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Chapter

How to Prepare for the Transition from Preschool to School: From Policies to Practices in Norway

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Abstract

Transition from preschool setting to formal schooling is seen as one of the most important transition in one's life trajectory, which may influence many people's future transition experiences. Research has confirmed that if children are prepared for school life from different perspectives when they enter formal schooling, they are more likely to succeed at school and in future life. This chapter uses Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory to present how the different environments influence children's transition with kindergartens' roles and practices being the focus. By doing so, this chapter aims to inspire better policies and practices concerning transition in Norway and beyond.

Keywords: ecological theory, kindergarten, Norway, primary school, transition

1. Introduction

Research has confirmed that if children have a successful transition experience when they enter formal schooling, they are more likely to succeed at school and in future life. Transition can be challenging for many children, as they are experiencing dramatic changes [1]. Importance has been attached to providing smooth and good transition experiences for children at policy level internationally, which is most obvious through looking at national preschool curriculum guidelines. The great majority of countries around the world that have national preschool curriculum guidelines have a chapter/section stipulating how to provide smooth and good transition experiences for children. Norway is no exception. "Transitions from kindergarten to primary schooling has moved up the Norwegian policy agenda in recent years" [2]. Transition from kindergarten to primary school has received considerable attention in the past decade in Norway and is dealt with in different reports and white papers to parliament [3]. There has been discussion on who should be ready in this transition process. Previously emphasis has been on children's readiness for school. UNICEF [4] uses the term school readiness which includes children's readiness for school, school's readiness for children, and families' readiness for school to provide a systematic framework for transition preparation. Research has documented the importance of readiness of all key stakeholders to ensure good transition experiences for children. This has provided the rationale for choosing the focus of this study.

The major goal of this chapter is to explore how national and local policies on transition from kindergarten to primary school are implemented at practical level through a case. In this chapter, the terms kindergarten and preschool are used interchangeably referring to the period before formal schooling. There is a Norwegian term—*førskolebarn*¹ for children who are going to primary school. This term will be used throughout this chapter.

Children in Norway start school in August of the year when they turn six as a result of Reform 97,² which has influenced children's adaptation in transition period. Before 1997, children started compulsory education at the age of 7. Reform 97 aims to unify primary schooling and junior secondary schooling and to be consistent with senior secondary school reform in 1994. It is mandatory for all children aged 6–16 to attend school which is called *grunnskole* in Norwegian. These 10 years are divided into two levels, the first 7 years are called *barneskole* in Norwegian and the rest 3 years are called *ungdomsskole*.

Norwegian children are entitled to a place at kindergarten when they turn one-year old no later than the end of October of the year that they apply for the place. Almost all kindergartens are mixed aged, with children aged one to three being placed in one group and children aged two and a half to six in one group. Some kindergartens place children into three groups one to two in a group, three and four in a group, and five to six in one group.

2. Theoretical framework

Transition in this chapter is seen as an important development and change process in children's life trajectory, which is influenced by the multiple environments that children are in. Yelverton and Mashburn [5] conclude in their research “that children's experiences of the Kindergarten transition are affected by the characteristics of children themselves, their educational settings, the large-scale systems that support children's educational experiences, and the way each of these is dynamic over time”, which provides rationale for utilizing Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory—which stresses the importance of studying children in multiple environments. Additionally, the Norwegian national framework plan for kindergartens also emphasizes the importance of collaborations and communications of different environments that directly influence children's transition.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory [6] which emphasizes the importance of studying children in multiple environments has been extensively used to explain how the inherent qualities of children and their environments interact to influence their growth and development. According to Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, children's lives are influenced by five ecosystems namely microsystem, mesosystem, ecosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem and each of these five interact with and influence each other.

The microsystem is the most immediate environment in which children live, comprising the daily home, school or kindergarten, peer group, and community environment of the children. The mesosystem is the interaction and linkages among the different environments of microsystems. The exosystem is the linkages that exist between two or more environments, one of which may not contain the developing

¹ Both the singular and the plural forms are the same in Norwegian.

² More information about the reform can be found here: St.meld. nr. 21 (1996–97)—regjeringen.no.

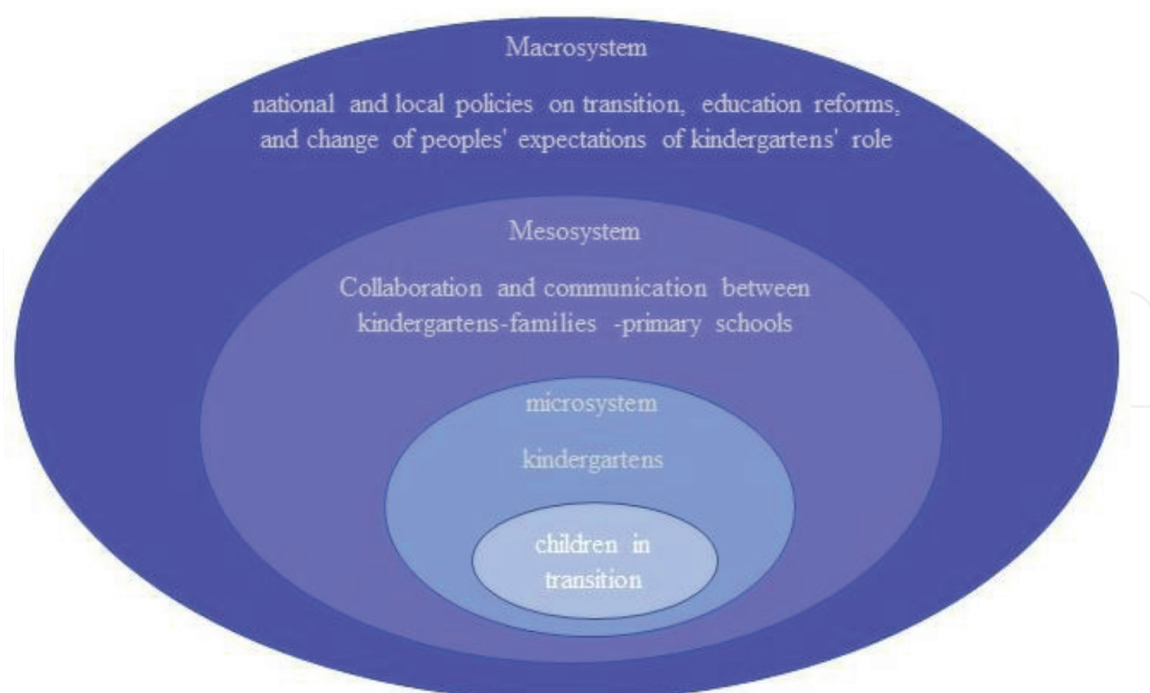


Figure 1.
Theoretical framework adapted from Bronfenbrenner.

child but influence them indirectly. These environments can be the workplaces of the child's parents, extended family members, and the neighborhood the children live in. The macrosystem encompasses the children's cultural patterns and values, specifically their dominant beliefs and ideas and political and economic systems. The chronosystem is the time dimension, including the influence of both change and constancy in the child's environment. This chapter has adapted this theory and only three systems namely microsystem, mesosystem and macrosystem are included. **Figure 1** illustrates the environments that are discussed in this chapter. In the macrosystem, social and education policy landscapes in relation to transition are first presented. Collaborations and communications between kindergarten and family, as well as kindergarten and primary school are presented in mesosystem. Practices of kindergarten are introduced in microsystem.

3. Research design

This chapter presents a case study of a larger cross-cultural research project that studies the transition from preschool to school by investigating the perspectives of leaders and teachers in kindergartens and schools. This case study is an instrumental case study and is used to understand the reality of how policies on transition from preschool to school are implemented in Norway.

3.1 The case

The case kindergarten is located in a municipality made up of different islands on the west coast of Norway. The local government has constructed three different projects to have a coherent line for the 10-year compulsory education. And the project for the first 4 years of primary school is called the Incredible Years which is

also applicable to the eldest children at the kindergarten. The present municipality transition framework plan took effect in 2013 which applies to both kindergartens and primary schools. All kindergartens in the municipality design their own educational activities for the eldest children in the kindergarten following both national and the municipality framework plan. And the case kindergarten is of no exception.

The case kindergarten has four groups of children with one group of children aged 1–3 and three groups of 2.5–6 years old. Children in this kindergarten go to two neighboring primary schools, one of which is a block away from the kindergarten. Each year, the number of children who go to primary school varies.

3.2 Data collection and data analysis

Policy documents and a follow-up interview are major data sources. Documents include government policies at national and municipality levels and are used to place the study in context, prepare for data collection, and supplement interview data. An in-depth interview was conducted with the kindergarten teacher who is responsible for Dinosaur school to solicit her opinions and experiences. She was asked to be interviewed because she is the teacher with the longest experience working with the eldest in the kindergarten and can provide rich information.

Data analysis went through two main stages. The first stage was document analysis and the second one was analyzing interview data. Both were deductive analyses following Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1 Macrosystem: Social and education policy environments

National framework plan for kindergartens is guidelines for counties, municipalities, and kindergartens to create their local curriculum. In the latest framework plan, the transition is discussed as an independent chapter (Chapter 6) while in the previous version, it was mentioned under the section on collaboration with the primary school in Chapter 5, which can be seen as a sign of the government's recognition of the importance of transition. The chapter dedicated to transition stipulates the transition from home to kindergarten, transitions in kindergarten, and transition between kindergarten and school. This chapter recounts how transition between kindergarten and primary school should be. In the framework plan, there are two main requirements for kindergartens namely kindergarten should collaborate with parents and primary schools and kindergarten should ensure a good foundation and motivation among children for starting school through different approaches. The framework plan indeed provides a framework and local governments and kindergarten make their own detailed policies and curriculum according to their circumstances. "There is a long-standing tradition of local self-government and decentralisation which also applies to the early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector" [1]. Based on the stipulation in the framework plan, different counties especially municipalities have constructed their own more detailed framework plan for transition between kindergarten and school.

The 20-page Framework Plan of the case municipality details the aims of the plan, the annual plan for the transition, five development domains of children in the last year of kindergarten and first year of primary school, competences that pupils

of second year should develop, different forms for information exchanges between kindergartens and primary schools, and information of different projects that aim to make preschool education and primary school education consistent. Both kindergartens and primary schools should use the transition plan as a reference to construct their daily activities. And they need to communicate with each other and go through collaboration initiatives according to different needs in the early spring of the year.

All førskolebarn go to Dinosaur School in their last year at kindergarten as part of the curriculum. Therefore, no extra fee is charged to parents. The Dinosaur School is a project initiated by a university in Norway. Not all municipalities/kindergartens across Norway utilize it. Each session lasts 45 minutes and in total there are about 60 sessions. Usually, the førskolebarn go there once a week for two sessions and it is up to the kindergartens to decide the frequency. The location of Dinosaur Schools varies from municipalities to municipalities, with some in kindergartens, some in primary schools or in folk schools of the municipality. In the case kindergarten, the teaching is conducted in the folk school and the kindergarten teacher and the children walk there each time. The aims of the Dinosaur school are to strengthen children's social and emotional competences, especially in terms of recognizing and understanding emotions in oneself and others, taking others' perspectives, developing skills in problem-solving and conflict management, emotion control, empathy, self-confidence and self-control. The themes are built on *The Incredible Years*. The contents are based on six stories of three cartoon figures where children can explore topics about emotions, communication, relations, and conflict resolution based on everyday problems. Each of the six stories has a theme that is discussed during the teaching. Activities are organized more or less like the teaching activities in primary schools, that is, classroom teaching followed by different activities in small groups. At the same time, teachers utilize practice-oriented methods such as the use of large hand puppets, conversations about video clips, role-plays and games, as well as other various activities related to the theme. Besides, children are given some tasks to accomplish with their parents at home, which also aims to establish close collaboration between kindergartens and parents and inform them of the different topics that children have learned at Dinosaur school³. The number of children in each class varies depending on how many førskolebarn there are that year and on average there are around 20 children in each class. The children are from the nearby kindergartens and they usually will go to the same neighboring schools. Kindergarten teachers of the children in the class take turns to teach in the Dinosaur school.

Additionally, the case municipality initiates different joint projects for kindergartens and primary schools to ensure that children will not feel insecure or strange when they go to primary schools. Starting in 2019, the municipality makes use of the culture schools to create joint music and drama projects between kindergartens and schools.

In general, the transition from kindergarten to primary school in Norway is unproblematic for most children [7]. And they can adapt to primary school life in about a month's time and some may need just a week or two to get used to school life. At the same time, some have problems. According to the interviews with six teachers from three primary schools conducted by the author, the common problems are lack of pre-academic knowledge, lack of self-care skills e.g. not being able to go to the toilet on their own, not being able to dress themselves, lack of sense of security because of leaving the familiar environment and people and friends, lack of social skills to make new friends, and not being able to listen to the teachers and take turns to do things.

³ More information about Dinosaur school can be found here: <https://dua.uit.no/skole-barnehage/>.

4.2 Mesosystem and microsystem: Kindergartens as the coordinative and active actors

This part presents how the Framework plans at national and municipal levels are carried out in practice with a focus on kindergarten's roles and practices.

4.2.1 Involving and communicating with parents

Parents are involved in this transition year by doing tasks given by the teacher at the Dinosaur school together with their children. Kindergarten teachers also encourage parents to talk with their child what they have learned at Dinosaur school before doing the tasks together. Besides this, kindergarten teachers also work with parents to train children's executive skills and inform parents of the importance of being consistent in their practices.

Additionally, kindergarten teachers make use of different opportunities to communicate with parents about their children. There are documentation and forms kept by teachers about the children and their development. The teachers need to get parents' permission to share children's information with primary schools and especially need to communicate with parents about what information they want them to share with primary school teachers. Please find the forms that parents/guardians need to sign in Appendix.

Traditionally, early childhood education and care in Norway adopts social pedagogy tradition and focuses primarily on social skills and care. This has some changes in recent decades, with a shift in policy focus on learning and its outcomes [8]. Kindergartens are referred to as learning organizations in the national framework plan for kindergartens [9], which did not appear in the previous national framework plan. Besides, with kindergartens having more educated staff, parents' expectations of kindergarten are also under change. They now expect kindergartens to teach and prepare their children for primary school in addition to care. Furthermore, they hope that kindergarten teachers can pass on their knowledge and the documents they have kept about their children to primary school teachers so that the primary school teachers know their children and prepare accordingly to teach.

4.2.2 Communicating and collaborating with primary schools

As mentioned above, in early spring every year, the kindergarten and primary school sit together to go through their collaborative tasks which vary according to the needs of the year. Every May, kindergarten teachers usually the lead teacher of each group visit the two primary schools to share the information of individual children who are going to school in August. As mentioned above, whether to share and what to share with primary school depend on the willingness of parents. More and more parents want kindergarten teachers to share their children's information with primary school in the hope that teachers can be better prepared to teach their children.

Besides sharing information, kindergarten teachers and primary school teachers communicate about using the same or similar languages to communicate with and instruct children so that children will not feel at a loss when they sit in primary school classrooms. For example, when asking children to raise their hands, the kindergarten teacher used to say "en stille hånd" while the primary school teacher usually says "rekk opp hånda". Now the kindergarten teachers in this case also use this expression.

Every May or June depending on the negotiation between the kindergarten and the primary school, children are taken by the kindergarten teachers to the primary school they are going to the following semester to get familiar with the schoolteachers and leaders as well as the environment. In some kindergartens, the *førskolebarn* may go to different primary schools in the neighborhood which is also why kindergartens and primary schools have to arrange the time in advance. During the visit, *førskolebarn* visit the classrooms and sit in the class for around 20 minutes. They play in the playground. Since the case kindergarten is very near to one of the schools where some of the children are going, they go and play there quite frequently. They greet teachers and students there whenever they pass the school.

The kindergarten and the primary school have a joint music program, which is initiated by the municipality and held in the folk school. Every week, the *førskolebarn* join the primary school choir where they sing together. The joint project ensures that kindergarten children have contact and establish relationships with older school children. Doing activities with primary school also bestows on children a sense of belonging to the school.

Furthermore, primary school teachers may be involved in the Dinosaur school when there is any child with special needs. They sit in the classroom and observe the child(ren)'s behaviors and performances so they know what to do when the child(ren) is /are in their classroom.

4.2.3 Preparing children for primary schooling

Besides involving, communicating and collaborating with parents and primary schools, the kindergarten carries out different activities to prepare children for their primary schooling.

The kindergarten helps children to master social skills such as how to be polite to others, how to talk with others and how to make friends. Once a week, kindergarten teachers organize all the last year's children for an outing activity through which they can socialize, establish and enhance friendships so they will not feel alone in primary school. It is the kindergarten's or Norwegian belief that outdoor activities promote children's cognitive development, which has evidence support as well. The Dinosaur school is another bigger arena for them to meet more of their peers because all the children of the nearby kindergartens who are going to primary schools go to the same dinosaur schools.

Kindergarten teachers purposely encourage children to share and practice what they have gained in Dinosaur school in kindergarten. For example, some children teach the younger children that "I can be angry, but I can also calm down". The practices are in line with the goals of the Incredible Year Project that children can teach others what they have learned.

Kindergarten teachers motivate children to be interested in learning letters and numbers by putting them on the walls and talking about them from time to time. They motivate more able children by challenging them for example asking those who are able to read stories for other children. They help children to develop at their own pace. At the same time, they make sure that all children know and recognize their own names.

Additionally, kindergarten teachers help children to establish some good learning habits. They train children to concentrate on one thing at a time and listen to people who are talking. If the children are interested in writing, they show them the correct pen grip. Moreover, they act as role models to children on how to write and where to start on a piece of paper.

Though they train children's ability to take care of themselves throughout the kindergarten years, kindergarten carries out more intensive training on self-care

among the last year children. For example, they need to be able to take care of their own things and go to the toilet independently.

4.2.4 Challenges

There are different challenges that kindergartens face in helping children enjoy a smooth and good transition. Two are more obviously mentioned by the kindergarten teacher. One is the time issue. In the past, the kindergarten invited schoolchildren to their kindergarten to share and read for children who were going to school the next year. However, because of the tight schedule, they have stopped this practice. According to the kindergarten teacher, this practice generated interest and motivation among children to start primary school.

The other challenge is about getting information from primary schools especially who are going to teach the first year. Children and parents are eager to know who will teach their children, which will give them a sense of security. However, it is not always easy for primary schools to make the decision and incidents happen. The teacher felt it a pity that nothing can be done at this moment to tackle these two issues.

5. Summary and concluding remarks

Transition from kindergarten to primary school is one of the most important life trajectories for people. It is of great significance to ensure a smooth and good transition experience for young children. This chapter aims to explore how national and local policies on transition from kindergarten to primary school are implemented at a practical level through a case. This case study has indicated that macrosystem that dictates the policy landscape for children's transition affects kindergarten practices in the form of guidelines at national and local levels. The Dinosaur School project initiated by the municipality in their local transition policy document is well received by kindergarten teachers, primary school teachers and parents. The mesosystem consisting of collaboration and communication between kindergartens and families, kindergartens and primary schools has a direct and significant impact on children's transition experiences while kindergarten as one of the key environment shoulders important role in the coordination of collaboration between kindergartens, schools and families. Joint projects between kindergartens and primary schools are especially thought highly of by teachers of both parties.

The transition projects of the given case in this chapter has been carried out for 7 years and has been well received by both kindergarten teachers and primary school teachers. The survey conducted by Rambøll [10] has indicated that many kindergartens have substantial local freedom to decide the transition activities and to adapt the Framework Plan to local conditions and needs. The measures taken have in various degrees helped ease the strangeness and anxiety as a result of the transition for children. There are no universal best practices applicable to all kindergartens in Norway or all cultures. However, there are some good practices that can inspire better practices and the case presented here can be of some inspiration.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Appendix

	CONSENT for information exchange	SAMTYKKE FOR UTVEKSLING AV INFORMASJON
Ikkje offentleg jmf. Offl. § 13 / Fvl § 13 unofficial		
Namn på barn/ungdom:	Name of the child/youth	Fødd: Date of birth
Eg/vi <i>samtykker</i> med dette i at instansane under kan utveksle og drøfte informasjon knytt til mitt/vårt barn. <small>I/we agree that information within the following lists concerning my/our child can be exchanged and discussed</small>		
<input type="checkbox"/>	
<input type="checkbox"/>	
<input type="checkbox"/>	
<input type="checkbox"/>	
<input type="checkbox"/>	
<input type="checkbox"/>	
<input type="checkbox"/>	
Tema som er omfatta av teieplikta og som kan drøftast er: Confidential topics that can be discussed		
	•	
	•	
	•	
	•	
Eg/vi er kjend med at eg/vi når som helst kan trekke samtykket tilbake. Dette bør gjerast skriftleg. <small>I/we know that we can withdraw the consent. This must be done in writing</small>		
Foreldre/foresette si underskrift: Parents'/guardians' signature		
.....
Dato Date	Underskrift frå foreldre/foresette	Signature of parents'/guardians
Eg/vi trekker med dette vårt samtykke. <small>I/we withdraw our consent</small>		
Foreldre/foresette si underskrift:		
.....
Dato Date	Underskrift frå foreldre/foresette	Signature of parents'/guardians

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