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TRANSITIONS – TIMES OF RECONSTRUCTIONS

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Abstract

This article reports children's perspectives of the transitions from preschool to compulsory school via the preschool class. The study indicates that children's ways of defining themselves, and the ways in which they mark borders between different school forms, change over time. In this process, time and place are crucial. The study highlights how Swedish children make two school starts as they enter the preschool class and then school. Each of these events demands energy in reconstructing identities and understandings of the new school forms.

The preschool class – a borderland between preschool and school

The issue of children's transition from preschool to school and the cooperation between these different school settings has been a recurring issue on both national (National Agency for Education, 2001; Agency for School Improvement, 2006) and international political agendas (OECD, 2006). Discussions are often based on perceptions that children's transitions are problematic, and therefore must be handled carefully. For this reason, discussions also focus on building bridges and softening the transitions between different school settings, with the overall aim being to simplify transitions for children (Ecclestone, 2009). International research shows that the way children make transitions between different school settings not only affects their start to school, but also has the potential to influence their future academic outcomes (Fabian, 2002; Bulkley & Fabian, 2006; White & Sharp, 2007). However, few studies explore the notions of 'soft' or 'hard' and problematize risks or opportunities with various transition experiences. Above all, there is a lack of national research that takes as its empirical basis the children's experiences of transitions. Thus, it is important to gain knowledge not only about the ambitions expressed in policy documents but also how children describe and experience transitions early in the Swedish school system.

In Sweden the preschool class is a voluntary school year for six-year-old children, and is designed to act as a bridge between preschool and school. The purpose of the preschool class is to relate to the surrounding institutions – preschool and school – and the pedagogies of these institutions in order to 'smooth' children's transitions between them. In the present study, three children are followed – Elsa, Nick and Michael – in their wanderings across institutional borders; from the end of the preschool period, throughout the year in preschool class and up to their entry in the first year in compulsory school.

A few Swedish studies (Fast, 2007; Skoog, 2012; Sandberg, 2012) focus on children's encounters with school as they make the transition from the Swedish preschool class to the first year of compulsory schooling. The studies provide consistent evidence of discontinuity between the preschool class and grade 1, as teachers in the different settings share little common understanding of the different settings and expectations. As a result, children's prior knowledge is often not recognized and it is difficult to create continuity between the school settings.

Several international studies address children's transition from preschool to school. Research shows, for example, that this transition requires children to change their identities; to be a 'school child' is not the same as being a 'preschool child' (Fabian, 2007; Niesel & Griebel, 2007). Other studies explore dilemmas and opportunities afforded by transition from the perspectives of children, parents and teachers. Children – and adults – have expectations about appropriate behavior and ways of acting at school. When these expectations are different, or unclear, dilemmas can result for children (Dockett & Perry, 2007; Fabian, 2007).

Other dilemmas for children relate to understanding the complexity of the school environment, and with greater numbers of children and fewer adults, managing different interactions. Fabian (2002) also argues that children's changing status can create confusion. When children start school, they soon realize that they are among the smallest and the youngest in the school.

The transition from preschool to school involves adaptation (Fabian, 2002). Children must adjust to the school's culture. Some children find it difficult while others adapt quickly. A range of research continues to indicate that starting school is not a positive experience for some children who worry about the new environment, new friends and the new conditions (Reichmann, 2011; Ackesjö & Persson, 2013). For these children, every day brings new challenges. Efforts to promote continuity are based on avoiding, or at least minimalizing, some of the dilemmas faced by children.

Theoretical framework: Identities and borders - two sides of the same coin

The study reported in this paper assumes a socio-cultural perspective on transitions, which emphasizes changes in participation in different contexts (Rogoff, 2003). A starting point for the study is that children both mark, construct and maintain borders both through speech and action. By this, they also construct identities.

It is assumed that identities are constructed through lived experience and the experiences of belonging (Wenger, 2000), or through lack of experience of belonging. Our agency and membership constitutes an important part of our sense and perception of identity, in the same way as the place is an important part of our sense of identity (Entrikin, 1991). Hence, children's transitions can be described by studying how children construct borders and identities; for example by their comparisons between different arenas or by how they act in different ways at different places. Of interest for this study is how children give the preschool class, and the borders that surround it, meaning in relation to preschool and compulsory education, and also how children interpret and give meaning to themselves in the different settings, and in relation to other children in other settings. Identities based on these theoretical descriptions focus on how individuals give themselves meaning in relation to a place where they compare themselves with *Others*. In other words, in relation to the *Others*, I can also determine who I am (Taylor, 1995).

The border concept can have negative connotations because it may suggest difficulties in gaining access. Indeed, borders can create divisions and lead to separations and fragmentation. But borders can also be a place for meetings between perspectives and new opportunities (Wenger, 2000). Tuomi-Green, Engeström and Young (2007) argue that border crossing, such as transitions, involves an encounter with something new; going into a new territory and facing something unfamiliar. Border markings refer to processes used by individuals to identify themselves with certain groups. Border markings imply that a sense of *We* is clarified, differentiated from *Others* (Newman, 2006). In line with this reasoning, the borders children construct between settings also contribute to the maintenance and reproduction of both borders and identities.

Hence, there seems to be a close relationship between borders, identity constructions and actions; constructions of identities and constructions of borders are intertwined (Newman & Paasi, 1998). Both involve understandings of how individuals relate to *Others*. Identification is then about individuals defining themselves, usually within a group with similar characteristics, or in contrast to other groups 'across the border' who do not share these characteristics. In line with such a theoretical perspective, borders become symbolic markers or manifestations of a cultural, social or political practice. Giving meaning to something

involves establishing borders to something beyond the borders. For this study, this implies that the identities and borders are two sides of the same coin; borders both construct identities and are constructed by identities.

Method

The purpose of the study was to gain understanding of children's transitions early in the school system, with particular attention to the meanings ascribed by children to these transitions and their actions in managing them. The study explored how the borders between school settings are marked and challenged by the children and how children are constructing (new) identities in transitions.

This study was an ethnographic longitudinal study. The empirical fieldwork extended over 18 months and was conducted in three different school settings (preschool, preschool class and compulsory school). The strength of longitudinal studies comes from studying the same activities and individuals over time, providing opportunities for comparison (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2005). Ethnographic methodology involves trying to understand the meaning individuals construct when interpreting and acting in their environment. Participants' images of the world are described and represented; it is their definitions and interpretations of situations that are in focus (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). In relation to the purpose of the study, it was important to be present in children's everyday lives in all the three different school settings, for an extended period of time. The longitudinal approach has offered the possibility to switch between empirical data and theory, to develop, test and reject conclusions and allow analyses to be revised and influenced by the new empirical data.

Different methods were used in different school forms. Participant observation was used to follow and understand the children's institutional everyday lives. Everyday activities such as circle time, children's free play, teaching situations, conversations, and activities outside in the different school forms were filmed and photographed, and when filming was not possible, a Mp3 recorder was used to record conversations. In addition to participant observation, formal conversations were conducted to explore specific issues and informal conversations occurred daily throughout the data collection. The children were also invited to paint pictures about the preschool class. The various methods allowed flexibility in the field work, and also gave the children opportunities to choose to participate in the study in different ways and in different situations based on their own interests and abilities.

The study used the concept of children's perspective when children beliefs and experiences are described (Sommer, Pramling Samuelsson & Hundeide, 2010). This reflects the aim of placing the children's descriptions and experiences in the foreground. An ethical issue in studies involving children is how to approach the child's perspective, and involve children in research in a respectful manner (Johansson, 2011). Using video observations requires considerable time to record and analyze video records, it also requires the researcher to be reflexive, particularly in relation to ethical issues. Since I participated in the children's everyday lives for an extended period of time, they became accustomed to having both me and the camcorder around. On many occasions children invited me to both video and photograph their activities. But on some occasions, some children asked not to film them. Being flexible and respectful of the children's wishes in these situations was important. One strategy in these situations was to use an Mp3 recorder rather than a camcorder. In one of the three school settings, one of the teachers expressed strong resistance to the camcorder. In this setting only the Mp3 recorder was used to record conversations. These were accompanied by field notes to ensure rich data were still collected.

The analyses are based on audio and video recordings that were transcribed, read and re-read several times. The results reported have been selected to highlight and describe the children's markings of borders and constructions of identities in transitions to and from different school forms. The analyzing process has been descriptive, interpretive and analytical. In the analysis, comparisons between empirical examples that have been constructed at different times and in different school forms have also been made, to gain knowledge about how children's experiences varied over time and in relation to the different arenas.

To gain access to the children's meanings and interpretations of the transitions, 16 days were spent in two groups with five-year old children during the last months in the preschool, 24 days during the school year in the preschool class *The Sea*, and 6 days during the first two months of the autumn semester in class 1B. Each observation day time lasted 2-3 hours. Of the 20 children who attended the two preschool groups when the study commenced, only three children – Elsa, Nick and Michael – made all transitions together. This study focuses on these three children. While this may limit the generalizability of the conclusions, it also could provide a base from which to address the current lack of knowledge in this area.

Results: Three children's transitions to and from preschool class

Children's identity and border construction are reported under the following emergent themes: *expectations, resistance, distance, affiliation and adaptation*. These expressions varied according to time and place. For this reason, the results are described as a story in chronological order.

Positive expectations for preschool class

At the end of the spring semester in preschool, the children were invited to three orientation visits to the preschool class. The aim of these visits was for children to familiarize themselves with the school buildings and meet future teachers and future classmates. Prior to these visits, I talked to the children about the preschool class, asking what the thought is was going to be like, what they thought, they would have to do, and what they thought the preschool class would look like. Both preschool groups worked with me to construct a mind map titled 'Our expectations on the preschool class'. The children were also invited to draw pictures about what they thought the preschool classroom would look like. In conversations, the children expressed feelings of longing, fear, shyness and excitement. Several of the children thought that it would be fun to 'start school' - even if the preschool class is not officially school - but they also expressed certain concerns about new groups of children and having to make new friends in the class.

Most of the children had *expectations* of the preschool class as (a form of) school. Many of the children also expressed almost enchantment mingled with fear, about meeting higher requirements, such as to reading and writing. In their stories, they highlighted beliefs about the preschool class, which can be interpreted as positive expectations of the 'new'. The children also reported expectations that the preschool class would be a 'school like' arena.

A few days later, the children made their first orientation visit to the preschool class. During this visit, and in conversations with the teachers, the children enhanced their 'school-like' expectations of the preschool class:

110510 Observations

When the children enter the preschool classroom the teachers Sue and Stephan gather them in a circle on the floor. The teachers first make a call to see which

children are present. Then Sue asks the children about what they think they will do in the preschool class. Elsa quickly raises her hand:

We are going to learn math and to read and to count!

Many of the children suggest similar expectations on learning (new) school-related skills. Michael describes similar expectations:

You get to learn stuff... learn letters... and to write.

Perhaps as a counterweight to children's school-like expectations Sue asks:

Do you think you get to play anything here in the preschool class?

The children become uncertain and they look at each other. Some of the children discuss with each other, and eventually enough Elsa raises her hand and says:

Yes, outside on recess.

Sue confirms Elsa's proposal but adds also that they also will get to play a lot inside the classroom in the preschool class.

Elsa and Michael marked the border between preschool and the preschool class by emphasizing the expected differences that seem to be based in their beliefs about the preschool class as 'something else' than preschool. It seems that these children identified themselves as *prospective schoolchildren*, as they emphasized school-like activities that marked the border between preschool and the preschool class. They indicated beliefs about the preschool class as a place of work and learning new skills. The border between preschool and the preschool class was also marked by notions of limited time for play. For example, Elsa suspected that they will work more and play less in the preschool class.

Resistance and distance based on previous expectations

In the autumn, the children started in the preschool class, the Sea. Elsa soon began to mark her *resistance* to the preschool class education. This resistance was most clearly manifested in her responses to 'the letter of the week', in which a new letter of the alphabet was introduced each Tuesday. After the teacher's introduction, the children worked with several different activities where they were supposed to recognize letters, identify letters in alphabetic order, write and shape letters, sound out and read easy words:

110823 Observation

The children are working with the letter A. One of the activities is to color a stencil with a lowercase and an uppercase A. The picture of a monkey ['apa' in Swedish] is also supposed to be colored. Elsa, who has been silent and absorbed by her coloring of the monkey, suddenly puts down the pen and expresses her opposition to the task:

Why does this feel like preschool?

Because it almost is like preschool? Stephan responds, as if he wants to highlight that the differences between preschool and preschool class are not that large.

Why? Elsa asks.

Yes, why? This is school, isn't it? a boy asks.

Did you do stuff like this with letters and numbers even in preschool? the teacher Stephan asks.

Yeeeah!.. several of the children bursts out at the same time.

This is school... Isn't it? The same boy as before repeats, as if he is confused about how to interpret the activity.

Does any of you know how to read? Stephan asks, ignoring the boy's question.

Yes, I can! Several of the children answer at the same time, and want to show that they can read.

110825 Observation and conversation

A few days later Elsa is sitting and painting at a table in the classroom. I sit down next to her and begin to paint with her. We are talking about the coloring of the character sheet, and I ask Elsa what she hopes to learn during the year in preschool class:

Little more than such things!

Did you work with 'the letter of the week' even in preschool? I ask.

No, but we practiced letters very much, Elsa says and turns to her teacher Sue who has joined us at the table.

Next time, she says and refers to the work with 'the letter of the week', *those who want easy, you can give easy [assignments]. And those who want a little more difficult, you can give a little more difficult [assignments].*

Elsa here indicates that the teachers should be able to offer activities at various levels of difficulty depending on children's interest and prior knowledge.

111018 Conversation

Elsa's questioning of the work with 'The letter of the week' continues during the autumn, and a few months later she expresses a similar resistance:

But... it just gets easier and easier every time ... However, some [children] want the activities to be very easy. But I do not care about that. I want the activities to be difficult ... a little more difficult. We are just supposed to paint and then paint more ... What is it that's difficult with painting? It's just to do like this ... Elsa shows what she means by pretending to paint in the air with a pen in her hand.

Elsa seems to question why they should work with coloring character sheets when they are in school. She seems to want to emphasize that she is *a former preschool child*. She extended this when she said, "Why does this feel like preschool?" It is possible that Elsa based her opposition on previous expectations of contextual differences between the activities in preschool and in the preschool class. One interpretation of Elsa's resistance to the 'preschool like' activities in the preschool class may be that she, after the transition to preschool class, strives to *distance* herself from preschool. Elsa may already have identified herself as a prospective schoolchild, based on the notions of the preschool class as a 'school like' arena with 'difficult' activities. Her resistance may partly also seem to stem from experiences of repeating activities they have already worked with in preschool.

Affiliation in preschool class and negative expectations for the first school year

In addition to expectations, resistance and distance, the children also started to show *affiliation* and belonging to the preschool class in different ways during the academic year. Before the transition to the preschool class several of them marked a clear border, where the preschool class was described as a part of compulsory school. After the transition, and with the newfound experience of attending preschool class for one semester, Elsa and Michael indicated that there is also a border between the preschool class and compulsory school. By marking a 'new' border the preschool class is delimited to be 'something else'; something that differs from the rest of school.

Elsa and Michael imagine that playing is going to be limited to recess and the leisure time center (which provides outside-school-hours care) at the start of school. Unlike earlier expressed and positively interpreted expectations at the start of the preschool class, their expectations of the start in first grade seem to be more negatively charged:

120424 Conversation and field notes

It is going to be hard work all the time...Except on recess and at lunch break... and at the leisure time centre, Elsa tells me. Michael agrees:

Yes, here [in preschool class] we get to play but there [in first grade] we aren't allowed to play. There, we only are supposed to write. It's really boring, Michel says.

There are no toys in the classroom!, Elsa comments. Boring, boring, boring...she says.

Elsa's statement is surprising, since she has previously expressed a desire for school related tasks. I asked if there was anything in particular that she thinks will be boring in school:

But I also want to play...Elsa says. It is going to be fun to get to read and do math and such. But it won't be fun not being allowed to play! Elsa enhances.

These comments suggest that Elsa and Michael regard the preschool class as 'something else' than the compulsory school. Their expressed opposition to the compulsory school's 'boredom' and 'absence from play' affirmed their affiliation with the preschool class and themselves as *playful preschool class children*. Play is highlighted as central to these border markings. One interpretation of the children's expressions is that they now consider the preschool class as a playful transition zone, free of constraints and school like work and full of play, something that Elsa now seems to appreciate in contrast to her earlier experiences. The start of compulsory education seems to be accompanied by negatively charged expectations of 'hard' work.

Adaption in first grade

The children's *adaptation* to new contexts was even more evident as they started first grade. During the first week in compulsory school, the teacher Anneli introduced the work 'The letter of the week':

120827 Observation

Now we are going to work with the letter O. How does an O look like? And where is its position in the alphabet? The teacher Anneli asks and points at pictures of the alphabet hanging on the wall in the classroom.

- *At the snake!* one child responses. [in Swedish snake is called 'orm']
- *At the snake, quite right, says Anneli. And how does the O look like?*
- *Circular*, the same child answers.
- *Quite right, a circular letter. And you write it like this. Anneli show how to write the letter on the white board. You start here at the top, and then you write it like this...Circular... All the way to the bottom and up again. You start here, Anneli says and points at the top of the O.*
- *Do you know any words with O?* Anneli wonders.

The children propose several words containing O. Anneli writes all the words on the white board at the same time as the children sound out the words.

After this introduction, the children start to work individually and in groups with different activities in a certain order, such as writing the letter O in the air and in sand, writing the letter O in long rows on a paper, and painting lowercase and uppercase O with watercolors on newsprint.

120827 Conversation

During recess, I asked Elsa about the work in the classroom:

Are these activities with 'The letter of the week' better then in preschool class? I ask.

Yes, this is better! But it is fairly easy... I did expect more difficult activities... and a bit more fun... Or, not funnier but more difficult, Elsa replies.

While it is evident that the children start over with the same type of 'letter training' that they have already done in the preschool class, this does not seem to worry Elsa. The resistance she showed towards 'the letter of the week' in the preschool class does not recur in first grade, despite many of the activities being the same or similar to those in the preschool class. Elsa's involvement and participation in the work with 'the letter of the week' in first grade seems changed; in the context of school she does not question what they are doing or why. During recess, Elsa indicated that she had expected more difficult and more enjoyable tasks in school. Despite this, she carried out the tasks in the classroom with accuracy and in silence.

This example indicates that Elsa adapted to the prevailing culture and structure in the first grade, and that she was acting in accordance with her interpretations of the school as an arena for work. After a few weeks in the first grade, I talked to Nick, Elsa and Michael about school. In the conversation, Michael and Nick described what had been difficult and new at the start of compulsory education. It is revealed that the start in school required some kind of adaptation of them:

120917 Conversation

I was a little nervous the first time, when we walked into the classroom the day we started here... I have now learned to be quiet. But it is a bit difficult... And the homework, that is new, Michael tells me.

Yes, to bring home homework and to bring them back to school, Nick fills in.

Yes, and to come in from recess in time, that's new. Because before they [the preschool class teachers] always told us when to go in after recess.

But now, we have to come in from recess in time by ourselves, Michael says.

Michael and Nick indicated the requirement for personal responsibility at school, as they were responsible for being quiet, completing their homework and bringing their homework back to school. Michael also described that time and the controlling clock were new aspects to take into consideration. In the preschool class, they relied on adults to help them with new routines. This responsibility fell to the children themselves after starting first grade.

In Elsa, Nick and Michael's stories, pictures of *the aligned and responsible pupils* are constructed. Elsa's adjustment to school work indicated that she had become an *aligned pupil*, who acted in line with what she believed was desirable or expected in a classroom context. Nick and Michael indicated that adaptation marked clear borders between the preschool class and compulsory education.

Discussion: Children's expression of identity and border constructions and their changes over time and in relation to place

In Sweden, children enter into two new contexts, and exit from two old contexts in the transitions to and from the preschool class. These entries and exits require that children re-orient themselves. In different ways, children create expectations and beliefs about what is to come. The results of this study support the view that children's identity constructions are embedded in their understandings of the various contexts. Further, the results suggest that children's ways of defining themselves and their markings of borders change over time, depending on the arena they are in.

Children's identity constructions and their border markings related to their *expectations* and hopes for the 'new'. Prior to the first visit to the preschool class, children gave the impression that they had begun to construct identities as *prospective schoolchildren*. Their border markings between preschool and the preschool class were based on expected differences between the arenas, and on perceptions of the preschool class as something more like school than preschool. The children interpreted the 'new' compared it with the 'old' and, in doing so, they also marked symbolic borders between the different school forms as suggested by Newman and Paasi (1998). Another example of border markings is the *resistance* and *distancing* expressed by the children. The study indicates that the children, after the entry into preschool class, were striving to construct themselves as *former preschoolers*. As an example Elsa expressed, in her opposition to working with 'the letter of the week', that she no longer accepted 'preschool activities' because she now has changed settings. One interpretation is that children strive to distance themselves from the 'old' that they have left. It seems that the settings in which children are located predominates in terms of the child's identity constructions. The results suggest, similar to Ackesjö (2013), that it is important for children to break away from the arena they have previously left. By looking at themselves in relation to other arenas, children seem to be able to understand themselves right here and now.

The results also indicate that children's identity and border markings change over time. Elsa's clearly expressed resistance to work with 'the letter of the week' disappeared during the spring semester in the preschool class. This could mean that Elsa, with the help of time, adapted to the arena, to the offerings she faced and to the cultural settings of the preschool class. A further example of changes in children's markings of borders and identities over time is seen in their expectations of 'the new'. As children approach the transition to compulsory school, their expectations of the new school form are not as positive as in the transition to the preschool class. This was seen in Michael and Elsa's expectations that school would be 'boring', and how they used play to mark the border to compulsory education. Less play and

more work, which in the earlier transition seemed to be perceived as positive, was regarded negatively in relation to the next transition.

Adaption to the activities occurred after the transition to compulsory education. Neither Michael nor Nick questioned the structure and control in first grade, and one interpretation is that at this point, the children regarded themselves as *responsible* and *aligned pupils*. These identities seemed to be constructed as the children now identified themselves as something other than preschool or preschool class children. For example, in their stories of how time was handled in school, and their own responsibility of homework, the boys highlighted their own responsibility and teachers' different approaches as a border between settings.

It is interesting to note that depending upon time and place, the children seemed to mark the borders surrounding the preschool class in different ways. Before the transition to the preschool class, the children placed a distinct border between preschool (as an arena for play and freedom) and the preschool class (as a school like arena where the play was banished to recess). In doing so, the preschool class was placed in the same framework as the compulsory school. Before the transition from the preschool class to grade 1, the children placed a new distinct border between the preschool class (as a playful arena) and school (as a place for work). This suggests that the border markings are not stable but change depending on both time and place, and the experiences children create and carry with them.

Conclusion: Transitions are times of reconstructions

Transitions between school settings can be considered as critical events for children. Softening or simplifying the transitions, and reducing the difficulties experienced, is one of the main thrusts of current focus on educational transitions. The results of this study indicate that transitions can be experienced as difficult for children, particularly in terms of interpreting new contexts. The results also indicate that children are active agents in their own transitions as they mark borders and adapt to the new arenas. Understanding how children interpret, reinterpret and understand the different social contexts, as well as how they mark borders and construct identities, may help us to understand children's transition processes.

Initially, the children did oppose themselves to the 'preschool like' activities in preschool class. They seem to struggle in their interpretations of this setting. Some of the children's difficulties in the interpretation of the preschool class could be explained by recognizing that children in the Swedish school system seem to start school twice; first when they start in the preschool class and second when they start in the first grade. The phenomenon of double school starts is discussed by Sandberg (2012), who argues that the preschool class both facilitates and dampens the start of compulsory school for the children. The results of this study suggest the opposite. The preschool class does not seem to have any 'softening' function for the children in this study. Rather, the children seem to exert a lot of effort and energy to deconstruct old, and construct new, identities both before and after each transition, regardless of the school form.

This study has shown that in each transition, the children distanced themselves from the setting they were about to leave, and regrouped their relationships and communities to adapt to the new. The children needed to interpret and reinterpret the different arenas in order to make sense of them, and to understand the culture and conditions. Thus, the results suggest that children must re-start the transition process at each transition to a new school form. In this process, the preschool class does not seem stand out as a school form that is more 'softer' than any other. However, the continuity between these school forms ought to be further problematized.

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