

TRANSITION COMPETENCE AND RESILIENCY IN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract

Resiliency and transition competence can not be seen as innate. This review of research highlights the relevance of social systems for coping with demanding life events and circumstances. Transitions into educational systems are identified as gate keepers for educational settings. It is only when transitions are successfully mastered that children and families are enabled to use these setting as a resource for support and personal growth to build resilient attitudes and behaviour. The identification of protective factors has led to preventive approaches to equip children with competencies to meet future demands and the intersections regarding transition competence and resiliency are discussed. This paper recommends that co-construction in educational settings requires further research and practice.

Introduction

Today children and their families are confronted with societal changes that, compared to former generations, encompass more and different disruptions and discontinuities in their biographies. Not only normative critical life events like marriage and birth of children and mothers starting to work outside home, but also parental divorce and remarriage may affect adults and children as well as phases of unemployment and poverty or migration into other cultural contexts (Fthenakis, 1998). This means that children growing up today have a higher probability of being confronted with increasing personal demands resulting from transitions in their own, and in their family's development. In this article we would like to discuss transitions into educational institutions as key processes that open up social and educational resources that may enhance resilient attitudes and behaviours in order to strengthen children (and parents) to deal with future demands.

About resiliency

Resiliency refers to a general capability to deal successfully with sustaining stressful life situations, either resulting from permanent status (like extreme poverty) or from disruptive incidents (like natural catastrophes, war, death of parents). Other reasons for potentially detrimental life situations can be found in critical life events (Filipp, 1995), that have been described as phases of heightened vulnerability in a family's or in an individual's development, especially if several adverse factors unite, e.g. in a protracted divorce with a lot of conflict between partners. Resiliency describes the psychological strength to withstand biological, psychological, and psycho-social developmental risks. Despite difficulties and burdens that may obstruct or even destroy children's healthy path of development, resilient children develop age appropriate competencies (Rutter, 2000, 2001). Besides theoretical frameworks of stress and coping, the concept of personal health and wellbeing (Antonovsky, 1987) underpins resiliency research.

Longitudinal empirical evidence (Egeland, Carlson & Sroufe, 1993; Werner & Smith, 1982, 1992, 2001) shows that resilient children approach problems and difficult situations in an active way and that they believe in the success of their doing. They use their talents effectively, have a strong internal locus of control and they know and use their resources, e.g. mobilize social support systems. These competencies enable a perspective that views stressful

events as challenging rather than overburdening. These children are also able to ease their tensions and use relaxation methods.

In contrast with earlier approaches, today it is assumed that resiliency is not a stable, innate personal characteristic. Rather resiliency is seen as a competence achieved in an interactional process of a child and his/her developmental context, and may be subject to changes depending on circumstances and phases of development.

Although resiliency can be understood as coping competence (Zimmerman & Arunkumar, 1994) under adverse circumstances, a lot can be learned from resiliency research to develop preventive approaches (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998) and support resilient attitudes and behaviours in educational settings (Wustmann, 2004) so that children are equipped with competencies that heighten the probability of resiliency and their ability to survive psychologically, if adverse circumstances should occur.

Fostering resiliency through strengthening protective factors

Resiliency research has identified protective factors that work as a counterbalance, helping children not only to withstand but to cope successfully and develop further in an age-appropriate way, thus turning biographical disruptions into positive developments (Rutter, 2000; Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000). As a consequence of the identification of protective factors, pedagogical efforts have been established on different levels:

On the individual level a child can be supported by teaching and strengthening relevant competencies necessary for coping with strain. Competencies to solve problems and develop strategies to deal with conflicts constructively can be supported. Self-determined activities and responsibility, for example by means of cooperative learning and participation, lead to self-effectiveness and strengthening self-esteem. Social competencies can be taught to strengthen relationships. Strategies for maintaining good health and methods of relaxation are important, as well as spiritual resources (Lösel & Bliesener, 1990, 1994).

On the level of relationships, empirical results on resiliency (Joseph, 1994) note the importance of secure attachment and trust. Children need a stable emotional positive relationship with at least one key person who gives attention to the child's needs and responds adequately to them. This does not necessarily need to be a biological parent. Support of children can be given indirectly by strengthening parental competencies, thus stepping up protective factors within the family system. Parents can be supported in practicing an authoritative democratic parenting style, whereby they support and value children's decision making and self-regulation through adaptive guidelines and emotionally fulfilling parent and child relationships (Baumrind, 1989). They can be supported to acquire constructive problem solving and adequate communication techniques. Acquiring resilient attitudes and behaviours themselves, they can model these to their children. Again, "parents" need not be the child's biological parents. Competent and caring adults like grand-parents, relatives, neighbours or friends, may function as a parent substitute. Positive relationships with peers offer opportunities for showing and receiving empathy, and friends can function as diversion from strain and crisis.

On the level of social networks a number of protective factors have been identified. Positive experiences within educational institutions, including clear rules and structures, high but adequate performance expectations and constructive feedback, are important for learning resilient behaviour. Educational institutions are especially important, because nearly all children have access to institutional education and care before school and need to find his/her position within the schooling system. Educational settings and community resources outside

the family play a very important role in developing preventive resilient attitudes and behaviours (Wustmann, 2004). Advisory centres, medical care, social networks etc. are valuable resources. Marriage counselling, for example, may work as a protective factor, because a harmonious marriage leads to familial cohesion and gives hold and stability in difficult situations.

Looking at protective factors on three different levels makes clear that children can not turn into resilient persons by themselves. They need significant support from their social systems. It is the resources in the social system that have been shown to be a decisive factor in the learning and development of resilient attitudes and behaviour that also foster long term personal development and growth.

About transitions

Transitions have been defined as phases of life changes connected with developmental demands that require intensified and accelerated learning and that are socially regulated (Griebel & Niesel, 2004a; Welzer, 1993). Transitions are also characterised as phases of heightened vulnerability (Wustmann, 2004). Examples in adult life are marriage, birth of the first child, starting work after school, or divorce. In a child's life, transitions can be the birth of a sibling, parental separation, puberty, and, last not least, transitions into educational institutions. Transitions can stimulate further development, but under adverse conditions lasting difficulties can occur, leading to problematic behaviour with disadvantageous consequences for the child. Advanced theory of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987) and of critical life events (Filipp, 1995) suggest that the individual appraisal of critical life events has to be considered. If a demand is regarded as a challenge, it motivates additional effort to cope. From the perspective of transition, coping and development are a key focus.

Transitions in education

In the field of education, coping with transitions between family and educational institutions has found growing attention: transition from family to crèche and into nursery school, the transition to "big" school being the most prominent one (Broström & Wagner, 2003; Fabian & Dunlop, 2002; Griebel & Niesel, 2002a; Pianta & Cox, 1999; Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003). Bronfenbrenner (1981) sees the child's adaptation to kindergarten as prototypical for the competence to function well in other ecological contexts. Successful transitions are supposed to strengthen the competencies of children, whereas problems with coping and maladjustment raise the probability that subsequent transitions will not be coped with adequately (Kienig, 2002; Ladd & Price; 1987; Oerter & Montada, 1999).

From a background of family research, Cowan's (1991) concept of family transition has been adapted to study the multiple demands on children and their parents during the transition process into the educational system, i.e. the entry to kindergarten (Niesel & Griebel, 2000), and to the formal school system (Griebel & Niesel, 2002b, 2004a). Associated with the transition to schoolchild, parents also experience the transition to being parents of a schoolchild.

From a social constructivist perspective, transitions can be understood as co-constructions (Valsiner, 1989), in which the communication and involvement of all participants is critical in establishing agreed understandings around key concepts. Thus in respect to the co-construction of transition to school it makes more sense to look at the system that includes the child, the pre-school institution, the school, home, and community (Dunlop & Fabian, 2002; Ramey & Ramey, 1998).

Fostering coping through transitions

Pedagogical support for the group of ‘transitioners’ as a whole, as well as for individual needs, presupposes a clear picture of the demands children and their families have to cope with during the transition process. From transition theory, transition competence is a characteristic not of the individual child alone, but a function of communication and interaction of all participants (Griebel & Niesel, 2003, 2004b).

On an individual level, the transition from kindergarten to school means a change of identity – being a school child is different from being a child in kindergarten. The change of identity can be supported by rituals. Coping with strong emotions like excited anticipation, curiosity, pride as well as insecurity and fear can be supported and eased by pedagogical activities. Information about school and being a schoolchild becomes more important at the end of the kindergarten time. Competence in reading, writing and calculating is supported when children are exposed to literacy and numeracy in early childhood.

On an interactive level, changes in and termination of relationships established during kindergarten often occur as children start school and strategies and rituals make help in this transition. Adaptation to school is easier, if the child visits the new class together with friends (Margetts, 1997, 2000). Building a positive relationship with the teacher is of great importance (Pianta, 1999). Families should be aware that relationships within the family also change as the child becomes more independent. The role of a school child with expectations and sanctions differs from a kindergarten child’s role. Role play and information, and experiences gained from school visits and contact with school children and teachers can ease the child’s transition.

On a contextual level, it takes a common effort of the entire family to integrate the demands of different settings: school, family, and job(s). If other transitions within the family (e.g. birth of a sibling, parent returning to work) take place close to school entry, transition to school may become more complicated. To cope with the change of curricula between kindergarten and school, transition programs that involve close cooperation between educational institutions and take the child and their family into account are important (Margetts, 2002).

Transition competence means competence of the social system

Measuring isolated, pre-academic skills in the child as well as neglecting the child’s relations in family and school, would be too narrow to conceptualize a child’s readiness for school (Broström, 2002; Pianta & Cox, 1999). Transitions are co-constructed in social processes and embedded in social contexts and involve complex interdependencies. They depend on effective communication. It is verbal information, verbal instruction, words and language of school, that have to be understood (Fabian, 2002). Social competencies enhance the family’s coping with transitions (Griebel & Niesel, 2003). Researchers have identified different social skills children need in coping with transition processes (Fabian, 2002; Griebel & Niesel, 2002a; Margetts, 2002). They include self-reliance, problem-solving, and coping with stress. The child’s well-being has been described as critical for the transition to school (Fabian, 2002). Clarification of expectations concerning developmental tasks and pedagogical support has to start early in the transition process between all participants. Co-constructing of school readiness and readiness to being a schoolchild and being parents of a school-child needs effective communication and participation.

Transition competence and resiliency: surfaces of intersection

Life events that may trigger resiliency are more comprehensive and are characterized by cumulative risk factors while transitions refer to normative or non-normative critical life events (Filip, 1995) with specific demands that can be matched with adequate competences. Despite this qualitative distinction there is an intersection in the fields of resiliency and transition. Some of the events marked by resiliency research like divorce or remarriage have been characterized as transitions in family development. Within a framework of resiliency, transitions have been categorized as phases of heightened vulnerability (Wustmann, 2004).

Both concepts focus on circumstances or phases of strain and risk but they go further than looking at problems with coping and adaptation. They include (re-)search for those factors and strategies that bear the chance for personal growth and development. In other words, both perspectives are not deficit oriented but are looking for every child's/family's resources and strengths. This is especially true for normative transitions between family and the educational system as they appear in the segmented German educational system.

Research on resilient children and research on transitions have each stimulated programmatic changes in the pedagogy of early childhood and early years of schooling. In an international perspective, new curricula have set a priority in strengthening the child's competencies from an early age including: a stable self-concept, high self-esteem, self-regulatory skills, secure attachment with parents and teacher, competencies for solving interpersonal conflicts in a constructive way, developing optimism, self-confidence and a sense of self-efficacy, as well as learning how to learn, problem solving and other skills like linguistic and intercultural skills (Fthenakis, 2003).

It is obvious that resilient attitudes and behaviours make it easier for children to cope with transitions. But does coping with the demands of transition foster resilient attitudes and behaviour? It has been said that transitions have been defined as phases of intensified and accelerated learning and that successful transitions are supposed to strengthen the competencies of children. But there is another aspect to look at. Resiliency is fostered by identifying social resources and encouraging children to use these resources. Along with family education, educational institutions like kindergartens and schools play a key role in fostering resilient attitudes and behaviour. This is only possible if transitions into educational institutions are mastered successfully.

Transitions are gate-keepers for institutional settings of education. How well the child passes through the gate has implications for life long learning. In seeking to better understand the long-term consequences of successful coping, for example with transitions from family to kindergarten, we need to consider: Does it strengthen a child's competence to deal with future transitions in the educational system? Or does it strengthen the child in a general sense thus laying a foundation for resilient behaviour? We also need to question how children's coping with transition demands in the educational system is affected if they have to deal with transitions in family development at the same time, such as when their parents divorce, a grandparent dies or a sibling is born. It is through investigating the interdependencies within these social systems that we will be better equipped to support children and families in this critical life event.

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