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Questioning continuity: On children's transition from day-care to kindergarten class in Denmark

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Abstract: Transition to school is recurrently pointed out as key to children's immediate well-being at school start, as well as to their long-term educational endeavors. Aspirations towards continuity during transition is a common denominator across research, policy, and practice, in Denmark as well as internationally. This theoretical-conceptual paper problematizes continuity as a fluent or empty signifier within the transition field. This implies that, within transition theory and practice, the question of how continuity may be institutionally organized, as well as professionally facilitated, is a complex issue. By highlighting how Danish transition practices instantiate an ambivalence between a Nordic, child-centered kindergarten legacy from Fröbel, and an Angloamerican approach to academic accomplishments, the question of continuity is theoretically problematized. This leads to a socio-culturally informed discussion of change as a constitutive factor in transition, and of continuity as a matter of children's trajectories of experience, learning, and development across divergent institutional settings. The findings imply a fundamental questioning of ambitions towards smoothing out transitions as a means for ensuring continuity. This has the implication that, within the fundamentally ambivalent Danish early childhood educational landscape, change and transformation may be valorized, rather than merely problematized. In addition, continuity may be approached as a matter of children's trajectories of sense-making across diverse institutional settings. This reconceptualization may also inspire international transition practices.

Keywords: transition, day-care, school, socio-cultural theory

Introduction

Transition to school has recurrently been highlighted as central to children's well-being and educational accomplishments, both at school start and in a longer-term educational perspective (Boyle, Grieshaber, & Petriwskyj, 2018; Dunlop, 2003; Dunlop & Fabian, 2002; VIVE, 2019). Continuity, coherence and bridging between institutional contexts are pointed out as crucial factors in this regard (ibid.). In Denmark, pedagogical professionals in day-cares, i.e., Early Childhood Educational and Care (ECEC) settings for children aged 0-5, are legislatively obliged to ensuring continuity and coherence between children's different institutional settings, as well as between home and institution (Dagtilbudsloven, 2022 §1 para 4; §7 para 5). As an aspect of this, children's last year in day-care must enable coherence to kindergarten class; the first year of compulsory schooling in Denmark (Dagtilbudsloven [Law on day-care], 2022 § 8 para 6). However, the questions of *how* to institutionally organize for continuity and coherence during transition, including how to professionally facilitate continuity, is a highly complex issue with no simple answers (Huser, Dockett, & Perry, 2016; Odgaard, 2018b; Odgaard, Koch, & Skovbjerg, 2023).

The central and complicated status of continuity is not limited to the Danish transition context. As an international review on transition to school research literature has pointed out (Boyle et al., 2018), continuity has been a common denominator for international transition policy, practice, and research for at least two decades. However, despite the apparent homogeneity, that such a finding might imply, no shared definition of continuity during transition exists, nor is there a general agreement on what it means to enable continuity during transition (ibid.). Rather, continuity is used with divergent meanings, ranging from: "[t]he developmental perspective of continuity as making preschool more school-like…" to "… socio-cultural and critical perspectives of continuity as […] children's agency in negotiating change as they enter school …" (Boyle et al., 2018, p. 176). This has the implication that continuity, as a central transition term, may potentially denote a diversity of meanings and practices. Thus, aspirations towards continuity may result in the early introduction of academic learning in day-care, as well as in initiatives to support children's pathways of participation (Hedegaard, 2014) during transition, e.g. in play communities (Koch, Odgaard, & Skovbjerg, 2022). In this sense, the notion of continuity may encompass both developmental, curriculum-oriented, socio-cultural, child-centered, and critical perspectives on transition; perspectives that diverge radically when it comes to fundamental assumptions regarding children, pedagogy,

and even transitions. Thus, the notion of continuity almost works as a floating or empty signifier within transition research and practice, i.e. a signifier without a specific signified; a signifier absorbing rather than emitting meaning (Buchanan, 2018). Importantly, when a concept absorbs meaning, it conceals fundamental understandings, which is counterproductive for theoretical and practical reflection, as well as for development. As Säljö (2009) has pointed out, educational and pedagogical research generally relies on a multiplicity of divergent, and partly incompatible, key assumptions, which is the reason why it becomes crucial to seek transparency; to explicitly declare positions in order to overcome conflation and confusion.

From this outset, this theoretical-conceptual paper aims at examining and questioning continuity as a key notion within the transition field. It does so through the following series of steps: First, it is outlined how transition to school appears as an ambiguous and partly contradictory phenomenon in Danish policy and practice, both historically and currently. It is shown how this ambiguity is rooted in inherent contradictions between the historical traditions of kindergarten and school, respectively. Then, this ambiguity is structurally exemplified by zooming in on a specific Danish transition model that has gained prevalence over the past decades, namely a model where children move from day-care to school premises/after school centers during spring, prior to their actual school start in August. Finally, the inherently ambiguous approach to transition, and to continuity as an aspect of this, is theoretically revisited by employing a socio-cultural perspective (Stetsenko, 2016; Wertsch, 1998; Zittoun, 2014). From this perspective, the paper seeks to reconceptualize continuity as a matter of children's trajectories of sense-making across diverse institutional settings.

The following questions guide the paper:

- *What characterizes transition from day-care to kindergarten class in Denmark?*
- *How can continuity during transition be reconceptualized from a socio-cultural perspective?*
- *What are the practical and theoretical implications of this reconceptualization?*

Background: Children's Transition to School in Denmark

When children transition from day-care to school in Denmark, they cross a boundary between two institutional traditions that originate from histori-

cally divergent sources: The kindergarten tradition and the school tradition. In contrast to most other European countries, Danish day-cares are not historically rooted in a preschool tradition, but rather in a Nordic-German kindergarten tradition that has often identified itself in opposition to school. However, the historical distinctiveness of kindergarten pedagogy has been under pressure for the last decades (Stanek, Togsverd & Ellegaard, 2022), largely due to policy efforts that aim at increased coherence and continuity in children's learning, with the ambition of strengthening children's learning outcomes over time. This has been criticized for leading to "schoolification" of pre-compulsory ECEC in the Nordics, which has also been thematized by the OECD Starting Strong Reports of both 2006 and 2017 (OECD, 2006, 2017). In this sense, the tensions between pre-compulsory ECEC and compulsory schooling is an international discussion, not merely a Danish issue. Central to this discussion is whether continuity and coherence during ECEC must necessarily lead to a more school-like day-care, or whether other possibilities are feasible. In the following, this theoretical discussion is exemplified with historical and current transition policies and practices in Denmark.

Kindergarten class: From preparatory to compulsory school year

In Denmark, compulsory schooling starts in August of the year when a child turns 6 years old, in the so-called kindergarten class. Kindergarten class was originally developed as a preparatory year prior to compulsory schooling, but in 2009 kindergarten class was made compulsory. At that time, virtually all Danish children already attended kindergarten class, just as they attended day-care from the age of 0-6. As hinted in the sections above, the construction "kindergarten + class" signals an implicit contradiction within Danish ECEC. Thus, the Danish kindergarten tradition, at least historically, diverges markedly from the school tradition due to its focus on children's perspectives, communities, and play cultures, rather that formal learning and curriculum (Stanek et al., 2022). As Erna Juul-Hansen (1845-1922), a Danish Fröbel-inspired kindergarten pioneer, once expressed it: *"Kindergartens are not Schools. School related Learning is out of the Question. The main Purpose is to contribute to Education of the Childish in the Child* [author's translation]" (Enoksen, 2003, p. 8). This immediately observable contradiction can be seen as paradigmatic for a deeper and ongoing tension that is still central to transition from day-care to school in Denmark, which will be further outlined in the following.

The changed status of kindergarten class took place along with a broader, international policy focus from the early 2000's; a focus on strengthening

young children's coherent learning processes and, thus, implicitly reducing the above-mentioned pedagogical divergences between ECEC settings. In Denmark, this ambition led to a wide range of policy initiatives from nursery homes and kindergartens, that were now both termed day-cares, and to primary schools. As an example, pedagogical curriculum themes were introduced in Danish day-cares for the first time in 2004, thus introducing thematically defined learning objectives for children aged 0-6. During the following years, changes related to transition to kindergarten class were also introduced in Danish legislation. Many of the changes related to transition and school start were prepared by a School Start Committee that was appointed by the Danish Government in 2005. The committee was assigned the task of providing recommendations to strengthen children's general educational success by enabling "a more coherent learning process" (Skolestartsudvalget, 2006, p. 5, author's translation) throughout day-care institutions for children aged 0-6, and during the first years of schooling, as well as in after school centers (ibid.). Central to the governmental ambition was the decision to make kindergarten class compulsory. The School Start Committee suggested ways of improving coherent and continuous learning processes from day-care to school, and expressed the expectation that a compulsory kindergarten class would overcome "the problem of two school starts" (ibid., 46). With "two school starts" (ibid)., the School Start Committee hinted at one school start in kindergarten class, that practically all Danish children attended at the time despite its voluntary status, followed by another school start in 1st grade. The Committee also recommended that a compulsory kindergarten class should be renamed "New 1st Grade" (Skolestartsudvalget, 2006, p. 9), thus ensuring coherence throughout primary school. However, kindergarten class was not renamed and, thus, kept its original – and inherently contradictory – name. In a sense, this exemplifies the ambivalence between, on the one hand, the child-centered and play oriented approaches inherent to the Danish kindergarten tradition where *"…School related Learning is out of the question…"*, and, on the other hand, the more curriculum-oriented and learning-centered tradition inherent to schooling. This ambivalence was not wiped out. And it is still on the agenda today, both with regards to the curriculum themes in day-cares, that were strengthened in 2018 along with a complementarily strengthened focus on play (Stanek et al., 2022), *and* with regards to transition from day-care to school, where professionals point to difficulties of orienting both towards curricular objectives and playful aspects at the same time (Christensen & Johansen, 2017; Odgaard, 2018a). Apart from this ambivalence, the level of institutional complexity, including the number of "school starts" that can be pointed out in most Danish transition processes, has not been reduced

as intended by the School Start Committee – rather the opposite. And the question is where this leaves continuity during transition?

A prevalent transition model in Denmark

Simultaneous to the above-mentioned governmental ambitions and initiatives regarding coherence and continuity during ECEC, all aiming at strengthened children's learning outcomes, some Danish municipalities started developing a new transition model. This transition model was not part of the official, governmental strategy, nor was it mentioned by the School Start Committee. Rather, it was decentrally developed and implemented, and during the 2000's it gained traction throughout the country. This transition model consisted in letting children transition from day-care to a transition module at school premises during spring, most often from April of May, prior to the children's school start in August. This transition model was widely launched by the municipalities as a pragmatic-economic solution to a general shortage in day-care institutions, but municipal administrations and institutions generally argued that the arrangement would benefit the children in terms of smoothing out and easing children's transition (Stanek & Vendelbo, 2019). Today, around 60 % of the Danish municipalities predominantly organize children's transition in this manner, while around 40% organize transition by letting the children stay in day-care until the summer holidays and starting school in August (EVA, 2021). In the early transition model, that has now become prevalent, pedagogical professionals from the school's after-school center ("SFO"/"Fritidshjem") are most often in charge, and the model is economically advantageous for the municipalities due to the child-adult ratio being lower than in day-care. This way of organizing transition was never mentioned by the School Start Committee or relevant Governmental bodies, but it slowly gained prevalence. Not until 2018 was this transition model explicitly mentioned in Danish legislation. However interestingly, it is legislatively defined that this transition practice, officially named "after-school center prior to the start of the school year" [author's translation] (Dagtilbudsloven, 2022 § 45 a) must *either* orient towards the curricular themes of day-care institutions, cf. Law on Day-care *or* towards the competence areas of kindergarten class, c.f. Law on School. In a sense, this specific transition model thus instantiates the earlier mentioned ambivalence between kindergarten- and school tradition that are inherent to Danish ECEC.

Questioning continuity

As mentioned earlier, Danish day-cares are legislatively obliged to ensuring a coherent transition to school during the children's last year in day-care (Dagtilbudsloven, 2022). As a consequence, the above-mentioned model, where children transition to "after-school center prior to the start of the school year" (ibid., § 45a), the children may potentially participate in school preparatory activities from the age of four (EVA, 2021). While school preparatory activities are intended to facilitate a coherent and smooth transition, professionals report that school-like activities with school-like materials in day-care, as well as during the transition module in spring, risk limiting children's curiosity and participation (Christensen & Johansen, 2017). Essentially, this also means that the intended aims of coherence and continuity are not met (Christensen, 2020; Stanek & Vendelbo, 2019). On the contrary, predominant measures, such as encouraging school-adequate behavior, introducing preparatory academic activities, and developing identical routines across day-care, transition module, and kindergarten class contexts, risk producing redundancy and false expectations (Winther-Lindqvist, 2013, 2019). And such measures risk accelerating a "downward spiral" (Stanek, 2020, p. 39), where demands and discipline challenge children's well-being and reduce their agency and motivation within educational environments from an early age (ibid.). In a recent survey (DLF, 2022), 9 of 10 Danish kindergarten class professionals report an increasing level of difficulties for children starting school, and they highlight social and personal aspects, rather than academic skills, as key to these difficulties. It seems timely to question continuity – at least in the sense of bridging a gap by introducing early academic and behavioral school preparation. Such tendencies of questioning continuity are spreading these years, both in Denmark and internationally. As an aspect of this, change and transformation are being discussed as inevitable, and potentially beneficial, aspects of transition that deserve further attention (Dockett & Einarsdóttir, 2017; Hedegaard & Fleer, 2019).

To sum up the above sections, continuity is a conceptually ambiguous and ill-defined notion within the transition field, in Denmark as well as internationally. Apart from this, the Danish transition landscape is ambiguous and filled with inherent contradictions between the historical traditions of kindergarten and school, respectively. Apart from this, locally defined transition models have been developed on the basis of economic rationales but have been made plausible through arguments on continuity and smooth transitions. These transition modules even legislatively instantiate the am-

bivalence between school tradition and kindergarten tradition, as professionals can orient to either of the two legislations. On this background, it seems necessary to question continuity during transition. By turning to sociocultural conceptualization of transition and continuity, respectively, possible answers to this questioning will be developed in the following.

A Sociocultural Perspective on Transition and Continuity

This paper employs a socio-cultural approach to transition and to continuity as an aspect of transition (Stetsenko, 2016; Wertsch, 1998; Zittoun, 2014). Fundamentally, the socio-cultural (and closely related cultural-historical) perspective builds on the assumption that children's learning and development is inextricably linked to their social, cultural and institutional settings. Learning and development takes place at the intersection between child and surroundings, between the child's perspectives and the institutional practices (Hedegaard, 2018). Recent sociocultural perspectives highlight that such processes necessarily lead to changes in both the child and in the surrounding environment (Stetsenko, 2016). This also means that transitioning from one institutional setting to another is essentially a question of transformation and boundary-crossing, rather than knowledge transfer and smooth bridging (Engeström & Tuomi-Gröhn, 2003). If changes may actually work as drivers, rather than obstacles, for children's learning and development; as "a positive developmental crisis" [author's translation] (Winther-Lindqvist, 2019, p. 47), then a completely different paradigmatic approach to transition may arise. As Zittoun has pointed out, "[t]here is much to be learnt from thematizing that gap or mismatch: the space between current motive orientation and new demands, the messy exploration, the maintained mismatch —this might be where development and change of a system occur" (Zittoun, 2014, p. 235). From this perspective, transition becomes a crucial period of development and learning in children's lives, where they transform and adapt their identities, and it may be questioned whether long-term transition periods, where pedagogical and institutional divergences are smoothed out, may in effect make children's transition more difficult and less productive (Winther-Lindqvist, 2013). Again, the question is where this approach leave continuity? In the following, a sociocultural perspective on continuity will be unfolded.

Continuity during transition: a sociocultural perspective

As evident from the above, a socio-cultural perspective on transition from day-care to school will not call for ambitions of achieving continuity by

smoothing out differences between day-care and school. However, and this is central to the argument, the above-mentioned valorization of transformation and change as drivers of learning and development does not imply that continuity is left out completely. Rather, the valorization of transformation and change necessitates a different conceptualization of continuity that will now be unfolded.

According to the above-mentioned sociocultural perspective, children's learning and development can be described as trajectories of participation that develop over time, within and across settings (Säljö, 2000). Trajectories necessarily unfold continuously, even when contexts change, partly due to the chronological timeline and, more importantly in this case, because the child draws on earlier experiences in order to actively make sense of, negotiate, develop, and transform new contexts. In this sense, the child engages actively in situated relations between own motival orientations (perspectives) and institutional-contextual demands (Hedegaard & Fleer, 2019). In Hedegaard & Edward's words: "…the child constructs and reconstructs her relationship to other people and the practices she inhabits. These processes make the child agentic in an important way in her actual social situation, putting demands on others as well as meeting demands from others" (Hedegaard & Edwards, 2014, p. 186). From this perspective, continuity during transition may be conceptualized as children's trajectories of learning and development; as the ongoing process of orienting to, making sense of, negotiating, and re-orienting in the system of relations between the child and social-institutional setting. Importantly, this also implies that institutional contexts are not viewed as fixed containers, rather as a question of participants' activities (van Oers, 1998).

In sum, according to the sociocultural perspective of the present paper, transition is essentially a question of change and transformation at the intersection between child and social-institutional environment. From this perspective, change is not seen as an obstacle or a problem, rather as a potential catalyst for learning and development. Both the child and the environment will necessarily be transformed during transition processes. According to the same perspective, continuity is a question of trajectories of experiences, participation, and sense-making. This implies that a continuous process of development and learning may very well take place in a transition process characterized by institutional change and structural discontinuity. In other words: A coherent and consistent transition can take place while keeping the institutional differences between day-care and school intact.

Concluding Discussion: Implications for Theory and Practice

This paper has shown how the notion of continuity works as a floating or empty signifier within transition research, both in Denmark and internationally, and it has pointed out that this is a problem for theoretical reflection and practical development. Apart from this, the paper has displayed that a central ambiguity runs through the Danish ECEC and transition landscape; an ongoing opposition or tension between the Nordic-German kindergarten-tradition, with its focus on children's perspectives, play and communities, and the more formal school-tradition, with its focus on curriculum and academic learning. As it has been shown, several Danish policy initiatives have aimed at smoothing out the gap between these traditions, which is part of broader international tendencies that aim at enhancing children's early learning outcomes. However, by pointing to the unintended consequences of smoothing out these historical divergences between kindergarten- and school traditions in Denmark, the paper demonstrates that socio-cultural notions of transition and continuity may enable an important reconceptualization. This reconceptualization takes both the change, that is inherent to transitioning across institutional differences, *and* the children's continuous trajectories of learning and development, into account at the same time. Thus, the paper shows that continuity during transition may be achieved by other means than academic and behavioral school preparatory activities. If transition and continuity are conflated as merely a question of bridging gaps and smooting out differences, the Danish transition model, with its ongoing transition activities during the last year in day-care, during transition module in spring prior to school start, and in the beginning of compulsory schooling in kindergarten class, does run the risk of unfolding as a range of consecutive, non-distinct transition settings that are busy preparing situations that will appear later. This stands in contrast to offering substantially divergent and flexible spaces for children's trajectories of participation and sense-making in contexts that exist in their own right, not as a mere preparation for something that comes later. As a corrective, the socio-cultural perspective presented in this paper offers a distinction between transition, as necessarily implying change, and continuity, as children's trajectories of experience, learning and development. From this perspective, professionals can scaffold children's situated sense-making by establishing radically situated and flexible spaces for participation, where children may actively contribute to the development of the activities at hand (Koch et al., 2022), and they can employ guided participation (Rogoff, 1995) where children's trajectories may develop from peripheral to central participation over time, across radically divergent settings.

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