

Transition to School in Views of Adults and Children

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The process of adaptation is understood as a dynamic process of change occurring in the person's behaviour, emotions and environment.

The process of adaptation involves two mechanisms:

- **the mechanism of accommodation** – adjustment to the requirements and conditions of the environment;
- **the mechanism of assimilation** – adjustment of the environment to the person's individual requirements.

It seems that the Czech system of education does not favour the latter mechanism since all of the discussion concerning children's transition to compulsory school is based on the question to which extent the child is ready for school.

Pedagogical-psychological practice seems to be restricted to terms such as "school maturity" and "readiness for school". The question to which extent school is ready to welcome the child is rarely asked.

Research questions

- (1) What are the problems accompanying the adaptation of children leaving kindergartens to primary school education?
- (2) What efforts are made in the Czech Republic to facilitate the adaptation of children leaving kindergartens to primary school?

Research in two waves:

- the first one was based on expert interviews with all **adults** (potentially) involved in the process
- the second one was based on various methods (group interviews, individual interviews and analysis of children's drawings) with **preschool children** and **first graders**

(1) Views of Adults

Kindergarten teachers and primary school teachers:

Overall experience on both sides is positive rather than negative; none of the participating parties sees any fundamental problems. It is evident that kindergarten teachers are considerably more engaged in the matter than 1st grade teachers. Another significant fact is that kindergarten teachers are the ones that think more specifically about what they can do to help more. Primary school teachers tend to resort to general or formal phrases removed from reality. However, it is necessary to acknowledge that one of the fundamental missions of a kindergarten is to prepare the child for starting school. The mission of schools is not to follow the children's personal histories, but to help them complete compulsory education. At least that is how the conditions of the educational system are set up.

After all, not even the pedagogical and psychological theory is clear about this point: Should children enter school as a “clean slate”, or with the label of a potentially problematic child?

Principals of kindergartens and primary schools

The principals of both institutions point out the same things as the teachers in a somewhat more sophisticated manner. It may be noted that the experience of kindergarten principals in this area is not very positive, or at least they don't mention much positive experience. On the other hand, primary school principals have practically no experience. This is probably due to what was mentioned in the previous section and the different role of both institutions. What is a priority for one is only a long list of tasks for the other and vice versa.

Inspectors of kindergartens and primary schools

One note is worth mentioning. A kindergarten inspector of used it when speaking about teachers in primary schools who, in her opinion, are not willing to acknowledge the increasing variability of family models and higher number of children finding themselves to be “outsiders”, just because they come from socially and culturally different families: *“Who does not want to, seeks reasons, who wants to, seeks ways.”*

One of the kindergarten inspectors says she has no doubt that there are a lot of problems related to the transition of a child to school. And that she could do much were she entitled to monitor the work at the kindergarten and primary school and make comparisons. However, this would have to be set out as a topic for inspection, which has not been the case yet.

In principle, this statement is the same as those of inspectors of primary schools: they too can do nothing but record the situation because otherwise they would exceed the powers entrusted to them.

Representatives of founders – chairpersons and vice-chairpersons of communities and municipal districts

It seems that the sentence “When no one complains, I believe everything works fine” captures the prevailing opinion of school founders well. These educational matters are to be attended to by schools while the founders are in charge of the economic operation of the school.

The chairpersons are interested in the school at the moment when there is the risk that not enough children will turn up for the enrolment and the school will end up with unused capacity. The competition for pupils may then manifest in various manners.

Pedagogical/Psychological Consultancy

Approach of the pedagogical/psychological expert is fully professional:

I do what is my job description. In addition, she is involved only in popularizing the issue in schools and among parents (through articles in school papers).

Parents of children from kindergartens and primary schools

Usually, parents' experience with transition of the child to primary school is good. Expectation of something new with no great fear prevails. Nevertheless, it depends much on the type of school the parents chose, because not every school fits every child. In this respect, children from larger towns and cities enjoy an advantage since the parents may choose school to fit their child's needs.

It is obvious that parents try to acquire information about school in various manners in advance: they monitor the school's website and inquire with their friends and older children who already attend the school, etc. They agree that the most important thing is the personality of the teacher in the 1st grade, and therefore they would like to know her in advance. They take note of the various activities offered by the school and would like to take part in them, but most of all they are aware that they should not frighten their children with the school. Assumedly they can remember that from their childhood.

(2) View of children

Children mostly look forward to school. They look forward to learning, to playing during breaks, to their teacher, to friends. Only exceptionally they regret they will not be able to attend the kindergarten anymore where children may play. Instead, school is waiting for them where they will have to learn. Evidence of fear or apprehension in children was recorded only in really exceptional cases. These were several children whose school attendance was deferred for overall immaturity and for whom it was difficult to mix with other people.

Children most often look forward to learning and even homework: *"I look forward to school because I will learn how to read, write, I will make new friends, I will have a schoolbag, write on a big blackboard, I look forward to homework, grades and that I will attend the school with my friends from the kindergarten."*

What would the children have needed to feel good at school for the first weeks? What could be done in other way to make the situation easier for them?

The children are clear about this: presence of their mother or father, a friend, if they knew what was in store for them, piano, have dogs or other furry toy animals, live animals in the class (they often have some in the kindergarten), play all day long, take toys with them to school, sit next to a friend, be only three hours at school, have longer breaks, get less homework and have more time to play, having more fun at school so that the children laugh.

Feelings of isolation were recorded repeatedly: "I felt alone", "I wanted my mum", but also the need for understanding at school: "I needed the teacher to be nice to me", "that the teacher explained everything to us".

Conclusions: What we have learned?

- There is, indeed, cooperation between parents and schools, but it cannot be said that it is based on partnership as outlined by the General Curricula for Preschool Education. This is a signal that it is not the forms of cooperation, but understanding the essence of this kind of cooperation that poses a problem.
- The so-far cooperation has been extensive and formal, i.e. focusing e.g. on getting to know the primary-school environment or the material requirements placed on parents in association with the school entry of their child. Intensive cooperation at the level of content is missing.
- Parents should be made involved in different programmes and projects pursued by the school; cooperation with parents should be part of the process of meeting the goals set by the General Curricula for Preschool Education; parents should not be educated, but consulted and joint solutions should be sought; parents should be seen as partners of the school.

- The cooperation of kindergartens with parents should also include primary-school teachers so that all the people involved may get acquainted with primary school curricula and the content and extent of compulsory education, conditions etc.
- More activity on the part of first-grade teachers is needed as their experience may help kindergarten teachers focus on problems occurring in association with school entry.
- A trend towards merging kindergartens and primary schools into a single legal and administrative unit has recently emerged. The act of administrative fusion has, nevertheless, not improved the quality of cooperation much. Quite on the contrary: The Czech School Inspection Board reported deterioration of work results in most of these kindergartens in its report from 2 to 3 years ago when this integration was very widespread.

- The opinion of the kindergarten on the child's school entry is not considered a requirement while it should be regarded as most important. A recommendation of the child's kindergarten should be required for school enrolment. Many primary school principals do not act very responsibly as far as school enrolment is concerned for each child enrolled brings a certain sum of money (that the child cannot articulate, lisps, is not mature enough socially etc. is not so important to them). The cooperation with the pedagogical and psychological counselling centres should be improved in this respect too.
- More intensive cooperation between kindergartens and primary school teachers is needed so that both parties can appreciate how demanding the work of their counterpart is and do not underestimate it (there is especially a tendency to underestimate the work of teachers in kindergartens).

- Some primary schools have preparatory classes, but not much information on their cooperation with kindergartens and parents is available.
- The whole problem can be reduced by good cooperation with parents when the same habits and demands as those of the kindergarten are required in the family, too – or vice versa?
- The role of the family in the period of the child's adaptation to school (not only in children with postponed compulsory school attendance) is primary, under all circumstances – and cooperation with parents should reflect this.

- What is also important is further education of teachers, which should prepare them to be able to provide good counselling services for parents (while not replacing the relevant specialists).
- The differences between urban and rural areas are not regarded as fundamental. The difference is that parents in small municipalities usually cannot choose a primary school for their child in reality, but have to accept the local one. On the other hand, cooperation between the kindergarten and primary school is usually closer there.
- There are no big differences in comparison with other countries involved in the project (Greece, Ireland, Poland, Slovakia)