study of priming events in a Swedish context (Lago, 2014) shows that transition itself strengthens the focus on future. Because the transition between preschool class and first grade is marked in different ways, transition becomes something that must be made sense of. White and Sharp (2007) have interviewed English children about their experiences of the transition from foundation stage to Key Stage 1. In these interviews, the children described
preparatory activities and how such activities helped them to understand and give meaning to the new context.

These studies show, in a sense, that the future is an important part of the transition process; but they do not make time an explicit part of transition. In this article, therefore, theories of time are used to deepen the understanding of how the concept of future is used in everyday life in school.

Method
This article builds on ethnographic data from a Swedish school class that I followed during its transition from preschool class to first grade, from March to November of 2010. I constructed data in different school settings (classrooms, playtime), and followed the children during their schooldays. Participant observations and field notes were used to document everyday life in school. Ethnographic interviews with the children were also included in this study. These methods were considered to be sufficient to study how transition is done on a local level, particularly because they allowed me as a researcher to get close to the participants. This closeness was crucial for my choice of an ethnographic approach, since it allowed a better understanding of how the concrete processes of giving meaning to transitions comes about (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). By observing what was said and done in the settings and by following the children through the processes of transition, it was possible to study transition as it occurred. Interviews were used as a way to put particular focus on transition. These interviews represent a co-construction of meaning (Holstein & Gubrium, 2004), where I have steered the conversation to the topic of study through my questions.

Several ethical considerations were assessed regarding the fieldwork. The closeness mentioned above required that I work within my role as a researcher and be explicit about my purpose in being there. The level of participation was not only an issue for me, but also depended on others’ reactions to my presence; so it involved constant work with social relations (cf. Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995). Consideration was also given to access to the school and to consent from children and teachers. All participants were contacted through gatekeepers; that is, children and teachers who needed to give consent were contacted through others. The use of gatekeepers can be problematic, since participants may feel obligated to give consent. However, gatekeepers are a necessity to gain access to school settings. Formal consent was given by the children’s legal guardians after they received written information. Children and teachers were informed and gave their consent verbally. To meet the requirement of confidentiality (Swedish Research Council, 2011), I have used fictitious names for individuals and places.

Data were analysed by coding and categorizing into themes. In this article, four such themes are explored through the concepts of temporal order, temporal orientation, and priming events.

Results: The use of future in everyday life
Analyses show that future was the strongest temporal aspect during the transition from preschool class to first grade. Talk about the future and activities pointing to the future were used by teachers and children to understand the transition, and were present throughout the transition. The following discussion, shows different ways in which future was used to create meaning about the transition from preschool class to first grade and is presented using four different themes: We do this now so you will be able to do it in the future; Learn more, get better, be first; In keeping with time; and Markings of time and change.
Theme 1: We do this now so you will be able to do it in the future

In preschool class, the future was mainly represented by the first grade, and children and teachers talked about first grade and compulsory school as the goal for activities.

**Example 1**

It’s circle time in preschool class when Kristin, the special education teacher, enters the room. “Is it Bornholm now?” Vilma asks, and says that she thinks it is boring. Kristin asks if Vilma finds it difficult. Vilma shakes her head. “To do this will help you when you go to school. When you learn to read,” says the preschool teacher, Pia. “I hope.”

In this example, Vilma, Kristin, and Pia talked about the work at hand: about Bornholm, a form of language training that was used in the preschool class. Vilma questioned this training by calling it boring. In order to legitimize their use of this language training in preschool class, Pia mentioned the future: what children will learn and work with in first grade. It was a common practice for teachers to refer to the future in first grade in different ways when they explained and justified various activities to the children. Teachers emphasized that the most important thing was not what children learned here and now. This use of future to justify activities in preschool class can be understood as a priming event, since this talk puts focus on future change. In this example, Pia called attention to future requirements of what children would have to know. As a child in preschool class, you do not have to learn to read even if you practice; whereas a child in first grade must be taught to read. In this way, Pia used the difference in status between preschool class and first grade: She used the mandatory and goal-oriented status of first grade to legitimize the voluntary and preparatory preschool class (cf. Corsaro & Molinari, 2005).

It was not only the content of first grade that was made significant in preschool class. First grade was also used to show how children should behave in preschool class.

**Example 2**

Our work in preschool class is preparing the children for first grade. We work with language, mathematics, physical exercise, social interaction, norms and values, and more. We also follow school hours starting 8.20.

The last few weeks we have seen many late arrivals, this disturbs the activities. We urge all to be on time so that everyone gets a peaceful start of the school day.

This quotation is part of a letter that was sent home to the children’s guardians in preschool class. The letter emphasized the preparatory character of preschool class. Besides the other content in this letter, the reference to the future in (compulsory) school is a way to assert demands to submit to the school order in preschool class. Though the time order in preschool class and first grade may seem alike, there is a difference. Preschool class is a voluntary type of schooling. Therefore, a reference to compulsory school is a way for preschool class to gain status by presenting itself as a preparation for compulsory school. The letter also contained a description of what school is; that is, what the children were preparing for. Language and mathematics were mentioned first, possibly because they are seen as most important. The strongest message, however, which was reinforced by underlining and a picture of a clock, was that school is a place where children are expected to be on time: that punctuality was expected here and in the future. This use of and temporal orientation towards the future made preschool class a place for training activities and (school) preparation. The year in preschool class became a year of practice to start first grade. In this way, beliefs about first grade are an important part of the temporal order of preschool class.
Theme 2: Learn more, get better, be first

Once the children under observation reached first grade, future continued to be strongly used as a means for social order. However, the way of orienting toward the future was different. This new orientation was most visible in the children’s way of relating to their schoolwork, but was also present in the instructions given by the teachers.

*Example 3*

It is one of the first days in first grade, and the teacher Anita gives each child a binder. When she is done, she tells the children to listen, and holds up a binder. First, Anita shows how the children should trace the letter A on paper. “When you’ve done that, you should put an X in the table at the back,” Anita explains. Anita shows the table to the class. The table shows the order in which the children should work with letters. There are five steps for each letter. “When you’re done with one thing, you should put an X in the right box,” explains Anita, “and then you should continue with the next.” She explains that you should always check what you have done so that you know where you are.

Anita’s instructions and the table showing how to proceed with the letters presented a way forward. Children were given a strong message to work forward, and shown how to do it. Thus, this example contains a future orientation of constant learning and improving. This way of talking about schoolwork can be seen as a priming event. The message was that now that the children were first graders, they had to know and be able to do certain things that they did not know or do before. This example marks a change between preschool class and first grade, between past and present, but also shows that change was still going on.

The message given by Anita was a kind of orientation to the future; and this orientation was also present in the children’s talk about schoolwork. One way in which the children used this orientation towards the future was by competing and comparing with each other.

*Example 4*

Vilma works in her blue notebook, writing zeroes in the boxes. “Am I fast, Jovan?” she asks. Jovan looks at Vilma. “Yeah,” he says. “Oh look, such small zeroes,” says Vilma, and rubs her hands before she starts writing in the smallest boxes on the page. “Am I fast now?” she says, looking around the classroom. She starts to comment on what the others are doing: that she has already done what they are doing, and that what she does is more fun and more difficult. The preschool teacher, Pia, turns to Vilma, and tells her to be quiet and work. Pia walks over to Vilma. “Why don’t you start with the big zeroes?” she asks, looking at Vilma’s book. “What? I’ll do these first,” Vilma answers, pointing to the small boxes that she has filled in. “Whenever one reads or writes, you start on that side,” says Pia. Pia points to the left and walks away. Vilma continues to write zeroes.

Shortly after Pia leaves, Niclas walks over to Vilma. She looks up at him, puts her pen down, and shakes her hand. She says it’s exhausting to write, and difficult. “Especially the small zeroes,” says Vilma. Niclas looks at what Vilma does. He says that he has no such blue notebook. Vilma looks pleased, and says that she got hers a while ago. Niclas walks up to Anita’s desk, where he puts down the stencil that he is done with. He walks back to his place and sits down. He takes out his binder and makes an X in the table. Then he raises his hand and waits for Anita. “Have you made an X in the table?” Anita asks. “Yes,” says Niclas and nods. Anita looks at Vanna, who sits at the same table. She is drawing the picture on the Step Two stencil. Anita says that Vanna must hurry, or she will fall behind. Anita
walks away. After a while, she returns with a blue notebook and gives it to Niclas. He looks pleased.

In this example, Anita once again made progress a desirable feature when she told Vanna to hurry so that she would not fall behind. Vilma, unlike Vanna, has grasped the importance of progress. The example shows Vilma to be focused on moving forward. She made a point of being fast, asking first Jovan, and then the entire group, “Am I fast?” She seemed to have grasped that it was important to be fast, and was the first student to get the blue notebook. By asking if she was fast, Vilma can be seen as calling attention to her progress. Vilma also managed to catch the attention of others when Niclas walked up to her. Vilma made sure to point out that she had made more progress than Niclas, and that this was an accomplishment since it was both exhausting and difficult. In this example, the use of future orientation in first grade was a way to become a competent school child: a real first grader. When Vilma pointed out her progress, she used orientation towards the future in order to become a competent first grader. Such a show of competence can be understood as a priming event, since the new context, the “after transition,” must be mastered and made sense of.

The children’s competing and comparisons were ways to relate to the message about progress given by the teachers. They can also be seen as ways for the children to gain control over the situation within the temporal order of school, where future plays an important part. Competition became their way to deal with and make sense of the temporal orientation towards the future. By comparing and competing with each other, children can be said to act in line with the teachers’ message, while making the temporal orientation something of their own, as well. Competing became an adaptation to the prevailing norms of collective progress.

Theme 3: In keeping with time

Time has been described as directed to the future. Although this feature of time was strong, it was not the only aspect of time that was important in the transition I studied. Along with the norm of progress, other—and to some extent contradictory—messages were conveyed. Example 4 shows other aspects of the temporal orientation in the transition to first grade: other ways to manage the temporal order of school. Although there was a norm of progress, there were other, conflicting ways to orient to and use time. When Pia corrected Vilma, she questioned the way in which Vilma made progress. Pia instructed Vilma both on a right way to do these kinds of tasks in school (“Whenever one reads or writes, you start on that side”) and on doing the work carefully, not just quickly. Her comment indicated that there was a specific way of progress that was desirable. Thus the concept of future interacted with other aspects when order was negotiated in the school context. Anita’s comment to Vanna made it visible that progress was expected at a specific rate. Her comment that Vanna risked falling behind gave a signal that there was an expected work rate, a normal work pace. Progress in itself was not enough; it should be progress in keeping with time. The children were expected to work at the right pace, in the right way, and at the right time; and individuals who deviated and did it “wrong” were told to work faster, slower, or more carefully.

Theme 4: Markings of time and change

The creation of transition also included a more concrete type of priming events. Through various activities such as graduation day, school visits, and markings of closure (“this is the last time...”) the passage of time was marked. In this way, an expected rate and pace for the overall transition process was created, since there were strong expectations of how transition should be done (Lago, 2014). By using different ways to mark that preschool class was coming to an end, an expectation of change and transition was created. In first grade, other
activities marked expectations of change. One such priming event was the introduction of new things, such as Anita’s introduction of the binder and the work with letters in example 3. These new things can be seen as marking changes in assignments, content, and expectations. The introduction of new things marked that first grade was something new and different. This was strengthened by introducing activities that were similar to activities in preschool class as new, or at least as something else. For example, letters were presented as something new, even though some of the children could already write. Similarly, math books were both presented by the teachers and received by the children as something new, despite the fact that the children had had similar books in preschool class. This marking of change can be understood as a consequence of markings of transition. When both a preschool class and a first grade exist, there is a need to understand them as different. If there were no difference between preschool class and first grade, there would be no need to separate them from each other.

Discussion and conclusions

This study shows how the concept of future was made an important part of the transition from preschool class to first grade. Analyses show that future was used in several different ways in the transition process. In preschool class, the future in first grade was made relevant both by children and teachers. Activities in preschool class were often motivated by what the children would do in first grade. By paying attention to future, the preschool class children were constructed as becomings, and becomings of a certain kind: first graders. Future continued to be an important aspect in first grade, as the children and teachers continued to orient towards the future. In the transition process, time was marked in different ways. In particular, analyses show that future was used, and change was expected to occur, in particular ways. These different ways to talk about and use future become a kind of priming event, since they put focus on difference, transition, and change between different school activities and contexts (e.g. Corsaro & Molinari, 2005). This priming event contributed to the creation of expectations of change in relation to the transition from preschool class to first grade. Future, in this way, is used to understand transition, but transition also strengthens the focus on future.

Through the use of ethnographic methods, my closeness to the situations allowed me to give thick descriptions of everyday life in school, and to show how children and teachers used future. This usage of future is important to an understanding of transition processes, and how they are used and given meaning. Transitions are an integral part of education systems, and provide conditions for the understanding of what school is. This study contributes to this understanding by showing how transitions can be done in a specific context. Analyses reveal how time was made an explicit part of transition. Theories of time were used to deepen the understanding of how future is used in everyday life in school.

This work presented here is a case study, and its limitation lies in the same aspect as its strength: My closeness to one particular class meant that other ways of using future to create meaning about transitions could not be taken into account. As a result, further studies on how future can be used in different ways in this kind of transition would be relevant. In addition, studies on how other aspects of time can be used to create meaning about transition could prove valuable.

Children and teachers seldom addressed the past, such as their prior experience of preschool class, in the same way as the future. In this way, the transition from preschool class to first grade was a transition in which the receiving end was made more important: the ‘after transition’ was more significant than the ‘before’. As a result, the construction of children as
becomings was strengthened. This knowledge is valuable in situations where different types of school are expected to collaborate regarding children’s learning and transitions.

References


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