

CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES OF CONTINUITY IN THE TRANSITION FROM KINDERGARTEN TO SCHOOL: THE POTENTIAL OF RELIANCE ON PICTURE BOOKS AS BOUNDARY OBJECTS

Hilde Dehnes Hogsnes
Buskerud and Vestfold University College

Abstract

This paper focuses on how children experience continuity in the transition from kindergarten to school. The study has a multi-methodological design and combines observation and communication with participatory tools. In this paper, one child's photos of a picture book and the subsequent dialogues and observations related to this book are discussed in light of the concept of boundary objects. This concept emerged during the analysis process and shows that recognisable objects in different settings might function as boundary objects and perform a bridging function during transitions. Children's experiences of continuity depend on their opportunities to find objects upon which they can act. Boundary objects, in the form of picture books, may help children actively participate in their own transitions. Therefore, to support children's experiences of continuity, teachers should be familiar with children's previous experience with picture books. A sensitive conversation with children is an appropriate way to identify these previous experiences.

Introduction

The purpose of this research is to shed light on how children experience continuity in the transition from kindergarten to school. Theoretically, this study builds on Dewey's concept of continuity of experience. The notion of boundary objects developed in cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) is also applied. This concept is important as it emphasises concrete activities in various pedagogical practices.

Cooperation and coherence between kindergartens¹ and schools are high-priority concerns both nationally and internationally (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2006). On a political level, kindergartens and schools, along with parents, are expected to contribute to children's sense of continuity (Ministry of Education and Research, 2006, 2011). Kindergartens and schools, however, originate from different traditions and have different mandates. The Framework Plan for the Content and Tasks of Kindergartens (Ministry of Education and Research, 2011) stipulates process goals for teachers' pedagogical work, while the Core Curriculum and Quality Framework (Ministry of Education and Research, 2006) sets standards of competency for different age levels. These two frameworks contribute to different expectations for how collaboration should take place, and counties within Norway have quite varied understandings of how to define and practice this collaboration (Østrem, S., Bjar, H., Føsker, L., Hogsnes, H. D., Jansen, T. T., Nordtømme, S., & Tholin, K. R., 2009). Cooperation and support of children's experience of continuity in this transition are important as they help children to use their previous experiences in a new setting (Dewey, 2005). However, it is challenging to establish cooperation between these different institutions. A lack of communication between kindergartens and schools seems to be an obstacle to developing bridging practices (Broström, 2009; Rambøll, 2010; Hogsnes & Moser, 2014).

¹ Educational institutions for all children from 1 to 5 years old are called 'kindergarten' in Norway.

Children are those expected to experience continuity (Ministry of Education and Research, 2011), so this study was aimed at examining the transition from their perspectives. To gain more knowledge of what factors are significant, children's voices (Clark, 2005) were included throughout the research. Thus, an analysis of children's experiences and views of the transition from kindergarten to school forms the core of this study. Including children's voices reflects their right to be heard on issues that affect them (United Nations, 1989) and acknowledges them as active participants in the research process (Clark, 2010b).

Theoretical foundations and previous research

According to Dewey (1974), all experiences are influenced by previous experiences. Thus, children's experiences in kindergarten and the home are important to their later experiences in school. Continuity of experience ensures that children have opportunities to use their previous experiences in their new environment in school. Discontinuity of experience might prevent children from finding common elements and reciprocal relationships between these two arenas (Dewey, 2005). The relationships between experiences in different arenas then can be as important as experiences within each setting (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Dewey, 2005).

According to Dewey (2005), experiences are social in nature, embedded in cultural practices and connected to both objects and the use of objects in different settings. During transitions, children attempt to find a balance between what is established and what is new. According to Broström (2009) and Fabian (2007), experiences are related to social, physical and philosophical conditions. When starting school, children encounter a new physical environment which provides new opportunities for friendships and activities but can also create insecurity (Dockett & Perry, 2007). The most challenging task appears to be supporting children's experience of philosophical continuity (Hogsnes, 2014; Hogsnes & Moser, 2014). In this contribution, philosophical continuity is understood as continuity in academic content and working methods.

Children can be seen both as boundary crossers who acquire traditions and practices from a new, unknown setting and as agents who affect the practices in the settings of which they are part. The competence to act in a new setting must be seen as contextualised as social situations are different (Hedegaard, 2007). Early, Pianta, Taylor and Cox (2001) show that teachers' competency is decisive for children's success in the transition from kindergarten to school. Teachers who are experienced and competent in transition processes can more flexibly create good transition practices. Instead of maintaining a one-sided focus on preparing children for school, it is important that schools prepare the environment and teachers to be welcoming to children (Early et al., 2001). Collaboration between institutions needs to take into account what children are bringing in the new setting (Einarsdóttir, 2013).

Boundary objects

In this study, the concept of boundary objects became central during the analysis as it explains how objects that exist in and between institutions can increase children's active participation in the construction of continuity. The term 'boundary objects' has its origins in Vygotsky's (1978) work and Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) (Star & Griesemer, 1989; Akkerman & Bakker, 2011). Although boundary objects are conceptual elements related primarily to CHAT (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011), objects also play a crucial role in Dewey's (1974, 2005) theory. Vygotsky (1978), along with Dewey (2005), emphasize that pedagogy must take into account children's interests and previous experiences. Attention is directed towards the objects, learning processes and teachers' organisation of educational activities.

Even if not contradictory, these theories present significant differences. Vygotsky (1978) criticises Dewey's representation of objects as tools children use to act in and change their environment. Vygotsky (1978) stresses that experiences with objects also affect children's psychological processes. Boundary objects function as both tools and signs. They help children act and master themselves in and across settings.

In this study, the concept of boundary objects is applied to identifying tools that can bridge children's transition from kindergarten to school. Fabian (2013) proposes that transitional objects, such as family photographs and toys carried in children's bags, might support their well-being as they enter school. Fabian (2013) also finds that what children bring into school is grounded in common experiences from kindergarten which can be seen as priming events, as described by Corsaro and Molinari (2000). These events involve activities in which children, by their very participation, prospectively attend to on-going or anticipated changes in their lives. Children's earlier experiences in the priming events of literacy activities in kindergarten are important in their adjustment to the participant structures of instruction in literacy activities in school (Corsaro & Molinari, 2000). Thus, experiences with objects, such as picture books, are linked to both social and philosophical conditions.

This study seeks to add to knowledge of the conditions necessary for continuity. Children's participation and interaction with others in a new environment depend on objects and forms of knowledge which dominate practices in institutions. Objects are embedded in the various cultures and traditions of kindergartens and schools, which encourage different behaviours by children who act with these objects within the given cultural limitations (Carr, 2013). Boundary objects might help bridge the transition as they are robust enough to maintain a common identity across cultures yet flexible enough to adapt to local conditions and constraints (Star & Griesemer, 1989). In the present study, a boundary object is understood as a concrete object, such as a specific picture book, in addition to conversations and play based on or related to the book.

Research question

The primary focus of the study is to gain knowledge about how children experience continuity and discontinuity in the transition from kindergarten to school and what factors are important for developing transition practices. During the analysis of the entire body of collected data, the following research question emerged:

How do picture books function as boundary objects that help children actively participate in the construction of continuity during the transition from kindergarten to school?

Children are critical contributors to knowledge acquisition about their experiences in transitions. Consequently, researchers have different methods to elicit children's voices. Participatory tools, such as children's drawings and photographs, have been employed as data for analysis and as supports to help children express their interests and experiences (Clark, 2005, 2010a; Einarsdóttir, 2011; Ackesjö, 2013). Much research on the transition to school has targeted parents, teachers and other adults, so there remains a need for research on children's perspectives (Margetts, 2013). The methodological approach was selected for this project as it enables including children as co-researchers (Clark, 2005, 2010a; Einarsdóttir, 2007a).

Design and methods

Children's perspectives were captured through conversations about photos they took in different settings in their everyday contexts. Meeting children in their everyday contexts in institutions reduces the undesirable effects of asymmetrical power relations (Clark, 2005;

Einarsdóttir, 2007b). The photos formed the basis for dialogue with the children in both focus groups and their everyday lives in different settings. Children actively participated by stating what they considered important, which was documented.

Children were asked to take pictures of what they liked the best and found especially exciting in kindergarten and in school. They were told initially and throughout the fieldwork that my purpose as a researcher was to learn from them. I invited them to show me what it was like to leave kindergarten and start school. Each child's photos were used to help the children tell about their experiences.

In this paper, the analysis of one child's photos, the subsequent dialogues, my observations as a researcher and data from one focus group form the empirical basis for discussing how children can experience continuity between kindergarten and school. The data presented were chosen to show how the multi-methodological design may help elicit children's perspectives. It also demonstrates that children's interactions with picture books at school are based on their earlier experiences with picture books in kindergarten.

Data collection and research participants

The fieldwork was conducted from April to September 2013 with 15 children from three kindergartens entering three different schools in a medium-sized municipality in Norway. The children took photos in their kindergartens in April and in their schools in May. A total of six focus groups were held in the kindergartens in May and the schools in September. The children volunteered to participate, and their parents consented to their participation. The children could choose not to participate at any point, and informed consent was obtained throughout the research process (Einarsdóttir, 2007a, 2007b). The photo-taking and dialogues took place on the children's own terms, requiring a high degree of flexibility.

The photos served as stimulus material for further reflection in spontaneous, informal dialogues and focus groups (Wibeck, 2011). The conversations in the focus groups began in an unstructured way and became progressively more structured and focused as the questions that arose were returned to the children for further elaboration and reflection. The informal conversations and observations that occurred in interactions in different settings during the transition were recorded in field notes.

Data analysis

The field notes were divided into distinct interaction sequences during the analysis. Following Corsaro (1985, p. 24), an interactive sequence began when one or several children attempted to participate with others in an activity. The episode ended when the children left the interaction. The data include 426 interaction sequences, 621 photographs taken by the children and 119 pages of transcribed conversations about the pictures with the children.

The analytical process was performed continual. The multi-methodological approach allowed the children and I to explore and enjoy dialogues in which we puzzled about and shared meaning (Carr, Clarkin-Phillips, Beer, Thomas, & Waitai, 2012). Data analysis consisted of open, axial, selective and focused coding (Charmaz, 2006; Postholm, 2010). In open coding, phenomena are labelled and categorised, and significant patterns in the data identified. In this phase, I noted 'interest in picture books' and 'delight in encountering a familiar picture book'. In axial coding, phenomena are specified within a context. In this phase, I noted 'the book's contribution to the continuity of friendship and joint activities in the classroom' and 'active participation in the construction of continuity in content and working methods'. Also important was focused coding, or researchers' encounters with specific events that provide

opportunities to view previous data in a new light (Charmaz, 2006). These ‘a-ha experiences’ help drive the project forward (Charmaz, 2006). Going back and forth through the dataset in focused coding confirmed the children’s experiences and raised the concept of boundary objects. The children’s experiences were organised in one main category: the importance of *boundary objects for experiencing continuity in relations and academic content and working methods*.

Findings and discussion

In the context of this study, several boundary objects emerged in children’s pictures, dialogues and observations of their actions in the different settings. These objects were primarily related to friendship, such as relationships with playmates. Second, boundary objects were related to play and outside activities, as expressed in children’s pictures, actions and talk about climbing frames and elements from nature (Hogsnes, 2014). Third, boundary objects were related to literature. In this paper, a particular picture book stands as a boundary object, and the term is used to analyse one child’s involvement with this book in the different contexts of the kindergarten and the school. Thus, the core boundary object in this contribution is a picture book and a child’s experiences with it. These experiences are analysed and discussed from the perspective of Dewey’s (1974) theory of the continuity of experience and the concept of boundary objects (Star & Griesemer, 1989; Akkerman & Bakker, 2011). I show how one special event contributed to the focused coding in this study. The picture book in the study represents the common interests of children (Dewey, 2005), so data from all the participating children’s experiences with picture books form the basis of a discussion of how picture books might help children actively participate in the construction of continuity during the transition from kindergarten to school.

First, by presenting one vignette from the data, I demonstrate how the different data collection methods contributed to the analysis. Vignettes can be used as illustrative narratives that describe events and convey the basis for analysis in a coherent language (Grbich, 2007).

I start by presenting data collected from 6-year-old Thorvald during his first visit to school.

The children take photographs in the classroom. Thorvald and Martin take photographs of the blackboard, chalk and a world map. After some minutes, Thorvald finds a picture book on the shelf. ‘Oh’, he says, ‘we have this book in the kindergarten. I’ve really got to take a picture of this’. ‘Oh, yes’, Martin says, ‘let me see’. Thorvald puts the book on a desk and takes a photograph of the cover. He moves to let Martin do the same thing. Thorvald opens the picture book. While describing what the first page says, Thorvald takes a photograph. Martin does the same. This continues until Thorvald and Martin have taken photographs of all the pages and retold the whole story of The Very Hungry Caterpillar. (Interaction sequence 39)



Figure 1

Six of Thorvald’s 22 photographs from the book.

Later the same day:

While we are out playing in the school yard, Thorvald wants to comment on his photographs. We find a bench. Thorvald scrolls through the photographs. When he reaches the images of the book, he jumps up and down on the bench. 'Oh, it was so great that I got these photographs from this book'. (Interaction sequence 41)

Three days later, we hold the focus group in the kindergarten, and I see a photograph (Figure 2) I do not recognise.



Figure 2

One of Thorvald's photographs of the Very Hungry caterpillar

'I don't know what this is', I say. 'I think that it is part of the book', Thorvald replies. I say, 'Oh, yes, you have taken a terrific photograph of this book. Do you remember what you did? Do you remember how you retold the whole story'? Thorvald ignores my question and asks, 'But where is the caterpillar'? He is silent for a long time. Thorvald scrolls through the images of the book. I ask him, 'Do you like this book?' 'Yes', Thorvald replies. 'We have this book in kindergarten. We have this book!' He continues to scroll through the photographs and comments along the way, 'Oops! Oops! Oops, a pie! One more pie! And now he has got a stomach ache'. (Transcription, 17.06. 2013)

Two weeks later, in kindergarten:

Thorvald tells me that they have some new toys. I ask if he would like to show them to me. He nods as he hurries ahead of me into the playroom. He takes a game off of the shelf, a game called The Very Hungry Caterpillar. He tells me that he and his mom bought this game for the kindergarten as a present. He has 'played this game many times already, maybe six times'. Thorvald says that the book is no longer available for them. It is only available for the 3-year-olds. He thinks that 'the school starters should have their own'. (Interaction sequence 247)

Three months later in the classroom:

Thorvald and his classmates are divided into groups and look in books selected by the teacher. The children are told to be quiet or to whisper during the session. I look for The Very Hungry Caterpillar and realise it is missing from the classroom. (Field notes; 05.09. 2013)

In the focus group in kindergarten, Thorvald ignores my questions. His interest seems to lie in the content of the book, not that he can retell the whole story or photographed all of its pages. According to Dewey (1974), desire is one of the most important motivations for action. Thorvald's desires seem to focus on a special interest in the content of the story of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, and his reunion with this familiar picture book motivates him to take an active role in different settings: in kindergarten and his leisure time with his mother. This tendency can be seen as an illustration of how picture books, as boundary objects, can perform a bridging function (Star & Griesemer, 1989; Akkerman & Bakker, 2011). Thorvald activates elements of his experiences from one arena in another and in his relationships with others. By doing so, he is not only influenced by systems but also influences the systems of

which he is part (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Dewey, 1974, 2005; Vygotsky, 1978). This relationship shows how a boundary object can serve as a resource for active participation in different settings. Thorvald's activities can be understood in light of his desire to connect with school. He grasped the familiar in a new, strange setting. The familiar book helped him act as a co-constructor of continuity in the transition from kindergarten to school. In late June, he seems disappointed that the picture book is no longer available to the kindergarten children. After Thorvald has started school, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* seems to be missing from the kindergarten room.

Picture books as boundary objects of common interest for children

According to Dewey (2005), pedagogical practices should utilise common and reciprocal interests. In this study, these interests are represented by picture books which, as boundary objects, can be seen as sources including the forms of knowledge that dominate practices in institutions. All the children who participated in the study had experiences with book projects in kindergarten. During one book project which lasted several weeks, the children and kindergarten teachers made sets as frames for a dramatic play based on the books' content. The dramatic play led to a theatrical performance for children's families in the spring. When children in this kindergarten photographed the things they liked the most, they took photographs of these sets.

Children's experiences with literacy activities in kindergarten can be understood based on Corsaro and Molinari's (2000) finding that children's earlier experiences with literacy activities in kindergarten are important to ensure continuity in transition. Corsaro and Molinari (2000) demonstrate a pattern of art and prose in the different education systems. While art is placed in the foreground in the kindergarten room, prose is placed in the foreground in the school classroom. However, art is retained in school as a supportive working method (Corsaro & Molinari, 2000). Broström (2013) points to the need for more aesthetic border play during the transition. When children are active participants in play, such as games or aesthetic activities with friends, they influence both their environment and themselves (Broström, in press). Solstad (2015) shows that play based on picture books helps children empathise and transition between real and fictional spheres. These capacities indicate children's literary competence. The use of past experiences in play and books helps empower children (Solstad, 2015). Enabling children to do so requires a mindful, observant teacher who can support children (Dewey, 2005). A central point is that, during this border play, the teacher takes on an active role and challenges the children to create new meanings and understandings.

According to Dewey (1974), thoughtful preparation by teachers is necessary if children are to experience continuity. Acknowledging what the children bring *into* the new setting (Einarsdóttir, 2013; Fabian, 2013) requires awareness of what children have experienced in their play and activities with objects, such as picture books, in kindergarten. As boundary objects, picture books can support further communication, cooperation and local adaptation (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011). In this study, children's collective experiences of picture books can be seen as priming events (Corsaro & Molinari, 2000) that provide the basis for the construction of practices which help bridge gaps between the two institutions. For example, the play- and classrooms in the two settings could be organised and activities prepared based on the content of one familiar book. Teachers could support children to bring their experiences in by designing classrooms for games and aesthetic border play. With active support from teachers, children's kindergarten book projects could be continued in schools.

Developing collaboration in which children are active participants is challenging (Hogsnes & Moser, 2014). At present, communication between institutions in Norway involves establishing procedures for the transition and transmission of information about individual children (Østrem et al., 2009). However, such concepts as boundary objects represent a different kind of focus. The creation and management of boundary objects are seen as key components of developing and maintaining continuity across social worlds (Star & Griesemer, 1989). The concept recognises that different groups of people in varied settings differently understand objects, such as books. Cooperative reflection on the nature of boundary objects could create necessary disruption, challenge habits and contribute to new knowledge for professionals in these institutions (Dewey, 2005). Dialogues about boundary objects can contribute to the development of bridging practices (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011).

Conclusion

Dialogue with children around boundary objects allows their voices to be heard during transitions (Clark, 2005). In this study, the photos taken by children became boundary objects, and the documentation made it possible for the children to weave together knowledge and meaning-making across contexts (Carr, 2013). The photographs and subsequent dialogues helped ensure that children's perspectives became visible and audible. Thus, the photographs served to reveal children's interests and contributed to dialogue, reflection and adjustments during the course of the study. The flexibility of this approach also promotes the inclusion of children's voices in research (Clark, 2005; Einarsdóttir, 2007a).

The analysis shows that, as boundary objects, picture books can help children actively participate in the construction of continuity. Through actions, children show the relationship between their experiences in different arenas and how these can be as important as experiences that happen within each setting. The analysis confirms that children's earlier experiences with literacy activities in kindergarten are important in their adjustment to the participant structures of literacy in school (Corsaro & Molinari, 2000). Thorvald's activity can be understood as an attempt to find a balance between what is established and what is new (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Dewey, 2005). These findings reveal that children can act as agents who affect the literacy practices in the settings of which they are a part.

Kindergartens and schools have different traditions and mandates but, nevertheless, a common responsibility to support children and ensure that they experience continuity during transitions. The analysis confirms that the communities involved in this transition need to enter dialogue (Star & Griesemer, 1989; Dewey, 2005). Schools should acknowledge and incorporate children's earlier experiences with literacy, while kindergarten teachers should decide what kinds of literacy activities children will encounter when they enter school. Kindergarten teachers need to give children opportunities to familiarise themselves with the new pedagogical environment and find boundary objects upon which they can act. The analysis presented here shows that teachers in both institutions have not sufficiently acknowledged the potential of picture books as boundary objects. This lack emphasises the importance of dialogue with children. Dialogue about boundary objects, such as picture books, can ensure that children's voices are heard during their transitions and can contribute to the development of better bridging practices.

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Correspondence about this paper should be addressed to:

Hilde Dehnes Hogsnes
Buskerud and Vestfold University College
Hilde.D.Hogsnes@hbv.no