

TRANSITION FROM KINDERGARTEN TO SCHOOL IN ESTONIA

Kerstin Kööp, Tallinn University

Introduction

Transition to school is an important time in the life of a child and his/her family. Ideally the transition from kindergarten to school should take place without any difficulties. Smooth transition is very important for a child's future physical, emotional and intellectual development. However in Estonia, admission exams to the first grade are becoming more common hence the parents wish to give their children as good a preparation as possible. As a result children end up in both the kindergarten and a preschool class. As the admission exams mostly assess the intellectual aspects of school readiness, then also the parents emphasise those. They might not even be aware, that school readiness isn't merely the learning of the necessary knowledge (intellectual school readiness), but also certain movement skills (physical school readiness) and communication skills (social school readiness).

In Estonia, children start school at the age of seven. Children eligible to start school have reached the age of seven by the 1st October of the current year and children who have reached the age of six by the 30th April of the current year may be admitted upon a parent's request. In accordance with the Regulation of the Government 2008, National Curriculum for Pre-school Child Care Institutions, local governments must create the possibilities for getting an education for all children living in their administrative territory and to support the parents in directing the development of preschool children that should guarantee a smooth and problem free transition to school. However, in real life the transition from kindergarten to school does not take place that easily. Often the elite schools have set requirements exceeding those set by the national curriculum for seven year olds. Thus the school demands more than the kindergarten's curriculum provides. As a result of this, parents are demanding kindergartens to provide a more thorough preparation for school even though the national curriculum does not obligate the kindergartens to do so.

In Estonia, preparation for school and promotion of children's learning abilities is a part of preschool education before entering formal schooling. The availability of preschool education for all children has not yet been regulated at the state level although there is a well established network of kindergartens in the country (Hytönen, 2006). In Estonia, very often a so-called 'double system' exists, where a child, who receives preschool education at the kindergarten, also joins a preschool group at school. The reason for this is the fact that the most popular schools in Tallinn and Tartu, the two largest cities in the country, have school entry trials and many parents want to prepare their children as well as possible to achieve high grades (Kööp, 2006). Actually, kindergarten attendance should be sufficient for entering school and the preparatory classes at school should be made available for children who do not attend kindergarten (Hytönen *et al.*, 2003).

According to Talts (2003) the expectations of parents and schools often force kindergarten teachers to drill children's skills in reading and calculating, instead of offering them positive learning experiences and forming learning skills more naturally, which would help children cope better on successive education levels. Many parents value structured, routine and formal activities in teaching children in order to provide the child with continuity when starting school, but at the same time they do not think what it means for the child's learning (Peters, 2000).

Parent's understanding of school readiness

My research was focused on the child's transition from kindergarten to school and especially on the parent's perception of this. The reasons for conducting this research consist of concerns about the high targets set for children entering the first grade; parents' expectations of children to obtain academic skills like reading, writing and mathematics skills; and parents' focus on evaluating the intellectual aspects of school readiness. The goal of this research was to determine parents' understanding of the meaning of school readiness, parents' judgement on the quality of the kindergarten's school preparation work and how much and why children participated in school preparation classes besides attending kindergarten.

Parents having children in preschool groups in 16 kindergartens in Tallinn, the capital of Estonia, and parents having children in the first grade in 8 schools in Tallinn participated in

the completion of a questionnaire. Parents of children attending the final year in kindergarten, as well as parents of children attending first grade at school, were studied in order to obtain more objective results and to find possible differences between the answers of parents having kindergarten children or having school children. Altogether 386 questionnaires were taken into account when analysing the results.

First, the parents got the chance to say what the essence of kindergarten was in their understanding and what they think about kindergartens' care. The answers of parents with kindergarten children, as well as of parents with school children, showed that a kindergarten was more a place where children were looked after, where a parent could leave his/her child while working and where a child could communicate with other children (297 parents). The answers of parents with kindergarten children showed that the parents highly valued a child's development according to his/her age in kindergarten. However, obtaining school readiness from kindergartens was left in the background by parents.

Secondly, the parents were given an opportunity to value kindergartens' work in preparing children for school. The preparation for school in kindergartens was highly valued, with almost 80% of all parents evaluating it as either good or very good. Parents with kindergarten children valued it higher. School children's parents justified their opinion with comments such as, in kindergarten there were not enough working materials and they did not provide school-like lessons. This might arise from the fact that the parents of school children already know what might be lacking in kindergartens and what else should have been taught to children before they started school. Bitterness of parents if their child did not successfully pass the entry trials for a chosen school might also play an important role here in influencing parents' perspectives.

Parents' understanding of the meaning of school readiness

When talking about school readiness, both groups of parents emphasised the indicators of intellectual aspects – the skills of reading, writing and calculating. Physical and social aspects remained in the background. The sociality of school readiness, or rather the lack of it, was noticed more by parents of school children who could already see how their child actually coped in school. Regardless of this, sociality was not emphasised; rather, it was seen only as an addition to school readiness. There was an open space in the

questionnaire for parents to document their understanding of the meaning of school readiness. All the answers were counted, separated and analysed. As can be seen from the answers, the ability to read, write and do mathematics were mentioned by an overwhelming majority of 236 parents. Also social competence (n=86), child's independence (n=68) and child's ability to concentrate (n=39) were mentioned.

When all parents' answers were put together it showed that only 6% of parents mentioned the intellectual, social and physical aspects of school readiness together. Most parents mentioned only intellectual or intellectual and social part of school readiness as it was important for the parents that children went to school with optimum preparation for academic work.

Children participating in preschool groups in addition to kindergarten

It was found that 188 (48.7%) of the respondents' children were participating in preschool groups outside kindergartens. Reasons given for placing a child in a preschool in addition to kindergarten included:

- The child gets acquainted with school life and his/her future school mates;
- The child acquires knowledge necessary for school;
- The child obtains a better preparation for school;
- The child learns to read and write;
- Preparation in kindergarten is not enough;
- In order to get one's child into a certain school, the child has to have attended the preschool of the same school;
- The child gets to learn such things in preschool that are not taught in kindergartens: English language, computer skills, aesthetics;
- The child personally wanted to go to preschool.

Conclusion

The results of this study show that the parents' assessment of the work of kindergartens in preparing children for school was good, but year by year, more and more parents placed their children in preschool groups in addition to kindergarten. The parents' understanding of school readiness favours academic knowledge that is required of children in entry trials

when starting first grade. Even after starting school, parents found that they should have taught their children more skills in reading, writing and calculating. According to the results, it can be said that the parents emphasised the intellectual part of school readiness, they evaluated the kindergarten's school preparation work as good but they also valued children's participation in school preparation classes in addition to attending kindergarten.

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