

The complex analysis of early childhood institutional change

Szilvia Golyán

Eötvös Loránd University

I. The objectives and questioning of the research

The ‘step’ from the kindergarten to the school is a milestone in the life of children. They can do well in school if they are prepared to the new, if they have the requirements that can be used as a base for the children and the teachers as well. The kindergarten environment can make children suitable for school life but they can become school students only in school environment.

The aim of my work is *the complex analysis of the transition from kindergarten to school*, the first big change in the Hungarian institutional education, which is now compulsory from the age of 3.

First, I would like to clarify the name of the basic concept. *Transition* can be any change in the life of the individual that results a motion, a displacement from the familiar social space. The narrow interpretation of the transition from kindergarten to school can be the last year of the kindergarten education and the first year of the introductory section of the elementary school¹, a wider interpretation can be the kindergarten and the elementary school education, namely the period from the age of 3 to the age of 10. Instead of the ‘kindergarten-school transition’ I deliberately use the ‘transition of children from kindergarten into school’ expression. The former represents the transition on the structural level of the institutions (the national pedagogical thinking is characterized by this meaning as well) as the latter expresses level of children.

¹ The introductory section refers to the elementary school first and second grades, however it is important to note that the inlet section of the several times amended 1993. Public Education Act was repealed by the 2012. Education Law by the first of September in 2012.

To achieve my research aims, I wanted to find answers to the following questions, which were marked as my sub goals (and their order indicates the structure of this paper):

1. In what sort of *interpretative frame* can the problem of the transition from kindergarten to school be placed?
2. In the *development* of the *early childhood institution types* – namely the kindergarten and the elementary school – what are the moments, which lead as a decisive momentum to the current (2013) ‘state’ of the early childhood institutional change?
3. In the *practice of which European states* does the early childhood institutional change as a problem and what solution trends can be identified regarding the issue?
4. What *difficulties of the early childhood institutional change* are characterized in *Hungary* and what efforts are aimed at resolving them recently?
5. Is there a correlation *between the degree of the satisfaction of the kindergarten activities and the direction of the attitude to school learning*?
6. How and to what extent do the *recent changes of the law and content regulation* contribute to the rethinking of the transition?

The complex analysis of the kindergarten transition into school – as it is reflected in the assumptions above – is aimed to approach the issue with many criteria and there required different methods and methodological solutions in different part of the research, so I cover them at the presentation of the results.

II. The analysis aspects and the main results of the research

Several domestic studies focus on a variety of social inequalities and their process of transforming into educational failure (*Kertesi and Kézdi, 2005a, 2005b; Radó, 2007*). More and more research show that although the individual skills and the family background are the determinants of the educational success, but schools with a very similar social environment may produce rather different educational effectiveness (*Kertesi and Kézdi, 2009*).

I have undertaken to clarify the basic concepts of equality and fairness regarding the *fair educational environment* as a frame of reference. I think the

benefits and risks of inequality may be more intense during the transition between institutions, but in return the principle of fairness might make the transition smoother. To see that nowadays the early childhood institutions are able to produce a fair educational environment, we need to review the main factors which influence the enforcement of the principle of equality.

I referred as so-called discriminatory factors in the kindergarten and elementary school education: the existence of small local institutions, the school choice pluralism and its impact, the position of mixed profile institutions, the social system that supports the participation in institutional education, the changes in the regulation of participation in kindergarten education, the possibility of flexible school-starting time, the potential in the indigenous practices of school education.

Education carries the disadvantages deriving from the disparities and inequalities from the very beginning, and not only amplifies the existing ones but creates new ones at every turn. Between the *factors influencing the principle of fairness* have more significance of the identity of the institute maintainer, the ‘labyrinth’ of financing, the difficulty in the signalling system, the realization limits of the ideologically neutral education, the feminization of the teaching profession and its low prestige, and I mention the difficulty in the practical implementation of the inclusive education.

In connection with the intention to *establish a fair educational environment*, it is not indifferent to note that there is a strong correlation between the professional and infrastructural supply of the institutions and the social status of the attending students (*Kertesi and Kézdi, 2005a*). The school enrolment ‘practice’ of the children having integration, learning, behavioural disorder and students with special needs (*Józsa and Hricsovinyi, 2011*); the growth of ethnic segregation² (*Kertesi and Kézdi, 2009*), and the ‘distribution’ of the disadvantaged students show strong differences between individual school districts, and these differences are amplified by the free school choice (*Józsa and Hricsovinyi, 2011*).

² While in the Hungarian society there is a substantial upward mobility, gypsies have education below average, and a total lack of mobility (*Gábos and Szívós, 2008*).

1. The historical review of the early childhood institutional types - in the view of the institutional change

In the historical review of the institution types, my aim was to focus on the early childhood institutional change – not the only, but in our country currently (2013) is affecting the most children. For this purpose in the chronological line of the domestic history of the pre-school and elementary school, I tried to capture, highlight the moments that affect greatly the transition from kindergarten to school, in which the significant changes – regarding this transition – of teacher training are naturally connected in several places.

If we follow the development of the national education system, historically it was inevitable to do a top-down aim and task management, and in the context of the kindergarten spreading as a type of institute, its own and independent professional function system could gradually develop. The appearance of the pre-school role of the kindergarten and then its growing importance attributed by the (educational) politics ‘indicated’ the ‘downward expansion’ of the elementary school education, strengthening until the present day – with different emphasis, but still permanently – the definition of the kindergarten as an ‘entrance hall’ of the school. This top-down educational approach even today characterizes the education system in Hungary, declaring that only the ‘preceding’ educational level has to adjust to the ‘subsequent’ level, not even assuming nor expecting a reciprocity in this field (neither). Although children would ‘need’ a down-up approach public education system (*Vekerdy, 2000; Pálfi, 2004a, 2004b*), in which the work done in one level is not determined by the requirements of the next level.

In this part of the research there was a systematic and multi-faceted analysis of the history of the kindergarten and elementary school. The chronological continuity was articulated by the moments that had content and/or legislative attempts; as the function of the kindergarten and its changes, the differentiation of school-readiness, and the change of the content frame. It is important that several professional – especially at national level – ideas were changed or were in dialogue with each other throughout history, and many further improvements can be found in each period.

2. The European experience of the early childhood institutional change

The incoming foreign experiences, views and their practical implementations had greater or lesser effect on the development of the Hungarian pre-school education from the very beginning. In my research I also made sure that the

early childhood institution change is surrounded by international interests. The documents of European Union member states, describing briefly their elementary education systems (*Pre-school education: current thinking and provision*, 1995; *Pre-school and primary education in the European Union*, 1994; *Supplement to the study on pre-school and primary education in the European Union*, 1996) show clearly that the transition from pre-school education to elementary school education is a subject of debate in several countries.

They try to resolve the transition problems between kindergarten and elementary school with structural changes, coherent curricula and with closer cooperation between kindergarten and schools and between schools and families. There are countries, where kindergarten classes were established in the elementary schools (the Netherlands) or the last year of the pre-school education and the first year of the elementary school education were placed together in an educational cycle (France), while others are trying several alternatives to solve the problems caused by the transition (Sweden). However, there are member states which does not have the problem of the transition (such as Denmark, Norway, Ireland, Iceland or Spain).

During the examination of the early childhood, I had the opportunity to get to know the education system of other countries, and I could have a little insight in their practices in many of them in my field trips. *In the comparative analysis* I highlighted the practice of those countries where the early childhood institution change is considered special. That is how I chose the United Kingdom, where the earliest start of compulsory education can be found and the kindergarten is optional; Denmark, where there is a pre-school class; Germany, where the only criterion to enter the school is the age and nothing else; Spain, where there is a 'kindergarten school' type of institution. Furthermore, France, where there is a so-called preparatory class; the Czech Republic, where the introduction of the preparatory classes cause difficulties; Ireland, where the early education of disadvantaged children is a high priority; and Romania and Slovakia; where the introduction of zero-grade was realized recently (in the former as mandatory, in the latter as an alternative).

In summary, it can be stated that the pluralism of institutional foundation and the autonomy of institution choice characterize the countries; in the structure of daytime child care and education, there are significant differences among the countries. In addition to the different school starting ages, the EU mem-

ber states regulate differently the calendar dates that are required to reach to start the compulsory education.

All over Europe there is a tendency in the movement, up and down direction too, on the one hand in the increase and decrease in the number of years that must be spent in the education system, on the other hand in the lower and the upper age limit of the compulsory education. It is worth thinking about what the compulsory education is good for by itself, and what other actions may help it to achieve its aim more efficiently.

It can be concluded that the EU member states recognized differently that the *quality of the early childhood education* is a critical factor which depends on the adequate funding, the practical application of the educational research, the quality guarantees and the continuous, ongoing training of teachers.

3. The Hungarian practice of the early childhood institutional change

By using the *content analysis* method and with the process of the Hungarian research results regarding the institutional change, I tried to gather all the issues in a ‘bouquet’.

During the historical review of the problem, first I tried to find an answer that which factors of the domestic early education system may ‘obstruct’ children in the transition; secondly my aim was to ‘seek’ the national initiatives addressed to solve these transition problems. I made an attempt to process all the Hungarian scientific literature regarding this issue.

It can be stated that the conditions for the school starting, the regulation of the compulsory education and other related issues have long been a subject of debate. In addition to the age, from the 1970s onwards the *criteria of the school maturity* have been defined, namely beyond reaching a certain age to be schooled, some biological, psychological and social maturity had to be achieved by the potential first-grade children. However, the so-called school maturity test in many cases is the only filter (and for only few children) before the start of school that could indicate the danger of learning disabilities, and that could offer options to prevent or moderate the future learning difficulties.

Reviewing the Hungarian research results, professional manifestations, I met several approaches. From the identified problem areas – such as the cooperation of the institutes, the early teaching, the different stages of development,

the affective factors, the free choice of institutions, the flexible school start and the school performance –, some proved to be of special importance.

In the kindergarten-school *cooperation*, I strongly believe that the mutual trust and understanding and appreciation of each other's work should be present in the relationship of teachers.

In addition to *age*, the *individual development* is determining concerning the transition, regardless that it is not taken into account in the school enrollment. Therefore I am convinced that every kindergarten teacher and school teacher has to be aware of the biological, psychological and social characteristics of the 3-8 year-old children.

The *too early school start* can turn the child's attitude towards learning 'unfavorable', and the *unjustified postponement* also has the hazards. From the view of '*right time*' school start, that is why the opportunity of differentiated school enrollment must be maintained beside the 'fixed' age-specific compulsory school start.

Education, both lay and professional, is a crucial space for *forming opinions*. The evaluation, between the evaluator and the attitude object, much depends on the surrounding physical and personal apparatus. If the attitude is positive, the person is more approaching to, and if negative, the person is moving away from the attitude object (*Petty, DeSteno and Rucker, 2003*). The attitude can be learned, during orientation it is forming and can be formed, and it can be influenced with maximum efficiency in the early childhood.

The results generated in this phase of my research reinforced me in my previous realization that the academic research regarding the kindergarten-school transition (either descriptive or correlative) focused on the system level operation or on the groups of children. The opinion-finding studies can be characterized in this way too, because these two dimensions determine the direction of the questions and the analysis of the answers.

4. The longitudinal survey of the predictive power of early childhood satisfaction

In Hungary I have not met a study that approached the issue of transition from the individual child's point of view and get to the child not just in the 'preparedness-unpreparedness' dimension. It is certain that importance of emotions during the transition cannot be overestimated and it is known that the from all the many and big changes that have to be experienced and pro-

cessed by the small children one of the most important is the difference between kindergarten learning and school learning. Therefore, I feel obligated to conduct an empirical study in this field to examine the transition from kindergarten to school transition among children.

4.1 *The presupposition and the basic concepts of the survey*

As a result of the theoretical and practical work specified above, I conducted a *longitudinal study* to attempt to examine the relationship between the level of satisfaction of children's kindergarten activities and their attitudes related to school learning. I assume that the satisfaction of kindergarten activities anticipate the attitude towards school learning activities. Furthermore, I assume that in the case of satisfaction about kindergarten activities, the attitude towards school learning activities is more positive, and in the case of dissatisfaction about kindergarten activities, the attitude towards school learning activities is more negative.

In the study I used two basic concepts, *satisfaction* and *attitude*. A common feature of young children regarding the satisfactory level and the attitude, I consider that beside the three-component (cognitive, conative, affective) determination, the *affective* factors are stronger and that the emotional aspect refers to the emotional attitude, which can be positive or negative. All these taken into consideration in my research, I identified satisfaction as a predictive factor of positive attitude, and dissatisfaction as a predictive factor of negative attitude.

4.2 *The methods of the survey*

Having chosen the *qualitative research method* – in which I constantly reflected to the moments of the study, keeping a continuous control over the data collection and the analysis process – I hoped to get round a particular approach regarding the issue of the institutional change.

Taking into account the *methodological dilemmas* of the planned research (features of participants due to their age; the comparability of data because of the longitudinal nature; subjectivity; anonymity; 'adequate-required-desirable' responses; linguistic and sociolinguistic aspects) reinforced me that the studies of young children involve a number of specific difficulties. It is a reasonable belief that it is hard to measure directly the opinion of children, especially kindergarten children. Nevertheless, it is important to know the beliefs, needs and expectations of young children, therefore my research

is an attempt to ‘measure’ satisfaction and attitude of children despite all the methodological difficulties.

In the test preparation, I realized that in Hungary there are few *measuring instruments* applying educational and psychological knowledge that can serve valid and reliable data about examining emotions and emotional components (*Forgács, 2003; Bányai and Varga, 2012*).

Because of this reason, I searched for partly adaptable tools and I completed them with self-made ones. They provided an opportunity to test the hypothetical relationships on a small sample, and then to refine them to be more accurate.

I had to make it clear before the survey that it would provide locally meaningful data and I wanted to avoid using incorrect, over-extended generalizations.

The most commonly used tool to get to know attitude is the attitude scale, but it cannot be applied with pre-school children. After thinking it over, I had to choose another methodological tool beside the oral interview with kindergarten children that is why I chose to apply *thematically focused photos*. For school children I thought the written interrogation (questionnaire) – with age-adapted conditions – could be applicable. After having tried the method in kindergarten developed by *Vargáné Szabó Györgyi (2000)* in a pre-test, I made some correction on the kindergarten tool and I completed it with the specific genre of discursive interview.

The school study relied on the basic methods. First, with the help of the questionnaire I wanted to get to know the children’s school learning attitude and I was curious about their attitude towards kindergarten. To measure attitude I created a so-called *Likert-type scale*. As a part of the school study and regarding children taking part in the longitudinal survey, I asked the *class teachers* to *rank* their performance on a five-point scale concerning their behaviour, diligence and some school subjects.

4.3 *The characteristics of the sample*

At the *sample* selection I watched for the following main aspects: to represent the average Hungarian settlement based on the population data; to ensure to gain access to the test groups. At taking of samples, the research topic determined which age group to choose for the research questions, in this regard my sample is *targeted*.

It is of key importance regarding the facilitation of institutional transition that what characterizes the cooperation of the involved kindergartens and schools; and presumably the dissonance or the harmony of the value preferences of the two types of public education institutes may have effect on the educational process. Thus, I applied the *document analysis* method in the pedagogical programs of the involved institutes. I tried to find the answer that in the programs in which context the assisting, helping efforts of institutional change appear; what kind of inter-institutional forms of cooperation they plan to develop.

I started the longitudinal study in 2009 in a small Hungarian town, where three last-year groups of three kindergartens (46 people) were involved, then followed to school, and in 2010 I continued the data collection in seven first-grade classes (139 people) of three elementary schools.

There were 27 children who had available data to analysis from both kindergarten and school, making them comparable. In the school attitude study, I recorded the classmates of the follow-up students, thus increasing greatly the size of the school sample. In this way I have a broader available data set in the given population.

4.4 *The processing of the survey*

I intended to explore the individual and group-related relationships. In the follow-up sample, I examined the context of the background factors regarding the institutional change, such as the gender, the number of years spent in kindergarten education or the characteristics of the family.

In the kindergarten I received information about the satisfaction level of four main activities (playing, learning, self-service, resting) based on the choices of these activities. The satisfaction of the kindergarten activities were measured by the photos belonging to the variables (i.e., the four main activities), if the photo was placed next to the ‘*smile*’ symbol, it represented satisfaction of the given child, if the ‘*sad face*’ symbol was chosen, it meant dissatisfaction.

From the 30 items of the attitude scale, *8 statements measure the attitude determining components towards kindergarten*. In the summary from the 22 attitude determining components I ignored 2 of them, thus from the total of 20 findings I grouped into topics, creating five combined variables (physical environment, social environment, well-being, learning conditions and learning).

To make the kindergarten and school data interpretable and comparable with each other, I formed satisfaction³ and attitude⁴ levels.⁵

4.5 The results of the longitudinal survey in the view of the presuppositions

As a conclusion it can be stated about the children participating in the longitudinal survey that

- they are ‘mostly satisfied’ (78.91%) about the kindergarten activities and they liked them, and globally only 3 people were dissatisfied;
- from the kindergarten activities they were ‘mostly satisfied’ (83.88%) about the learning activities, a little less with playing, but still ‘substantially satisfied’ (76.54%), and a high proportion rejected ‘resting’ (51.86%);
- the different learning activities are not equally popular: many rejected drawing (6 people), singing (6 people) and bedtime stories (5 people), 3-3 people rejected gymnastics, mathematics and environmental activities;
- by the end of the first school year, 22 children changed their opinion about kindergarten. 8 of them showed negative direction, 14 children had more positive opinion about kindergarten: the satisfaction of 62.57% kindergarten age opinion to 92.79%;
- their attitude towards school learning is ‘mostly positive’ (81.00%). It is important to emphasize that this figure represent an average, internally it is more segmented: comparing to the kindergarten satisfaction level almost as many of them are more positive (14 people) about school learning as those who are more negative (13 people);

³ Satisfaction levels: ‘*completely satisfied*’ (100.00%), ‘*mostly satisfied*’ (76.91%-99%), ‘*substantially satisfied*’ (50.01%-76.90%), ‘*half-part satisfied*’ (50.00%), ‘*substantially dissatisfied*’ (23.10%-49.99%), ‘*mostly dissatisfied*’ (0.01%-23.09%) and ‘*completely dissatisfied*’ (0.00%).

⁴ Attitude levels: ‘*entirely positive*’ (100.00%), ‘*mostly positive*’ (81.00%-99.99%), ‘*substantially positive*’ (60.01%-80.99%), ‘*neutral*’ (60.00%), ‘*substantially negative*’ (40.00%-59.99%), ‘*mostly negative*’ (20.01%-39.99%) and ‘*entirely negative*’ (20.00%).

⁵ Although the concepts of satisfaction and attitude seem interchangeable in the scientific literature, I believe that despite the several common features, the two concepts are not the same, thus I used them both.

the factors influencing school learning attitude show a varied picture: they are mostly positive about the physical and social environment, but only 3 of them said with full clarity the same concerning the school well-being. It was also detected that those had higher index who had former kindergarten-mate in the class.

I have found that those children who were satisfied with the kindergarten activities had positive attitude towards school learning (from 27 people, 19 people showed this relation). The dissatisfaction about the kindergarten activities, however, did not indicate a correlation that their attitude towards school learning would be negative. The study results did not support sufficiently that *there is a correlation between the degree of the satisfaction of the kindergarten activities and the direction of the attitude to school learning*. I consider it necessary to study more my assumption, as only three children were dissatisfied with the kindergarten activities in the follow-up sample and it is insufficient to refute my hypothesis definitely.

The longitudinal study showed that *instead of/beside the structural or age-group approach regarding the institutional change, a special survey would be necessary and possible to focus on the individual*.

5. The challenges in the new regulatory environment

In the *critical analysis* of public education regulators basically I wanted to an answer to the question that whether the adequate central law and content regulation concerning the early childhood institutional change ensures the continuity of the transition; reforming the old initiatives or creating new opportunities how and to what extent can contribute to a seamless transition.

In my opinion, the National Public Education Law (2011) ‘takes’ and ‘handles softly’ several issues that might support a smoother transition, providing national and local alternatives within the public education system. Between the kindergarten and the school there is not a professional successive relationship (both true to the national level law and to the content regulation), so the transition will not be easier in this new regulatory environment. But beside the contradictions and the tendencies of the public education system, there are other contingencies, such as the appearance of ‘new’ barriers which support a uniformity education or the underfinance of education (for more decades).

III. Conclusions

The theoretical and practical efforts that I got to know in my research to ease the institutional change mostly offer local solutions, and the national level alternatives, because of many and separate reasons, could not solve the problem of kindergarten-school transition, and the problem analysis from the children's point of view is basically lacking.

To sum up *the experience of the systematic and complex analysis*, I would like to list some options – without striving for completeness, which could contribute to an efficient and effective early childhood institutional change:

- establishment of system-wide (national) conditions regarding the ongoing professional development;
- introduction of (experimental) programs to smoothen the transition from kindergarten to school;
- implementation of a coherent 'early childhood approach' and operation of a coherent early childhood education system;
- a united handling of the introductory and initial phase in the elementary school;
- the interpretation of the pre-school preparatory tasks of the kindergarten and its implementation (without 'hurting' the declared education-oriented kindergarten!);
- taking into account the skills (competences) which are required for the effective school learning, and making them structured (I think a national level guidance might be required, even as a regulator) when creating content (kindergarten knowledge provision) of kindergarten education;
- the 'continuation' of the several years of professional experience regarding child development in kindergarten, the 'transfer' of knowing children (from kindergarten to school, a compulsory transfer of documents about the kindergarten development of children, compliance with the data protection rules);
- providing an extended period of grounding phase in elementary schools;

- ensuring the stability of lower elementary school teachers and the ‘minimization’ of their numbers (a correct understanding of the not subject based teaching is essential for that);
- provision of opportunities to support institutional change for children with special needs;
- ‘rethinking’ the ‘intermediate’ school forms (zero grade, pre-school class, correction class, developing class) as alternatives taking into consideration the individual development path – as the current transitional institutional forms seem to be unsuccessful, a solution or ‘aim’ would be: the implementation of a pedagogical environment (physical, methodological and personal as well) which can monitor better the individual differences (and adjusts better to the given age);
- school enrolment as an alternative that takes the individual level of development into account;
- adaptation of finance to the needs of early childhood education system;
- elimination of ‘gender stereotypes’ found in the field of early childhood education, making the area more attractive to men; and
- multi-faceted and interdisciplinary study of the institutional change.

A smooth transition from kindergarten to school depends on the helping, supporting educational methods and cooperation of the family, the kindergarten and the school. Despite the organizational diversity of kindergarten and school, the unity, the indivisible development curve of this age group has to be seen. All educational level has to ensure appropriate circumstances for the children’s age and development level.

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