Transitions in School Life – Teachers' Experiences of Pupil's Middle-of-the-school-year Transitions

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Abstract

Studies on school transition usually focus on transition to school or between school levels. However due to migration, children change school also in the middle of a school year. This kind of transition does not concern the whole generation but represents a unique phase of life to children facing it. Transition requires plenty of preparations and extra attention. In this study, teachers' perceptions were researched through a phenomenologic-hermeneutic approach. Seven Finnish teachers were interviewed. Based on the results, the teacher's role was discussed and the transition process from the teacher's point of view was introduced. The study contributed new information about school transition in the middle of the school year and teachers' perceptions on their role in grouping and preparing the transition.
Key words: school transition, teacher, grouping, pupil, ecological transition.

Introduction

Finland is a northern-European country with about 5.5 million people. In Finland, internal migration is becoming more and more common. According to the Official Statistics of Finland, internal migration had increased by 40,000 migrants between 2001 and 2011, and at the moment about 281,500 people move inside Finland's borders. The number is likely to increase because of for example increasing numbers of divorces and lay-offs. All these happenings affect children's lives too. As families migrate, children have to change school and often these changes take place in the middle of the school year.

Migration changes everything in children's lives: the environment, friends, roles, and even their identities. Sometimes, the reason for moving to a new place is a difficult one which increases stress in children too. While children are occupied with normal questions such as what the new home place or school will be like, the most important one must be whether they will be accepted in their new peer group (Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003; Wentzel, 1998). The latter question is not any obviousness because the classroom has already grouped and pupils have

found their own roles in the classroom (Lou et al., 1996). Not all pupils have necessary skills for socializing with the group and therefore teachers have to pay attention to numerous things as they welcome the new pupil.

Mostly studies on school transition focus on transition to school or between school levels (see e.g., Piippo-Näätänen, Uusiautti, & Määttä, 2012). Kagan and Neuman (1998) use the definition of transition to refer to the continuity of experiences that children have between periods and between spheres of their lives. Children who experience school transition have to enter a new setting that is always different from previous settings (Conn-Powers, Ross-Allen, & Holburn 1990; Magnuson et al. 2004; Magnuson & Waldfogel 2005). This also includes adaptation of new social roles (Entwisle & Alexander, 1998). During transition, certain child groups need special attention, for example, children from economically disadvantaged families or children with handicaps or special needs (Forest et al., 2004; Fox et al., 2002; Kemp & Carter, 2004). Anderson et al. (2000) summon up the difficulty of school transition: "Simply stated, school transitions interrupt the continuity of life" (p. 326).

The purpose of this study was to research school transition taking place in the middle of the school year and grouping from the teacher's point of view. Two theoretical perspectives were selected as the background of the study: grouping and ecological transfer. Therefore, the focus is on social aspects in transition (see also Hardy, Bukowski, & Sippola, 2002).

Grouping

A group is much more than a random group of people that happens to be in the same place at the same time (Pennington, 2005). Kenneth Bordens and Irwin Horowitz (2000) define a group as follows: "An aggregate of individuals who interact with and influence one another" (p. 318). In addition, certain phases can be found in the forming of a group. Tuckman (1965) distinguished five phases: (1) forming, during which the members familiarize with each other and group work; (2) storming, during which the goal, role, and ways of action become clarified to the members of the group; (3) norming, that results from successful passing of the storming phase; (4) performing, which means the actual starting of group work and doing; and (5) adjouring, which is the phase of achieving the goal of the group.

Classrooms have formal and informal groups. Becoming a member of a peer group is important to a child (Harris 2000) as they learn social skills from each other and through working in a group. According to Christina Salmivalli (1998), one of the important tasks of a peer group is also to develop a healthy self-image.

The teacher can help grouping in the classroom by being the group leader and a safe adult to his or her pupils. Indeed, the teacher's task at the beginning of the school year is to create such an atmosphere to the classroom that everyone becomes noticed and respected. This has a beneficial influence on pupils and their self-image, but also it lays a foundation to successful grouping (Baker, 2006; Korpinen, 1996). In all, the teacher's role seems to be merely the enabler of grouping in which pupils form peer groups voluntarily.

Ecological Transition

As mentioned in the introduction, research on school transitions mostly has focused on various transition phases between school levels. In addition, researchers have been interested in factors affecting school success during these transitions (see also Karikoski, 2008; Galton, Gray, & Ruddock, 1999). These transitions concern the majority of people as basically everyone attending school face these transition phases.

In this study, the focus is on a smaller group. Pupils who change school alone, transfer from their old school to the new one in the middle of the school year. This phenomenon is little studied and thus information about the practices related to it is greatly needed. The transition is different in nature because the pupil faces the phase alone, and enters the new social environment alone.

In this study, transition is viewed based on Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model which represents transfer as an ecological transition. Ecological transition does not mean just physical dislocation but also covers every other changes in social environment occurring due to the transition. In addition to physical environment, a human being's role changes in various transitions during the life span. The transition to one role to another is always a very personal experience and therefore, each transition is different to different people. Later on, Bronfenbrenner included the dimension of time to his model: the course of time affects environment although the physical environment and people who belong to the microlevel remained the same. This means that an individual people's characteristics are molded by the interaction of these three things: the ecological environment, interaction, and getting older all affect the individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Transition can also be viewed through the turning points of transition. Victor Turner (1977) molded a theory of the phases of transition that are disengaging oneself from the old role, the turning point of the transition, and finally, engaging oneself to the new role – these phases represent also the phases of changing school in the middle of school year.

Bronfenner's theory has been popular when designing research on transition. Earlier school transition has been studied based on this theory among others by Akos and Galassi (2004), Crockett, Graber, Ebata, Petersen, and Schulenberg (1989), and Anderson et al. (2000). However, these studies has focused on transitions from one school level to another, in other words transitions concerning the whole age group. Felner, Ginter, and Primavera's (1982) research compared the school success of pupils who had gone through these normative school transitions with pupils who had faced many other school transitions too, for example because of multiple moves. The results showed that numerous non-normative school transitions were connected with weaker school success and increased absenteeism especially in girls.

The research phenomenon in this study was therefore non-normative. However, the interest was instead of school success in teachers' experiences on transitions, their understandings of a

successful grouping, and the methods they had found suitable for smoothing a new pupil's adjusting to the new school environment.

Method

The purpose of the research was to study teachers' perceptions and experiences of transition and grouping when a new pupil comes to their classroom in the middle of the school year. The main research question set for the research was as follows: What kinds of experiences had teachers had regarding new pupils' transitions to school in the middle of the school year? This research question was studied through the following sub-questions:

(1) How does the teacher prepare herself or himself with the pupil's transition?
(2) How can the pupil's transition be supported during the turning point of the transition phase according to the teacher's perceptions?
(3) What factors enhance successful transition according to the teacher's perceptions?
(4) What factors hinder successful transition according to the teacher's perceptions?

The research data were obtained by interviewing seven teachers located across Finland. Some of the interviewees were found by sending to four Finnish schools a letter asking teachers to participate in the study. Some were found by using the so-called snowball effect, in other words finding them through contacts and other's recommendations. Teachers were 25–63 years old (one man and six women). Their work experience as a teacher varied from a few years to almost a 40-year-long career. Five of them worked as classroom teachers, one was a small group teacher, and one was a retired classroom teachers. They were selected for the research because they were known to have personal experiences on the research phenomenon. Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous.

Teachers were interviewed with the theme interview method because flexibility in the content and course of interviews were regarded as beneficial for collecting this type of data concerning personal experiences. Each participant was interviewed with the same outline but the interviewee had the opportunity to change the sequence of themes discussed in the interview or ask about issues that are brought up in interviews.

The themes used as the basis of interviews also functioned as the basis of data analysis. Therefore, the results are also introduced in this order. In addition to the phases of the transition, the research participants were asked about problems related to transitions. When analyzing the data, similarities and differences between participants' experiences and perceptions were paid attention to.

The study represented phenomenologic-hermeutic approach (Dilthey, 1976; Giorgi, 1994) because its purpose was to study teachers' experiences of transition and grouping. Reduction which is crucial part of phenomenology means that interview questions and analyses are designed so that they do not lead the interviewee according to the researcher's preconceptions of the theme. The interviews were designed to explore teachers' perceptions and meanings

given to them: how the pupil had adjusted in the classroom and how important the teacher's role was in this process according to the teacher's perceptions.

Results

Time before the Transition

Teachers reported that preparation for the transition was considered important for the overall success of the transition. What the preparation work meant in practice was cooperation and contact between the old and the new school and with parents. Especially a meeting before the transition was considered important for example for planning necessary support and getting to know the pupil's hobbies and points of interests so that the teacher could think through already beforehand who could be suitable peer-tutor for the new pupil.

"You do not know the child and that is a sort of problem because you cannot read the child as well as the other children. And therefore, meeting the parents is extremely important. - - The parents act as the interpreters of the child's emotions. - - Sometimes, you become surprised when finding out that this is how the child thinks about these things!"

"They visited here already in the spring. They had that teacher from the old school with them, too, and they took a tour at school and I had a little powwow with this teacher to exchange information. We agreed that we can call and be in contact."

A major factor making the transition easier or more difficult is the class who will have the new pupil and what the attitude toward the newcomer is among the pupils in the classroom. Teachers interviewed in this research had discussions with their classes in which they tried to empathize the new pupil's situation. For example, they would discuss what the new pupil might think and what the pupils themselves might think if they were in the same situation of going somewhere they do not know anyone. Moreover, they discussed how they would like to be welcomed to the classroom.

The Turning Point in Transition

From the teacher's point of view, the turning point in transition is when the pupil physically changes the school and the time when he or she is still considered a new pupil instead of one among others. Teachers were asked to describe a new pupil's first days at school and elaborate their own role during this sensitive period.

The first school days were tried to maintain very normal although different kinds of games to familiarize with each other and tour in the school facilities do take some time from regular teaching. Teachers thought that they should not make too a big number of the newcomer so that the pupil would be feel uncomfortable for too much attention. This would also accentuate the fact that he or she is really new and not part of the group. Teachers in this study had chosen

one or two peers who were supposed to show the school building and take care of the new pupil during dining or breaks.

"Of course, the first lesson goes by letting the new pupil tell about himself of herself and classmates tell about themselves. And then we do something together and often I suggest a game - - and I always try to have a teaching moment soon so that the new pupil sees how we work here"

"A couple of peers, and then we decide beforehand where the newcomer will sit, and I try to foresee if I know something about the new pupil that who could be suitable tutor for his or her personality or temperament, for example to support the newcomer. And then we familiarize with the house and peers can show the toilets…"

The turning point was interesting from the point of view of analyzing the teacher's role as a group leader. The interviewees' opinions differed considerably: while some teachers considered themselves as enablers or background factors who provide the new pupil with a chance to select his or her company, other teachers regarded their role as bigger than that. These teachers would, for example, use teamwork to boost the new pupil's grouping. Whether a teacher's approach was visible or more invisible, the teacher is never passive: in all cases, teachers observe the situation and the pupil and intervene in and help if necessary. Transition is always pupil-specific and therefore teachers have to select their approach according to the situation.

"The teacher as a sort of observer and then intervenes if necessary but does not impose it all the time and remind the pupils like 'hey, let's not remember him/ her' because the new pupil can feel nervous if his or her position is overly highlighted"

"I think that you have to do the grouping. First you have to have those social groups that you have determined because the children can already have established the relationships at the day care and therefore you have to use your power in this grouping. "

Time after Transition

After the transition, teachers evaluated whether the process had been successful or should they direct more efforts in grouping. The teachers seemed to pay attention to issues that helped them to conclude whether the new pupil had found his or her place in the group. The teachers reported that they observed situations in which grouping or the selection of pairs were not controlled. Dining and breaks are these kinds of situations. In addition, the teachers told that they considered earning the pupil's trust important. For a successful transition it is necessary that the pupil feels that he or she can share even the unpleasant things with the teacher.

"-- I observe the child and how the others take him or her with them and with whom he or she spends time during breaks. - - and when we are doing teamwork or in pairs, how the pupil get

along with the group and I don't have to find a pair for him or her and the pupil is not the last one without a pair."

"-- basically, a pupil has adjusted no later than when he or she has the courage to tell that something has happened, something unpleasant, I mean. If something bothers or if he or she talks a little about his or her worries and personal matters."

The interviewees were also asked to estimate how long adjustment usually takes. All teachers reported that this was case sensitive. The estimations varied from a couple of weeks to a month, and after a couple of months, the teachers would be worried if the pupil did not show signs of or willingness to adjust or get friends. The teachers listed factors that enhance fast adjustment the most important ones being the new pupil's personality (open, social, brave), the teacher's preparations, and the teacher's and pupils' positive attitude to the new pupils.

Problems in Transition

The teachers also mentioned problems. However, they were difficult to place in some particular phase of transition. Several issues did not depend on the teacher and they thought that it was sometimes impossible for them to do anything regarding these problems. Three teachers mentioned transitions that took place at short notice which means that the teacher does not have time for contacting for example the pupil's previous school or preparing the class mates. Likewise, three interviewees mentioned that it was difficult to get information: because of the professional secrecy, the teacher does not always get all the necessary information about the pupil which would help the teacher in preparing the transition. Sometimes the background can be quite wretched, and even parents do not always tell about these issues.

The social relationships in the classroom can become a problem too. The newcomer can find it hard to make friends in the classroom if there are very close and tight friendships and small groups. It is also possible that the new pupil takes someone's place in the classroom and then, this pupil has to be paid special attention. According to the interviewees, boys seemed to welcome new friends more openly than girls. Girls tend to hold on to their best friend.

"-- When a new pupil comes to the group, all the relationships in the group become redefined. So, it is not just that one pupil who comes in but every new member mixes the group cohesion and re-organizing the group requires time and space and a chance - - I usually observe and watch how it goes and which groups are likely to fall apart and which will be restructured. Who will be friends with whom?"

"-- Our school has less girls than boys and if our classroom has had two girls and if a third girl was coming, it would mess it up totally. It has its own systems of how to get that third girl in."

In the worst case, an unsuccessful transition can lead to a years-long bullying. One of the interviewees reported that the new pupils was being bullied because of the jealousy for the

teachers. A teacher has the difficult task in helping the new pupil to adjust but not making it too a big deal. The teacher's good intentions can turn against the new pupil:

"-- Jealousy is a problem of which I have quite a hard experience. - - even if parents and the head teacher were involved, there were those few strong girls who started to push that new pupil and it continued for a couple years until they went to middle school."

Conclusion

The results of this research are illustrated in Figure 1. The teacher's perceptions of transition in the middle of the school year were divided by phases of the transition. The whole process can lead to either a successful or unsuccessful adjustment.
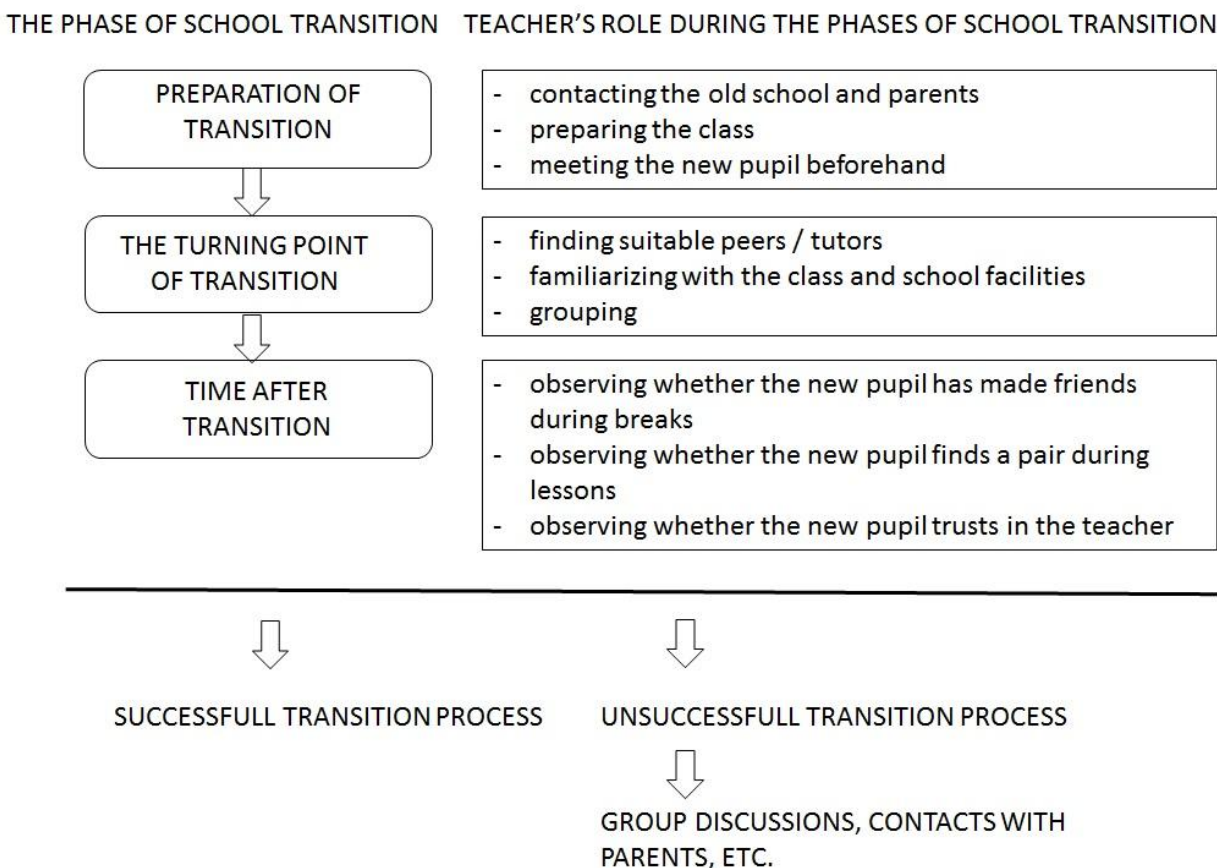

Figure 1. The school transition process from the teacher's point of view

The teachers emphasized especially two features in transition: preparation and case-sensitivity. Preparation means that the teacher has time and resources to prepare the new pupil's transition and also prepare the class for this to make the transition easier. This idea is also supported by Crockett et al.'s (1989) study on transitions during early adulthood in which preparations and social support during the transition and its critical turning point were significant factors. The teachers also emphasized that each pupil is a case and therefore each

transition are case-sensitive. Indeed, a professional teacher considers pupils as individuals (e.g., Määttä & Uusiautti, 2011; Uusiautti & Määttä, 2013a).

The teachers considered their role the most important in the phase of preparing the transition. Naturally, the teachers participated in transition and grouping in latter phases too but the teacher's role was regarded as more imperceptible because they wanted to transfer the responsibility for grouping to the pupils of the classroom. This is because friendships will arouse more naturally and easier if the teacher does not intervene in by guiding and selecting pairs. Staying in the background lets the teacher also observe situations and find out whether the new pupil finds a pair without outsiders' help.

The results of this study imply that the teachers considered social relationships more important that academic success at school in the transition phase. None of the interviewees mentioned how the transition affects pupils' scores, and in general, subject-specific issues were not emphasized at all. The teachers found it more important that the new pupil will enjoy himself or herself at the new school and trust in the teacher. In addition, the feeling of being accepted in the group was considered crucial.

Discussion

The teacher's role in school transitions is salient when considered from the point of view of socializing in peer groups. The teacher's preparations can be crucial as they can prevent exclusion of the new pupil. Often, this kind of indirect bullying can be easily hidden from the teacher and last for long time. Although the new pupil was accepted as a new member of the classroom, the informally established peer groups may not always welcome new members (Pörhölä, 2007). From teachers' point of view, adjustment means ability to work in groups without relying on the teacher (see also Ladd & Price, 1987).

When it comes to pupils, it has been shown that that preparedness and support were the key factors in transitions from one school level to another (Anderson et al., 2000). Preparedness refers to a pupil's readiness to move to the next level in school. In addition to these features, social skills make one of the key issues in transition. McIntyre, Blacher, and Baker (2006) discovered that fostering early social skills in children with special needs may be an important target for increasing the positive adaptation to school (see also Bowman, 1994). Not surprisingly, children themselves have reported that having friends at school is the most important thing (Dockett & Perry, 2003).

When analyzed from the perspective of ecological morel of transition, "links among child, home, school, peer, and neighborhood factors create a dynamic network of relationships that influence children's transition" (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000, p. 492)—and this also concerns transition from school to another within the same school level. The old and new relationships can either support or challenge children's adjustment in new school.

In this study, the purpose was to highlight the teacher's role in transition. The teacher can show with his or her behavior and attitude that new pupils are a good thing and that everyone is welcome to the classroom. Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, and Cox's (2000) findings regarding transition to kindergarten showed that more attention should be paid on aligning children's competencies, their home environments, and teachers' expectations, but the most importantly teachers need to see children as individuals who have special school experiences, cultural values, and skills. Teacher can practice emotional and social skills with the class in these situations, too (cf. Peltokorpi & Määttä, 2011). Teaching of emotional skills should also be included in teacher training (see also Uusiautti & Määttä, 2013b) so that teachers would be prepared to confront pupils in various situations of life.

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