Chapter 11
Transition to School from the Perspective of the Girls' and Boys' Parents

Anna Kienig

11.1 Introduction

The aim of the study reported in this chapter was to examine gender as a factor that influences children's transition to school from the perspective of their parents.

Starting school is described in psychological and pedagogical literature as an important developmental and educational event, influencing both the child's wellbeing and his/her school performance (Alexander and Entwisle 1988; Dockett and Perry 2002; Ladd and Price 1987; Margetts 2013; Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta 2000). The change of educational environment presents multiple challenges to some children as they cope with many differences between home, the preschool setting and school: managing changes in physical, social and philosophical environments (Fabian 2013); developing resilience (Fthenakis 1998); and experiencing changes in identity, roles and relations (Griebel and Niesel 2002). The start to school is therefore of interest to teaching professionals, scientists, and politicians engaged in matters of education. The child's transition to school can be considered from numerous perspectives: the child; family; school; teachers; the broadly-defined local community; and educational system.

Researchers have identified various factors (such as psychological, organismic and behavioural child characteristics or family issues) that influence children's transition to school (Alexander and Entwisle 1988; Dockett and Perry 2002; Fabian and Dunlop 2002; Griebel and Niesel 2007; Harrison 2014). This chapter highlights gender as one of Bronfenbrenner's (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006) "demand characteristics", exploring parents' expectations and opinions about school (family context) for their children as they make the transition to school.

A. Kienig (✉)
University of Bialystok, Bialystok, Poland
e-mail: ankienig@uwb.edu.pl

11.2   Theoretical Perspectives

The theoretical framework for this research was Urie Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model of development (Bronfenbrenner 1979, 1986, 2005; Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006) with the ecological transition as its key element. Details of the bioecological model and its application to the transition to school have been canvassed in earlier chapters in this book, particularly Chap. 1. These details are assumed in this chapter. The process of a child's transition to school can be considered and analysed at each of the levels presented by Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model.

A bioecological approach enables an understanding of how convictions, cultural values and interrelations shape the ways in which educational transition is conceptualised and experienced on both an individual and macrosystemic level. In this sense, starting school is an ecological change and both a result of, and a stimulus to, developmental processes (Bronfenbrenner 1979).

11.3   Transition to School

In psychological and pedagogical literature the term *transition* is commonly used to describe the process of change which takes place in any individual's life (Brammer 1992) as the individual changes states of being. The transition takes place when an individual's status in his/her environment changes as a result of a transformation in the roles s/he fulfils (all the forms of activity and relations with others) or a change in his/her environment, or both these factors (Bronfenbrenner 1979). Transition results from both the biological changes that happen to an individual and from the changes in his/her external conditions.

Kagan and Neuman (1998) point out numerous conceptualizations of the term "transition". Some interpret "transition" as an act which children, families and educational programs undertake just once, such as when the children and parents first visit school. Others consider it as a sequence of extended efforts undertaken to connect the child's natural environment (including his/her family) to his/her educational environment outside the family (for example, pre-school). Others still consider transition to be a manifestation of the developmental rule of continuation, thus creating a new approach to educational programs. Transitions can be periods of intensified and accelerated developmental change, influenced by social situations and contexts involving the environment, social and cognitive learning, and as emotional turmoil (Fabian and Dunlop 2005).

Educational transition, in turn, is a process of change which occurs when children move from one place or stage of education to another (Fabian and Dunlop 2002). It is perceived as a process of transition to a new *setting*; in this case, a new school (Fabian 2007) and as a major transition in the life of children (Fabian and Dunlop 2002). This process leads to changes in identity, roles and relationships (Bronfenbrenner 1979; Griebel and Niesel 2002). Transition to school is one such educational transition and is nowadays considered to be a long-lasting process,

encompassing weeks and even months before and after the education has begun, and not, as it was thought previously, as a momentary event (Margetts 2014). Fabian (2007) notes that this process does not necessarily take a linear course, but is, rather, a series of comprehensive and varied interactions. To achieve an understanding and a sense of positive experience demands that everyone participating in this process – children, parents and teachers – communicate and cooperate with each other. A child's transition into the school system is an exceptionally important process not only for the child and his/her family; it is also a time in which all the stakeholders of this process enter a new educational landscape (O'Kane 2013).

Intrapersonal and interpersonal influences on transition to school (Harrison 2014) include psychological (for example, child characteristics of temperament), organismic (for example, gender, communication), and behavioural child characteristics (externalizing and internalizing behaviours), interpersonal relationships (such as child-parent attachment, student-teacher relationships), and contribution (emotionally supportive or stressful) (Birch and Ladd 1997; Harrison 2014). Several sets of factors influencing children's transition to school have been identified. Dockett and Perry (2003) noted the areas of: knowledge (ideas, facts, or concepts that children know); social adjustment to the school context (such as knowledge on interaction with peers and teachers; skills; disposition (attitudes toward school); rules (the expectations of behavior and action); physical attributes or characteristics (age and general health); family issues (family interactions with the school and changes to family life); and educational environment at school. Fabian (2013) listed the factors which influence successful transitions to school such as parents' and children's positive attitudes to school, learning, and teachers' expectations. Brooker's (2008) list of factors included a positive sense of identity, the presence of familiar adults and friends, understanding roles and routines, a sense of control and purpose, and having an environment of opportunities. There are many similarities and commonalities among these lists.

Bronfenbrenner (2005; Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006) argued that demand characteristics, including age and gender, can influence proximal processes (interactions at the level of microsystems) and determine their developmental outcomes.

> Demand characteristics are those to which he [Bronfenbrenner] had referred in earlier writings as "personal stimulus" characteristics, those that act as an immediate stimulus to another person, such as age, gender, skin colour, and physical appearance. These types of characteristics may influence initial interactions because the expectations are formed immediately. (Tudge et al. 2009, p. 200)

The gender "demand characteristic" is considered in this chapter.

11.4   Gender and the Transition to School

A growing body of research indicates that there are key differences between boys and girls that can affect both learning and achievement. These differences include psychological and behavioural child characteristics, such as non-cognitive skills,

achievement striving, self-control, motivation, and aggression (Kriesi and Buchmann 2014). Stereotypically, girls are characterized as compassionate, docile, diligent, conscientious, even-tempered and good in languages. Boys are perceived as physically active, boisterous, competitive, lacking discipline, and good at math, science, and sports (Liben and Bigler 2002). Girls tend to be able to plan and organize their work more effectively than boys. They are also more able to apply their skills to different learning contexts. Only a few studies (Harrison 2014; Kienig 2002, 2012; Kriesi and Buchmann 2014; Margetts 2013; Siu Ling Chen and Rao 2011; Upadyaya and Eccles 2014) have asked whether the transition to school is perceived or experienced differently by boys and girls and, if so, how these differences may affect further academic achievement. When boys and girls make the transition to school, they face the task of adopting student roles as defined by the particular institution: developing certain work and learning habits and motivation for achievement, and establishing positive social relationships with teachers and peers Dockett and Perry 2002; Entwisle and Alexander 1993; Entwisle et al. 2003; Ladd et al. 2006). According to Kriesi and Buchmann (2014, p. 56) 'gender-stereotypical socialization practices are assumed to be associated with gender differences in competencies, personality traits, and behaviors'.

Numerous studies suggest that gender is a factor determining the outcomes of educational transitions. In a new social environment, for example, girls are reported to function better than boys, enter new social roles with more ease, and perform tasks more effectively (Karwowska-Struczyk 2000; Kienig 2002, 2012; Kopik 2007; Kriesi and Buchmann 2014; Margetts 2013; Upadyaya and Eccles 2014). Kriesi and Buchmann's (2014) findings on the antecedents of boys' and girls' coping with the transition to school show that, before entering school, girls score higher on cognitive competencies, school-relevant knowledge, conscientiousness and have a more positive social self-concept than boys. These researchers concluded that girls were better prepared than boys for the transition to school – possibly because of boys' slower maturation and development or gender-specific socialization practices.

Gender is also a differentiating factor in the kinds of activity undertaken and in developing social and emotional competencies (Karwowska-Struczyk 2000). The connection between social and emotional maturity and gender was emphasised in a study by Kopik (2007), where girls achieved higher levels of socio-emotional maturity than boys. Moreover, girls achieved higher scores on measures of self-reliance: they were better at looking after themselves; more concerned with orderliness; better able to use and take care of school supplies; more able to find their way around pre-school or school; and better at performing tasks without assistance (Kopik 2007). Kopik's study also showed that girls were more able to engage in agreeable and friendly co-operation with peers and were more "truthful" than boys. Girls attained higher scores than boys in all the categories of group co-operation assessed by Kopik including: readiness to co-operate; ability to conciliate and compromise; and ability to judge the behaviour of peers. Kopik (2007) also noted that, when compared to boys, girls displayed more positive dispositions such as: attitude towards tasks; attitude to personal commands; perseverance; concentration; interest; and self-assurance when making decisions.

Girls experienced fear and uncertainty less often than boys, and reacted with anger less often than boys (Kopik 2007). The ability to empathize was higher in girls than in boys. From this study, Kopik argued that socio-emotional differences between the sexes were partially determined by stereotypical perceptions of social roles assigned to boys and girls but that another partial reason for the difference in achievement may be a faster rate of development for girls in their early years (Kopik 2007). Other research also suggests that boys and girls vary in terms of socio-emotional competencies (Kienig 2002). Ashiabi and O'Neal (2015, p.11) referring to Bronfenbrenner suggest that child gender modifies some of the effects of contextual factors on child social development and the effects of proximal processes on child social behaviors (positive and negative) differed significantly by child gender.

Teachers play a significant role in the gender socialization process, not only in supporting positive teacher-child interactions but also as they supervise peer interactions in kindergartens (Siu Ling Chen and Rao 2011). Findings from a range of studies have suggested that teachers uphold gender stereotypes (Kriesi and Buchmann 2014; Siu Ling Chen and Rao 2011). For example, teachers often describe girls as doing relatively well academically when compared with boys (Cowan et al. 2005). Some teachers give more feedback to girls than they do to boys. It has been argued that girls are more sensitive to teachers' evaluative feedback than boys and teachers' perceptions have stronger impact on girls' motivation and self-perceptions (Kriesi and Buchmann 2014).

11.5 Family Context and Transition to School

Numerous recent studies considered the role of family contexts in the process of transition to school (Cowan et al. 2005; Dockett and Perry 2002, 2007, 2013; Griebel and Niesel 2013; Johansson 2002; Margetts 2002). Children's developmental outcomes depend on the contexts and processes that are close to them (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006), and in which children actively participate (Ashiabi and O'Neal 2015). How, and to what extent, parents are engaged in what happens at the educational setting (preschool, school) can impact on the effectiveness of children's transition to school (Dockett and Perry 2013). Such engagement should be supported across the entire transition process. Often, "parent engagement" in their children's education defaults to fund raising and occasional official parent-teacher conferences. Recently, the importance of communication between parents and teachers has been emphasised as an integral part of the process of children's education. Parents are entitled to be included in decision-making processes and encouraged to participate actively in their child's education at home and at school (Educational Transitions and Change (ETC) Research Group 2011). The school, in turn, should take into consideration the substantial diversity among families and the ways in which this diversity might influence their engagement with school. Dockett et al. (2012) show that generally parents try to support their children when they begin formal schooling.

Griebel and Niesel (2013) noted the changing role and behaviour of parents when their children, especially their first born, begins their school education. They also noted that the beginning of school education can be a challenge not only for children, but also for parents. Strategies of coping with this new situation and adapting to the new role – that of the parent of a school child – are described. Challenges faced by parents when their children start school were categorised on three levels: individual; interpersonal; and contextual. The changes on the individual level concerned the construction of a new identity – the parent of a schoolchild, which on the one hand effected a sense of responsibility for the child's success at school and, on the other, a sense of losing control over the child. Parents had to adapt their expectations and aspirations to their child's achievements. As well, they become members of a group of parents of schoolchildren enrolled in the same class. On the interpersonal level parents had to restructure important social relations with their children's educators –pre-school teacher to school teacher; and with pre-school children's parents to parents of other children at school. Parents, mainly mothers, also noted significant changes on the contextual level – in their everyday routine and the routine of their week and year. The schedule of everyday lessons, the schedule of consecutive weeks and of the school year changed the habits that had been well established in children's families: family life had to be adapted to the framework determined by school (Griebel and Niesel 2013).

Families expect the best possible learning environments for their children (Dockett and Perry 2004). In the *Transition to School: Position Statement* (ETC 2011), transition to school was characterised through opportunities, aspirations, expectations and entitlements. This position statement notes that 'Children and families start school with a range of expectations about what school will be like and what it means to be a school student or parents of a school student' (ETC 2011, p. 3). Further:

> Families expect that their knowledge of their children will be respected at school. They expect that their children's educators will draw on this, as well as their own expertise and that of other professionals, to create the best possible learning environments for their children.
>
> Families expect to contribute to their children's education, and may seek guidance from educators about how partnerships can operate effectively. Families expect children's safety and wellbeing to be central features in decisions about educational provision. They expect schools to recognize the strengths their children bring, as well as to be responsive to their diverse learning needs. Families expect to be advocates for their children, and to be supported in this by the advocacy of other professionals. (p. 3)

11.6   The Study

This chapter reports research findings from a sample of 485 parents (482 mothers: and 3 fathers) of first grade children aged 6 years 4 months–7 years 6 months, and 73 first grade teachers from 30 primary schools. The data included responses from questionnaires of 20 questions for parents (opinion about transition to school of their children, parents' assessment of the work of school, parents' educational expectations and parental anxiety before their children start school) and 16 questions for the first grade teachers (opinion about transition to school of the children and parental involvement in children's education).

11.7   Results

11.7.1   Transition to School in the Opinion of Parents and Teachers

In general, parents and first grade teachers agreed about children's first few days at school. Both groups reported good adaptation by girls and boys to the new environments, with difficulties being observed slightly more frequently for boys than girls. Teachers perceived children to be better prepared for school than did the parents. As well, the parents of both girls (8.7%) and boys (10.8%) more often reported challenges concerning educational transition than teachers (6.7% girls and 6.0% boys).

11.7.1.1   Parents' Assessment of the Work of School

Parents suggested various categories they considered important for their children's well-being as they started school: ensuring the child's safety; ensuring educational care after school; good conditions for the child's intellectual development; well-prepared teachers; modern teaching aids; individual approach to each child; the possibility for the children to develop their own interests; fostering the child's independence; and the teachers' preparation.

Most of the parents thought that the work done by the school was good or very good. A few parents were displeased about the lack of educational care outside of lessons. The parents of children who attended pre-school before starting at school were used to all-day care and expected the same from school. Several respondents negatively evaluated the teachers' preparation for working with first graders, while 35% of the respondents evaluated it as wonderful. A similar situation was observed in the category of "individual approach to each child" where 25% of parents were very pleased, while others had several reservations. Most parents found that the school offered their children enough possibilities to develop their interests. Differences in the parents' assessment of the functioning of the schools attended by their children suggest that there are school differences. The child's gender was not statistically significantly related to parents' evaluation of the work of the school.

11.7.1.2   Parents' Educational Expectations

Most parents held high expectations of schools. These mainly concerned ensuring good conditions for the children's intellectual development and the possibility for children to develop their interests (more often voiced by parents of girls – 76.2%, than boys – 58.3%). Boys' parents more often expected the school to create conditions for their child's developing independence and self-sufficiency (25%) than girls' parents (14.3%). Less attention was paid to parents' ex[ectations about ensuring care outside of lessons on school premises, but it was more often expected by

the parents of boys' (16.7%) than girls (4.7%). The parents of both girls and boys paid little to no attention to the teachers' level of preparation for their work.

11.7.1.3 Parental Anxiety Before School Start

Parent participants were most often worried about their child experiencing difficulty adapting to the new environment (28.6% of girls' parents and 25% of boys' parents). They also worried about whether or not their child could face up to the formal demands of school (50% of boys' parents and 14.3% of girls' parents). Some parents, more often those of girls (19%) than boys' (8.3%), were concerned about whether or not their child would be able to find friends at school, and whether or not the children would feel lonely or rejected. Almost 30% of girls' parents and 8.3% of boys' parents had no fears regarding their children's school start.

11.7.1.4 Parental Involvement in Children's Education as Perceived by Teachers

Teachers claimed that most parents of girls' (77.5%) and boys (68.5%) were engaged in their children's education in a reasonable and balanced way expected by the teachers. According to the teachers, approximately 5% of girls' parents and 10.8% of boys' parents were engaged in matters happening at school, but contacted the school only in response to the teacher's initiative, while a small number of parents (0.4% of girls' and 3.4% of boys') failed to contact school and their child's teacher despite the teacher's attempts at establishing such contact.

11.8 Conclusions

Results of this study are consistent with results of Cowan et al. (2005), although there were no statistically significant differences between the parents' expectation for school and the child's gender. Research reveals that children who encounter similar environments and expectations at home and at school perceive the transition process as easier; in turn, the child who sees his/her school environment as unfriendly and different from the context of the family home tends to experience difficulties, disorganization and anxiety during the transition process (Dockett and Perry 2007). Transition to school is shaped by the expectations of the participants in the process. For example the support of a child's parents affects the course of his/her adaptation to school environment; the teachers' expectations – some formed during the transition process – directly determine the child's school experience (Entwisle 1995); children who were familiar with school environment before starting school (for example, through repeated visits) were more likely than others to have realistic expectations of school (Broström 1995).

Nowadays, emphasis is put upon a holistic approach to educational transition, transition being conceived of as a process engaging children, their families, preschool teachers and the teachers working with first graders, as well as educational authorities and political decision-makers (ETC 2011).

Parents are agents of their own transition process (Griebel and Niesel 2013; Margetts 2002), with the success of children' transition to school depending to some extent on the involvement of parents in this process. Brooker (2008) notes that teachers should consider the process of children's transition to school as an undertaking where the school and the family make concerted efforts aimed at preventing interruptions in the continuity of experiences of all participants, especially children. Close communication between parents and teachers is important in the transition to school because it is important to create positive mutual relationships among parents and teachers on the way to forming educational partnerships (Dockett and Perry 2014; Griebel and Niesel 2013).

This study indicates that when teachers and parents agree about a child's preparation for school, the more optimistic parents are in their expectations about the child starting school. The less positive the parents' evaluation of their child's competence, the less optimistic is their approach to their child's school start, irrespective of the opinions voiced by teachers.

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