Different Voices during Transition to School

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DIFFERENT VOICES DURING THE TRANSITION TO SCHOOL

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The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that every child has the right to be consulted and heard on matters that affect them. The transition to school represents a 'matter' that requires a child's point of view. Up to this moment their participation has mostly been based on set of tests that position them as objects of assessment. The aim of this paper is to investigate the similarities in perception of the child and the transition process among all stakeholders during transition. Interviews were conducted with preschool and elementary school teachers as well as with parents and children attending the local ECEC center. As expected, the answers differed and the research opened other numerous questions and educational needs in Croatian educational system. Conclusion was made that understanding and respecting diversity is necessary for communication, as well as for striving towards shared goals and a ready school model.

Key words: child participation, interview, transition process, shared goals, starting school

1 Introduction

Childhood in terms of democracy and citizenship is as important as any other period in life. It is a period of life with its own culture, values, rights, perspectives and should thus be viewed with respect and appreciation. However, the transition to school is focused more on children's academic achievement and knowledge and less (if at all) on their prior and current experience as learners. Their participation in the transition process is based mostly on set of tests that position them as object of assessment. In the Croatian educational system educators are using assessments of children's physical and psychological state before the children are enrolled in schools.

Assessment is conducted by arbitrary use of non-standardized tests. That sort of testing would not be so problematic if there was a clear methodology and child centered purpose behind it. At this moment, assessment is used mostly for the placement of children in different classes so that every class has approximately the same distribution of the children's abilities. Assessment is also used to identify high risk children (special needs children) who are placed under a three-month observation period starting on their first day of school. Testing children's abilities in that manner (absence of adequate tools, arbitrary interpretation of results, absence of consensus on definition of readiness and its connection with future school outcomes), literature shows (Meisels, 2005), is not a useful tool for predicting or enhancing children's academic outcomes. It only shows the child in a binary way as either ready or unready for school. The idea of contesting traditional perception of readiness is not even being considered. Roggof (2003) states that, in order to fully understand the learning process, one has to change one's perspective of the child as an object of assessment. As Dahlberg and Lenz Taguchi (1994) also stated, the child needs to be seen as an active cultural constructor of knowledge and identity during the transition process. Only assessing the child has no purpose for his development, but if it is used in collaboration *with* the child and its environment to *understand* the learning process and to provide necessary support (seen through the socio-constructivist paradigm), it becomes a powerful tool for further development. Traditionally, the assessment prior to starting school is directed towards children's shortcomings and limitations so that the adult can help the child to 'fill the gaps'. But authentic children's nature is focused on their capabilities, accomplishments and experiences. In order to appreciate the child as a whole, the educational system has to concentrate on that. For example, using the children's prior experience to co-construct the curriculum should be the main idea of starting school assessment. It should not be perceived as a starting point, but rather a continuity of children's experiences. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990) states that every child has the right to be consulted and heard on matters that affect them. It should be clear that this does not imply a child-centered educational

system through a pedocentristic, but rather socio-constructivist pedagogical paradigm. Since mutual understanding and sharing similar views contribute to successful transition process, it is interesting to see how different adult stakeholders see and understand the child and the transition process (ECEC and CSE educators, parents). The understanding and respecting of diversity as a necessary communication aspect has to be part of the foundation of striving towards shared goals. Since tackling diversity while finding similarities is a challenging task, educators need to be well prepared, motivated, educated and have a high quality educational practice.

Continuity and quality

It is important to state that discussing the transition process should not be focused exclusively on continuity, since continuity (of goals, environment, curriculum etc.) does not provide sufficient support. It is only one aspect of the transition process. The continuity of the transition process should be seen through the contemporary view of the child as well as the quality of practice and theory. First of all, all stakeholders (with an emphasis on the educational system) need to be conscious of the *child's active presence* in that process (Chan, 2011). A child is entering the school system with a wealth of experience, knowledge, different emotions and expectations. If we observe the child only through its cognitive (academic) skills, we are denying its multiple intelligence capacities (Gardner, 2011). The child is not a *tabula rasa* and the school is not the only environment where it can gain valid knowledge and skills. Parent are also an important part of the transition process, as they see their child in a different environment. Their involvement in the transition process should be seen as support for educators and the child. In a paradigm of contemporary childhood and education, educators as professionals (both in ECEC and in CSE) need to support parents and guide them towards adequate communication during the transition. That way the children can thrive from multiple social connections between their environments (sharing goals and values) and the dynamic and dialectic relationship they are in. Secondly, both the ECEC and CSE systems need to strive toward *quality practice*. Rinaldi (2006) states that

continuity is related not only to our environment, but rather to the interrelation of our environment and experiences, in which the mutual understanding (of all the stakeholders) is the focus of continuity. That implicates a constant process of evaluation and self-reflection of one's practice and theory, thereby ensuring quality. That, most of all, provides a continuous and effective support for a successful transition.

2 Methodology

The methodology used for this paper is based on qualitative research design. Little is known about the Croatian transition process, indicating that the transition process is not in the focus of either the researches or the practitioners. Using a qualitative approach the researcher can gain a deep and content-rich understanding of the problem at hand. The interview represents a method that allows just that, but the semi-structured nature of the interviews used in this paper helped the researcher to reconstruct the particularities concerning the transition process more easily (Halmi, 2005). The objective of this paper is to gain a deeper understanding of the transition process from different perspectives (ECEC and CSE educators, parents and children). During the pedagogical year 2016/2017, individual interviews were conducted with preschool and school teachers as well as with parents and children attending the local ECEC center. Interviews were conducted in the local elementary school (elementary school teachers) and the local ECEC center (preschool teachers, parents and children). Interviews lasted anywhere from 10 to 45 minutes, depending on the respondent. Data was collected by using an audio-recorder while simultaneously taking written notes (noting pronounced gestures, the overall attitude). The interviews were semi-structured, comprising of three open-ended questions concerning the transition process and starting school. Adult stakeholders were asked from both an adult and a child's perspective to give answers to what they thought that the teachers must know and want to know about the child starting school (*What do you think the teacher must know about the child before it starts school? What do you want the*

teacher to know about the child before it starts school? What do you think the child wants the teacher to know about him/her before he/she starts school?). A difference was made between two questions – what they *must* know and *want* to know. The first question is based on the traditional assumption of a child's prescribed academic set of competences for the 'child ready' model (Moss, 2013). All stakeholders generally follow the child ready model and that is why they do not critically observe the transition process and the prescribed norm. They are content with the notion of children's competencies that are set and standardized. The second question is based on the adults' personal practice or implicit pedagogy and can reveal what the respondents really think about the transition process and the child. The questions were set mostly as guidelines and the respondents could talk about the transition process without restrictions. The children were asked similar questions concerning what they thought the teacher must know about them as well as what *they wanted* the teacher to know about them. Interviewing the children was especially delicate and all ethical precautions were made so that the interview would not cause stress of any kind or create negative emotions for the child. Overall, 11 children, 6 parents, 10 ECEC educators and 7 CSE educators were interviewed. The gathered data was analyzed using grounded theory (see Strauss and Corbin, 1994).

3 Results and discussion

As expected, the answers differed, indicating that connecting different stakeholders actually represents the connecting of diverse and complex systems. After careful transcription and categorization, the answers immediately started to make sense viewed through the particularity of the environment (small urban community strongly affected by post-war challenges with emphasis on poor economy, multicultural community, lack of ECEC professional support, low intensity of parental involvement in the educational process, etc.). What was first observed was that there was hardly any distinction between what the teacher *must* know and *want* to know about a child starting school (the semantic difference was explained earlier in the

paper). What was surprising, when asked what the teacher must know about a child, the school teachers gave little emphasis on the children's prior academic knowledge. They were content with testing results given to them on the first day of school (scores achieved in testing in May) explaining that it is a good way to place children in classes, but it was also observed that they had no need to know that information prior to the first day of school. One teacher stated that the scores were actually incomplete and meant nothing to them: "*When I was given the list with total scores I was so surprised with some children. It was completely different from what they really are all about. So that made me think that there are children who do really well on that sort of testing, and there are ones who get very scared, don't answer all that is asked of them, they just didn't manage in that moment. To some children, the testing is not really measuring anything!"* (CSE teacher). What they thought they must know were details about the children's families and socio-economic status, explaining that there are more and more children from abusive families, foster care families and families with low income struggling with long term unemployment. They also highlighted special needs children as well as children's health issues. When asked to explain how they would benefit from that information, they said that they could help the child during the adjustment period, but they had no constructive ideas regarding the curriculum. One teacher saw the whole process differently, emphasizing the children's interest: *"The most important thing that I want to know about a child is its interest. It helps me so I can animate them (children), make plans and work with them longer. I think that every teacher must know their children's interests."* (CSE teacher). On the opposite, one teacher was strongly convinced that children must have a structured prior knowledge so it would be easier for teachers to work with children (e.g. children must know their colors, count to 10, add, subtract, play orchestra instruments, understand and follow instructions and so on, and the teacher must know that information), clearly stating that she believes in transmission of knowledge.

If given an opportunity to know more about the child, two kind of answers emerged. The first kind was the same as when asked what they must know – something about their families, socio-economic

status, special needs and health issues. The second kind was more directed toward getting to know the child's interests: *"Numbers and letters – I can see all that in the classroom in two days. But that is why I made a survey for parents. I can't see the child from their perspective and they can help me, and I can't get from the child some information that I need. I would like to know the child before it starts school because I have ideas. If I knew the children before school, I would be able to use their interest for what we were doing, so the children would also be interested, it would help them."* (CSE teacher) "*Why don't you have contact*?" (researcher) "*Because we can't know the list of children that will be in our class, we get the list on the first day of school. But it would be good to have the list and to know the children so I could make my preparations - get to know their interests and organize my curriculum."* (CSE teacher). Interestingly, this was the only school teacher who did not mention special needs children or the children's shortcomings and limitations. She focused on their interest regardless of their special needs or social status.

Preschool teachers' answers were also divided in two groups. The first group stated that school teachers must know what prior academic knowledge the child has and whether the child has difficulties. Every year the school pedagogue gives them a checklist for every child that they fill out and that has been embedded in their practice for years: *„So, each child has to draw their family and I fill out that checklist and we give it to their pedagogue. She takes it and I guess it means something to her, I don't know."* (ECEC teacher). The second group stated that school teachers must know the children's families and their social status so that they would be familiar with the child's environment outside of school: *„They have to know child's environment, what the children were in touch with, what had been offered in their environment that encouraged them and what to offer them next to encourage their development further."* (ECEC teacher). When asked what they wanted the school teachers to know, aside from the elements already mentioned, some of the preschool teachers added that school teachers would benefit from spending more time with children in preschool and acknowledging their friends from preschool*: "It would be important to know who is friend with who. That is very important for starting strong, they have a sense of security.", "It is not important*

for the child to show its knowledge, but to be accepted. If they don't feel like they belong, there is no learning." (ECEC teachers).

In terms of communication, the only contact the school teachers have with preschool teachers is once a year in June when preschool children visit first grade children (the local school and ECEC center are adjacent to each other, physically separated by the playground). Visits are organized by the school pedagogue and the ECEC headmaster. School teachers have no particular attitude concerning the visits and the impression was made that it is something prescribed and embedded in school routine as such. One teacher had a positive experience in her former school that she is missing in the current one. She stated that she had the freedom (curricular) to organize the preschool class in her school class and saw the benefit of knowing her children prior to school: *"We would play, dance, make tea, make plays, it was wonderful. You get to know the child, the parents, you get to know what is going on with them so on the first day of school you don't have a tabula rasa. But the children liked it too, and they get to know us, the culture, environment, and they adjust faster. They are more open in communicating and that even made a difference when they started learning their letters. I think it was the time they needed to acclimatize, get used to us, to feel free, to feel like they belong."* (CSE teacher) *"Why not something like that here?"* (researcher) *"We are constantly worried whether we can get everything done in time. So we move this topic here, that topic there, cut something out only to make everything duly noted because if an inspection comes and I have a different topic in my work journal or I am doing something that is not planed* (she shook her head in disapproval). *And I have to follow the prescribed curriculum. But one child will need 1 hour, and another 2 or 3 hours for the same topic."* (CSE teacher). Even though there are constant debates about school curriculum reform in Croatia, this is the only teacher who saw the prescribed curriculum as an obstacle for good quality child-centered practice during the transition. Thus, a question arises: Are school teachers aware of the need to cooperate with stakeholders outside their school? School teachers stated that it would not be a bad idea to get to know the local preschool teachers, but also saw no particular benefit from that. From the preschool teacher perspective, the initiative for communicating should come

from the school: *"Because it is in their interest to cooperate with us. They could spend time with children for a few hours, not at once, but over a period of time.", "It is not on us to impose, but then, maybe they are thinking the same way, they think that we should come to them and that is where we misunderstand each other."* (ECEC teachers).

When asked to think like a child starting school, school teachers recognized the children's prior experience and achievements. They were aware of the children's need for recognition but nonetheless they showed superficial interest in that information for future curriculum development. Preschool teachers immediately recognized the children's need for praise, approval and recognition since that is what the children are used to in preschool. But, like CSE teachers, they did not find that idea particularly beneficial for school teachers.

Preschool teachers, more or less, all agreed that testing prior to school should change, but there had no constructive idea how to achieve that goal: "*When school starts some children start to count, to talk, to read. How is the testing in May objective then? And there is a cut – everything that has been going on in kindergarten ends, it is cut off and something new starts. And that is so bad. They see a child like a blank paper and they are the ones who will fill it with that something that the child doesn't have. I don't know when that will change, the whole system. There is no continuity. And we talk about the individual approach – what individual approach when everything that the child gains prior to school is of no worth anymore, "let's go from the beginning again".* (ECEC teacher) *Why don't you speak up about it?* (researcher) *We don't dare to stand in front of a teacher and say what we think a child needs because we are still the institution that only play games. That is how they see us. And play is something that is definitely not part of the school."* (ECEC teacher). When commenting about testing, they were constrained by their vocation and justifying that the transition process is more the school teacher's domain. What they found important was communicating with parents. Every preschool teacher mentioned missing parental involvement in the children's education process, attributing it to egocentricity and lack of time. Every child has a map of its development and preschool teachers state that very few parents are interested in it. When asked did they thought about using the map in

connecting with school teachers, preschool teachers found the idea interesting and motivating because maps were something that they are competent in.

Parents were interested in the interview, but kept it very short. They were clear in their expectations – they wanted their child to be of good behavior and disciplined and did not want the teacher to know much about their child prior to school. *"I don't want the teacher to know my child before school, I want him to have the same chance as any other child, I want the teacher to give equal opportunity to every child."* (parent). When asked what the children wanted the teachers to know about them, the parents showed their surprise and stated that they hadn't thought about that. One parent even stated that his child was too young to have the opportunity to want something because teachers have to be respected. Other answers were directed towards the children's abilities and hobbies. After the interview, some parents showed interest in their children's answers and stated that the interview made them think more about their child. The children were very clear in their answers and were concentrated on what they liked to play with (water, kinetic sand) and what they usually liked to do (draw, sing, learn, play ball and play with siblings and friends). It seemed that they had no concerns regarding the transition which is consistent with findings from prior research (Somolanji Tokić & Kretić-Majer, 2015).

4 Conclusion

Contrary to the first assumption, school teachers are not focused on the children's academic skills prior to school. Interestingly, preschool teachers are the ones who are forcing academic skills through work-sheets (math, literacy, graphomothoric skills) even though they do not believe that children need to acquire those skills prior to school. That shows an interesting gap between their beliefs and practice. The school teacher's lack of initiative and constructive ideas about how to use the children's prior experience and expectations is something that has to be addressed further. It is noticed that they are missing crucial facts about transition as a process and child-oriented educational

practice. The main goal is shifting toward quality of practice that consequently assures continuity. Reflecting and (self)evaluating their practice should be a central activity in achieving that goal. Preschool teachers, on the other hand, are missing the initiative to synchronize their practices with their beliefs. They do not feel competent to talk with the teachers about the child starting school and are missing professional support. It would be interesting to find out the reasons behind that inconsistency – is it the lack of the already mentioned professional support, lack of assertiveness, not investing in lifelong learning or something else that underlies the problem? Testing the children's abilities prior to school was also considered during the interview. On the one hand, school and preschool teachers are content with the current situation and see no particular need for change. On the other, they found that testing the children's abilities prior to school is unnecessary and not useful either for the child or for school teachers. Parents had little concern about the testing and were surprised that the children's perspective was even being considered. They were focused on their children's proper behavior in school. It is perceived that adult stakeholders (mostly focusing on ECEC and CSE teachers) do not understand connecting multiple systems in terms of socio-constructivist paradigm. As stated earlier in the paper, the research paradigm and its dialectic nature allows the participants to change their perspective, resulting in the changing of practice. Since interviews were conducted in a safe and relaxed environment and the interviewer had an active role in an interview, most respondents gave a broad range of comments not only about the questions asked. Communicating different concerns and from different perspectives, it was inevitable to enter in a constructive dialogue thus changing the practice and knowledge that was being questioned. By constructing deeper understanding of the transition process, educators were made to reflect more on their practice. One can say that they were made aware of the transition process. Since transition to school is not problematized in Croatian literature or practice, this research opened numerous questions and educational needs: purpose and method of testing prior to school, lack of professional support in ECEC system, parental support and parental

inclusion in the educational process, limitations of the prescribed school curriculum and quality of preschool and school practice. The gathered data contributes to future research regarding transition process.

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