

Germany and Scotland – Conversations on Playing and Learning in Transition to School

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Abstract

In this paper we present an informing background of theory and international research into the transition from preschool to school, before discussing the existing transition-to-school situation in Germany and Scotland. We are convinced that an understanding of the role of play is essential to inform developmentally and pedagogically appropriate practices for children in transition to school. Recognising attributes of play such as creativity and imagination means creating transition spaces in which children can exercise agency, feel good during the transition and move from familiar early childhood contexts to the newness of school. International professional conversations reflecting on these attributes in practice will complete this paper.

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to highlight the relative importance of play, agency and wellbeing in the transition-to-school process in the Federal State of Hesse (Germany), and in Scotland, and to discuss these concepts in the context of kindergarten and school experiences.

Sustaining engagement and a sense of belonging during educational transitions is central to pedagogically and developmentally appropriate practices in early childhood. It has been argued that positive early childhood transitions set children up for longer-term educational success (Dunlop, Peters

and Kagan, 2024). Educating children for life means enabling participative democracy and inclusive awareness for all children. Not a new concept, play has an important place in transition to school (Dunlop, 2003; Fabian & Dunlop, 2014). Recognising attributes of play such as creativity and imagination means creating transition spaces in which children can exercise agency, feel good during the transition and move from familiar early childhood contexts to the newness of school.

Transitions are known to further marginalise already marginalised children (Vandenbroeck, 2015): to challenge such marginalisation and promote equity we invoke the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 3, 4 and 10 – good health and wellbeing, quality education and reduced inequalities (United Nations, 2015). These SDGs are central to discussions of transitions in the context of education.

To elaborate these introductory ideas, we turn to international research on play in relation to wellbeing, agency and learning. We then focus on shared insights into transition to school in Germany and Scotland, drawing from our cross-national professional conversations and joint working during the knowledge exchange and knowledge acquisition sessions we have shared.

2. International Research on Play in Relation to Learning, Wellbeing and Agency

Currently and internationally, there is certainly a pressure on teachers to address quantifiable learning outcomes (Nilsson et al., 2018). Yet, there are many other aspects of education and of learning for life that might not be quantifiable or measurable in all educational contexts such as attitude towards learning or social and personal competences. Even when children are competent in terms of literacy and numeracy they might not be able to show their know-how in formalised testing formats.

In the context of the international debate on measuring (quantifiable) learning outcomes, there is also the international discourse on younger children's education that play is an important element of young children's learning: in our view they are in fact co-dependent and inseparable constructs in which children's wellbeing and agency are implicated (Hedges, 2020). In the

1970s and 1980s and in recent years, theorizing and researching on play became of interest again. From the classic theories Vygotsky's theory of play stays influential (Smith & Roopnarine, 2019). "Vygotsky stressed the role of pretend play as a means of organizing thought through verbal mediation, enabling self-regulation to develop." (Bergen, 2014, p. 12) The togetherness and the tension of play and learning in formal educational institutions such as kindergarten and school has become obvious in the 19th century, since the beginning of kindergarten in Germany with the Fröbel kindergarten tradition or the "infant schools" in Scotland.

International findings indicate that play leads children not only to gain social skills, communication skills and self-regulating skills (Pyle & DeLuca, 2017; Taylor & Boyer, 2020). Research also found academic gains through play such as oral vocabulary and mathematical competence (Pyle & DeLuca, 2017; Pyle & Daniels, 2017; Taylor & Boyer, 2020).

Moreover, in the dual context of the inseparability of play and learning in child development (Sahlberg & Doyle, 2020), and in transition to school processes, studies from the European context and from New Zealand show that a fracture between playing and learning (Gaches, 2023; Wilders & Wood, 2023) commonly occurs at school start. Such a fracture may be accompanied by a decrease in the joy of learning (Müller, 2014; Zumwald, 2011; Corsaro & Molinari, 2000; Peters, 2000). To exemplify this, Peters' research focused on the transition into formal schooling from the multiple perspectives of children, teachers and parents both before, and some months after school entry (2000), with examples of children noting the lack of time to play matched by an increase in "work".

A fracture between preschool and primary school also occurs in parts of the United Kingdom, where children enter school earlier than in Germany, but then experience a curricular fracture in the transition from play-related to formal learning (White & Sharp, 2007; O'Keeffe & McNally, 2022; Arnott & Duncan, 2019; Dunlop, Burns & McNair, 2023).

Dunlop's longitudinal study generated comparisons between times before school and in school which illustrate such fractures for children in Scotland: Jasmine and Rachel discussed the difference between the story books they had in their early childhood class and at home, by contrast with the lack of what they called "real books" in school. In another entry class five

of the study's focal children making the transition together from their early childhood setting into school were unequivocal at the end of their first year in school in articulating a strong wish to be back in ELC where "there were more books", "more things to play with" and "you could choose what to do" (Dunlop, 2020, p. 77).

A consequent movement towards playful pedagogies is necessary to facilitate developmentally and pedagogically appropriate transition approaches. The Early Childhood Research Review (BERA-TACTYC, 2017) links play and pedagogy, and Wood (2019) recognises that "play progresses in complexity, social organization and cognitive challenge": this links directly to observing play in both early childhood settings and Primary School to consider the degree of children's agency, reflection and collaboration involved in each (Bruner, 1996). As they potentially pursue their interests, develop their funds of knowledge (Hedges et al., 2010) and engage with their own working theories (Hedges & Jones, 2012), play offers children many opportunities for self-regulation and exploring personal identity. (Hedges, 2020). Hill and Wood (2019, p. 9) find this combination of funds of knowledge, children's interests and working theories conceptualise play and learning well, and underline "the complexity of children's life-worlds".

In summary, the existence of a fracture between the ethos of the settings before and after school transition, and between playing and formal learning appears to be an international problem (Dunlop et al., 2024). The following sections will concentrate on transition arrangements in Germany and Scotland.

3. Transition to School in Germany and Scotland in a Country Comparison of the Education Systems

In Germany, Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) and schooling are regulated quite differently in the 16 federal states. Preschooling is free in some, such as Lower Saxony (between the ages of 3 and 6). In others, parents have to pay for preschool facilities. The modes of attendance are quite flexible, yet they depend on the employment status of the parents. Across Germany, compulsory school age is around the 6th birthday. If a child is not yet 6 on the date of school start, parents and headteachers usually decide on a further year in ELC – every federal state has its own specific regulations.

In Scotland all children are entitled to two years of funded early learning and childcare (ELC) before they start school. This entitlement is for 1140 hours per year – this translates as 30 hours a week in school term time or 22 hours a week is spread throughout the calendar year. There is an increasing focus on providing this entitlement for “eligible twos”: this will include children in low-income households and where families face other challenges. Modes of attendance are flexible which may be problematic for consistency of approach, friendships and personnel. Typically children start school between the ages of 4 ½ and 5 ½ years, but recent legislative changes mean that for any child whose 5th birthday falls after the start of the school year, parents can decide on a further fully funded year of ELC.

Explicitly in Germany, there is a fracture between elementary and primary education, both regarding the transition design in general and the design from playful to formal learning. After the publication of the first OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) study results in the year 2000, there had been an intensive decade of back-to-school reforms as the German results were quite disappointing. For instance there had been a reduction of the binding enrolment age of three to six months in about half of the federal states which means that children had to start school a bit younger. All federal states had to develop curricula, so-called “Bildungspläne”, for the transition from ELC to primary school. Even though there was a clear statement of all federal states to focus on education in ELC in 2004, there were no common national guidelines for these curricula. Consequently, the binding character of the curricula, the age range and the measures of evaluation differ between the federal states (Nagel, 2009). Additionally, there were initiatives for academic training of preschool teachers. Theoretical transition models were further developed and many research projects were conducted such as TransKiGs, BiKS, the Bildungshäuser and VELP (Fried et al., 2012; Faust, 2014; Arndt & Kipp, 2016; Müller, 2014). Since this nationally intensive period of attention in the years between 2005 and 2015, there is currently less specific consideration of the transition topic in Germany (Pohlmann-Rother, Lange & Franz, 2020; Müller et al., 2019). There are not so numerous and nationwide projects, one current example is ILEA-Basis-T (Liebers et al., 2024).

By comparison, the single Scottish curriculum governs the education of children from the ages of 3 to 18: the Early Level 3-6, which spans ELC and

early primary schooling with the aim of ensuring a smooth transition in what children have learned and also in how they learn. This will mean extending the approaches which are used in pre-school into the early years of primary, emphasising the importance of opportunities for children to learn through purposeful, well-planned play (Scottish Executive, 2004, p. 1). Further this curriculum documentation asserts that

Active learning is learning which engages and challenges children's thinking using real-life and imaginary situations. It takes full advantage of the opportunities for learning presented by: spontaneous play, planned, purposeful play, investigating and exploring, events and life experiences focused learning and teaching. (p. 5)

There is much agreement in the work of researchers in Scotland that active learning, including purposeful play, has a positive and lasting impact on children's learning in ELC and the early years of primary school. However, there are two very different educational traditions visible in ELC and school in Scotland (Burns, 2022). Together these factors generated a resolution in 2022 which was passed by to the party of government in Scotland to raise the age of entry to school to 6 years of age. This has not yet been enacted though there is evidence that many parents are taking advantage of this change now that hours of term time attendance in both ELC and school are equivalent.

One of the initiatives to improve educational processes in Germany after the publication of the PISA results was that in about half of the federal states children started school 3 to 6 months younger than beforehand. In recent years some federal states such as Brandenburg and Lower Saxony changed their binding enrolment age a bit again as a lot of children had to repeat class 1 or 2. One issue of the problem might have been that younger children were obliged to go to school at younger age but the pedagogical approaches hardly changed to meet the younger children's needs to learn appropriately as curricula and teachers in class one stayed the same. Additionally, increased provision rates of children to enter school later (Landesamt für Statistik Niedersachsen, 2021) indicate that schools in Germany do not optimally adapt to the younger school children's needs. Moreover, slowing of learning progress - e.g. in the development of reading competences - in many countries and in

Germany also - make it obvious that this transition should be re-focused on in Germany (Betthäuser et al., 2023).

In Scotland new national practice guidance for children 0-8 years, *Realising the Ambition (RtA) Being Me* (Education Scotland, 2020, p. 6) underlines the importance of the earliest years in children's learning journeys. RtA emphasises there "needs to be a consistency between practice in early learning and childcare and early primary school so that the transition is as seamless as possible" (2020, p. 6). Play pedagogy is central to practice discussion in Scotland (Dunlop et al., 2023) and is currently more embedded in ELC/preschool than in early primary school, linking to reflection on wellbeing, attainment and readiness for school, and to the question of whether primary school teachers are ready for such a refocus (Burns, 2022). There is a potential conflict for practitioners as they navigate a focus on rights based perspectives in which children lead their learning, with testing of children as part of the drive to close the recognised attainment gap that exists for certain groups of children.

This growing policy focus on play and on transitions in Scotland was captured in the Transitions as a Tool for Change Project which ran from 2013 to 2016 and was followed by a seminar series which led to publication of the *Scottish Children and Families Early Childhood Transitions Position Statement* (2019), endorsed by Scottish Government. This Position Statement is informed by a shared understanding of the importance of transitions, the need to address the impact of transitions in children's lives and the idea that a shared agenda for action will afford the best possible start in new settings, which included considering the opportunities, expectations and aspirations of early educators, children and families at times of transition. This means understanding children's learning journeys, attainment and learning outcomes and the contribution of positive transitions.

Combined with the initiative to offer practice guidance for working with children from babyhood to the end of the Early Level (3-6) of the Scottish Curriculum, transitions in early childhood were firmly on the Scottish agenda. It could be claimed that curriculum and transitions are therefore intertwined. The impact of curriculum on transitions practices is complemented by a set of clear transitions principles articulated in the national practice guidance in which transitions are defined, guidance is informed by research and justified as an important aspect of practice improvement. Five sets of key features

are also illustrated, these are the key features of positive transitions practice: from home to an early learning and childcare setting; within and across an ELC setting; for babies and children accessing more than one ELC setting or provider; for babies, children and families who need additional support, and key features of positive transitions practice from an early learning and childcare setting to school.

4. Attributes of Play for Ensuring Learning, Wellbeing and Agency During Transitions

In such ways, in each of our jurisdictions, the combining of approaches to curriculum and transition can lead to reflection on a synergy between these constructs, ensuring that each influences the other. As authors we believe a commitment to play allows practice to foster children's learning, wellbeing, self-regulation, awareness of others, and facilitates the transitions which educational systems impose upon children. In Scotland the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is enacted in law in 2024. In our shared work between our two nations we seek to explore how children's, professional and parental identity and voice intersects with children's play and learning in the transition to school.

As we focus on the intersection of play and learning at times of transition, and aspirations to create schools that are playful spaces, we revisit the idea that transitions can be a tool for change. Much transitions work aspires to greater continuity for children between what they experience in early childhood kindergarten settings and what they experience at school start. We have shown that in Scotland the boundaries before school and after school are becoming more blurred through the adoption of playful pedagogies (Education Scotland, 2020). We find that the nature of curriculum is also a major factor in determining not only learning and teaching, but in consequence, the nature of the transition.

Where curriculum before and after school entry is aligned, hopes of continuity, of a sense of belonging and of using the child's existing "know how" to navigate change is at its optimum. Where the gap in the "models" held of children are very different and the purposes of kindergarten and school are

not mutually understood, then children have more to adjust to, and planned curriculum expectations may not build consequentially on their previous experiences. Dunlop's research has interrogated the connections (Dunlop, 2013) between transitions practices and relevant curriculum change, as illustrated in the revised model in Figure 1 (Müller et al., 2023, p. 12).

Impact on transitions	1 Curriculum changes	3 Combining approaches to curriculum and transitions	2 Transition practices	Impact on curriculum
Systems designed to link potentially provide for curriculum connection and continuity	System curriculum links - Tightly coupled - Loosely coupled - No natural linkages	<p><i>Social/emotional interaction...Forming identity as a school child ... Bridging to new opportunities</i></p> <p>Working together on Relationships, creating connections in environments, views of children</p> <p>Linking Settings Acknowledging curriculum differences Providing for curriculum links</p> <p><i>Extending thinking...Moving on as a learner...Creating continuity in change...cognitive interactions</i></p>	<p>Teacher collaboration and reflection. Visiting between sectors</p> <p>Parental participation</p> <p>Children's agency- Sharing children's strengths through children's learning stories and various forms of assessment</p> <p>Transition policy to foster continuity and progression</p> <p>Shared models of the child</p> <p>Shared pedagogies</p> <p>Play pedagogies</p> <p>Continuity in learning</p>	<p>Teachers working together across sectors to develop continuity and build on prior learning</p> <p>Parental interest, support and contribution</p> <p>Children who are able to show their strengths and make use of those in their learning instigate and are active in curriculum: they can make a curricular contribution</p> <p>As sectors work more closely they begin to consider transitions curriculum, learning environments, deepening understanding</p> <p>Shared understandings and concepts about young children are helpful in providing appropriately for learning</p> <p>Collaboration in appropriate teaching approaches shape curriculum offered. Children feel more familiar in similar approaches</p> <p>More continuous – new opportunities for learning build positively on the 'known'</p>
Process pedagogies (including play) going up to school with the child Content knowledge curriculum drives more formal pedagogy down	Differences in curriculum - Process oriented curriculum - Content oriented curriculum			
Emphasises the importance of shared understandings of young children	An "Active learning" curriculum (A mantra for change, but a definition difficulty) Or A "playful curriculum" that recognises what children bring to school			
Valuing children as learners with existing funds of knowledge	Direction of curriculum policy Age related Top down Bottom up			
Risk of age related silos and general ideas about 'readiness'	Policy that focuses on the importance of the early years			
More attention given to transition challenges and opportunities for children	Differences in curriculum expectations of the child:			
Child centredness Subject centredness Negotiated curriculum				

Figure 1 – The impact of transition practices on curriculum change and the impact of curriculum change on transitions practices

Here we emphasise that changes in children's curriculum experiences are linked to transitions practices in a virtuous cycle in which in turn transitions practices as they develop will have an impact on what children are offered day-to-day as part of their curriculum. Such a model invoked greater belonging, wellbeing and therefore agency for children. An understanding of play in young children is essential to the implementation of playful approaches in learning during the transition to school. We emphasise further attributes of play: attributes that are essential to children's wellbeing: play fosters creativity and imagination towards self-realisation (Talu, 2018), enables children to develop working theories (Hedges, 2014), and to draw on their funds of knowledge and identity (Hedges, 2020). Recognising such attributes means creating transitions spaces in which children can exercise agency, feel good in the transition and move from the familiar early childhood contexts to the newness of school. Hughes wrote of play defined as "incorporating free choice, personal direction and intrinsic motivation" (Hughes, 2012, p. 27). Provocations about how such a definition sits with the different pedagogies visible in early childhood and school education. Transition spaces exist both between settings, such as home and kindergarten, and kindergarten and school – and in the overlaps of experience in-between. Children engage with people, with objects and with symbol systems: in proximal processes with others they jointly create and share meaning and understandings.

Where connections are weak, the opportunity for such play and learning in transition spaces reduces and as suggested, children themselves may find difficulty in what they see as a fracture of play and of learning and their opportunities to play together at times of transitions (Gaches, 2023; Reinåmo Olsson, 2023; Wilders & Wood, 2023). This raises concerns about children's motivation and joy to learn (Müller, 2014; Zumwald, 2011; Corsaro & Molinari, 2000; Peters, 2000). Trevarthen (2018) reminds us of the natural joy visible in children's early learning and creativity, their zest for learning and their development of knowledge through play in the company of others: adults and children.

5. International Professional Conversations

Turning now to these across-nation conversations undertaken during three funded researcher exchanges in Germany and Scotland the opportunity to work together and to visit each other's countries has renewed our thinking about what matters in practice. In early childhood and primary contexts we have considered the ways in which play ease the transition to school, the value of playful spaces and approaches in the school context, and the desirability to carry play-based approaches on into primary education. We intend to explore this balance further to consider the degree to which it may be desirable to organise for play differently in pre-school and primary school contexts.

Our shared work and mutual visits move us towards some answers. In early childhood we find common ground between our Scottish and German kindergarten settings. A strong emphasis on play, self-determination, choice and respect for others was visible. Play outdoors is highly valued. We found contrasts in ideas about teaching and the balance between child led, adult led, negotiated and what Fisher (2024, p. 60) calls "adult-insisted" varied both between and within countries.

At school level the concept of play changes. Teachers may work "playfully" with children, they may create less formal class environments and in Scotland now specialized teachers are appointed to lead on play in Primary School. One such teacher (Thomson, personal communication, 2023) describes her new role of developing play in area primary schools:

I was previously a Principal Teacher in a primary school and led and developed the Play Pedagogy for the first three years of school (for five to eight year olds). Prior to this I have taught across school, nursery and was a nursery assistant too. I am now a Visiting Teacher. My role is really varied but the ultimate aim is to ensure high quality Play Pedagogy for our children in Early level (first two classes) and beyond. To achieve this there are a mixture of parts to my role: planning, organising, supporting continuing professional learning, focussed intense support with schools (who apply – there is currently a waiting list), consultation with school leader teams to enable them to support the development of play in different areas. I currently have an informal "Play is the Way" group and work on tran-

sition too. Part of this role is also looking at play as we move through primary school and planning for this.

By contrast schools also create and offer intensive play opportunities through outdoor play and forest school, or for example, in the case of the German team, through a week's intensive circus making, where every child had a part to play, where risky (and safely supervised) opportunities such as trying out flame throwing, acrobatics, juggling and circus tricks were incorporated into an immersion into circus performance with consequent growth in confidence, self-esteem and the opportunity to thrive in alternative skills and ways of being. The host school for the Circus immersive experience is also building stronger connections with its neighbouring early childhood centre (Pfeiffer, 2024).

As we look forward to our future collaborations the focus developed through our knowledge exchange brings us to a new over-arching question on the intersections of play, learning, voice and identity in the transition to school. We have identified three broad areas of future work: the ways in which young children process and make meaning in transitional spaces; how transitions shape or re-shape professional identity and voice, and how parents are positioned in relation to their children's transition to school. Our pedagogical and research conversations continue. To that end workshop and knowledge exchange and knowledge acquisition between our two countries and reflected in pedagogical discussions in our workshop at the "School as a Playful Space/Spielraum" Conference has moved our work forward.

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