Chapter 11
Experienced and Recalled Transition: Starting School as Part of Life History

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11.1 Introduction

Often people can recall memories about starting school and carry them into adulthood and even to old age as part of their autobiographical narratives. This chapter brings together transition to school as part of life course (Elder 1998) and autobiographical narratives as a story of 'continuing me' (Nelson 2003). It argues that starting school is one of the key life events and might contribute to a person's identity and life trajectory. It also locates transition to school as an influential factor within the life course and facilitates the application of autobiographical narrative methodologies to early childhood transition research.

Previous research has shown that transition to school has an impact on the school years that follow (Dockett and Perry 2007). Positive transition is linked to positive school outcomes in academic achievement and social competence. A child's image of himself/herself as a learner is influenced by school experiences, and experiences of success have an impact on a child's future success at school and sense of self. This chapter contributes to the field of transition studies by opening a new view to starting school as part of an individual's life course and story of 'continuing me'. It continues the work of the previous studies on memories related to childhood (Andersson and Strander 2004; Lahelma 2002; McNicol 2007; Rosewarne et al. 2010; van Hook 2002) and concentrates on memories and autobiographical narratives of starting school that recall happenings even decades after they occurred.

Memories about starting school are part of autobiographical narratives which people construct to understand their lives as entities (Bruner 1990, 2001; Polkinghorne 1988; Webster and Mertova 2007). Autobiographical narratives are

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places to establish a sense of personal history in the social world where other people have their own histories. They are one way to explain to the self why certain things happened the way they did and their significance for the present (Nelson 2003). Autobiographical narratives are complex forms of cognition in which knowledge, emotions, identity and culture intersect during the process of remembering (Conway 2004). In their stories, people make sense of their experiences and memories, themselves, the world and their relationships. This process often begins at about the same time as children start school. It contains awareness of self in the past and future and the difference between self and others' narratives. It is linked to language development and the establishment of a unique and coherent life story (Howe et al. 2003).

In this chapter, I integrate the theoretical foundations and examples from my finished and ongoing research projects with memories about starting school in Finland and Australia. In these projects, the participants were asked to tell their story about starting school in autobiographical narrative interviews. The studies so far include stories from Finland during the Second World War and the post-war reconstruction (Turunen 2012). In Australia, the stories were told by early settlement Australians, immigrant-background Australians who started school either in Australia or first overseas and then in Australia and Indigenous Australians (Turunen 2009; Turunen and Dockett 2013; Turunen et al. 2012). The extracts from the stories are used to highlight the implications of the theoretical foundations for research and practice.

11.2 Starting School as Autobiographical Knowledge

Following Conway's (2004, p. 9563) statement, 'the term autobiographical memory refers to memory for the events of our lives and also to memory for more abstract personal knowledge such as schools we attended, people we had relationships with, places we have lived, places we have worked, and so on'. Memories of special events can be vivid and detailed, whereas personal knowledge is more general.

In the following extract, the narrator first describes her personal vivid memory about the event of not understanding and knowing what to do on her first day at school and the strategy she used to cope with that situation. At the end of the extract, she moves from this personal experience to more general knowledge about English as a Second Language (ESL) programme in her school:

> So I just had this sheet in front of me and I just looked over at the girl next to me and whatever she did I would do. So I do remember writing down like … Trying to … Well I thought I'll just put … So I just put 'Carolyn' on my sheet. I mean, I didn't know how to write so I just did my best. So I copied her. Basically I just copied her, whatever she did I did. That's my memory of the very first day. And obviously I kept returning to school and the school started to have an ESL program for me. (Started school in Australia 1979, immigrant heritage)

In the following extract, the knowledge about moving and the age of the baby brother represent general knowledge which is accompanied with a personal experience of the uncle's truck. This memory was told as part of a relocation story before starting school.

> But we lived at [the name of the town] till I was about two years old, I think, and then moved down [to the place she started school]. So my baby brother was just born when we … Must have been six months old when we moved down. And that's probably my earliest memory, is coming in that truck. I can vaguely remember the truck, my uncle's truck with the furniture on the back and us sort of coming down. (Started school in Australia 1956, Australian heritage)

These two examples illustrate how different kinds of memories are needed in the construction of autobiographical narrative. The personal experiences and vivid memories about them are placed in the context of general knowledge about one's life during the experience.

Autobiographical memories form a resource of autobiographical knowledge. Conway and Pleydell-Pearce (2000) have identified three areas of autobiographical knowledge: lifetime periods, general events and event-specific knowledge. Lifetime periods are distinct periods of time with identifiable beginnings and endings, such as the period of schooling. In the stories, starting school marks a new lifetime period – schooldays – as can be seen in the following extract:

> It's just really bits and pieces but as I said we lived very close to the school. I just really have very positive memories of all of the primary school years anyway. And I found most people very, very helpful and I don't remember, even though I couldn't speak English at all when I went, it didn't seem to matter. (Started school in Australia 1959, immigrant heritage)

In the following extract, the narrator tells about her whole education from Year 1 to Year 9.

> I don't remember there being a kinder class, there may have been but I know I started in first class. Yes, and so sometimes there might have been only two and three in a class. Some classes I can remember there was probably up to five of us. The classes went from either kinder or first through to intermediate, Year 9. And so yes, I was always last in the class because I never had time to do homework. I had to milk the cows to start with before I went to school and milk the cow when I went home. And was always sent to bed early because I had to ride the bike I suppose, that and all the jobs I had to do. (Started school in Australia 1939, Australian heritage)

As can be seen from these extracts, in their stories, people constructed starting school as part of a bigger lifetime period which contained primary school years, as in the first example, or even the whole schooling experience as in the second example. Previous studies have indicated that starting school is not something that happens in one day but is a longer process occurring over six months to several years, including preschool years and the first 2 or 3 years of school (Fabian 2002; Karikoski 2008; Petriwskyj et al. 2005). In autobiographical narratives, starting school is an even longer period than the previous studies have indicated.

Lifetime periods contain general events, which are more specific, but at the same time more heterogeneous. They are usually repeated events like going to

school every day, having a school lunch and playtime. They can be identified from time-related words such as ‘ever’, ‘we used to’ and ‘always’. In the first one of the following extracts, the word ‘ever’ marks a general event of not having a seat in the school bus. In the second one, the narrator identifies the general event of lunchtime by using ‘used to’ and ‘always’.

> And I remember me starting school and I just didn’t like it because I was nearly the last kid to get picked up at [place-name] and there was no seats, ever. (Started school in Australia 1993, Australian heritage)

> We used to have this great big shed with chairs in it and you could have your lunch and that. Yeah, playground was always fun. I always had a lot of friends. (Started school in Australia 1962, immigrant heritage)

Some general events contain event-specific knowledge. These are typically characterised by vivid and detailed imagery. The previous example of copying a schoolmate’s name on the first day at school is a good example of event-specific knowledge. The narrator could vividly remember the details of the incident and how she managed to overcome the difficult situation. Other examples of this kind of autobiographical knowledge in the stories often contained strong emotions.

In this extract, the narrator tells about her joy of learning and success:

> At school everything was new: rules, lunch, kits and real crayons. We also moulded with plasticine and that was the first success of my school work! (Started school in Finland 1953)

In the following example, the narrator tells a vivid memory about being separated from her carer:

> I can still remember those moments after 60 years. My stepmother had taken me to the railway station and left me with a nurse. I clenched my doll in my arms and embarked onto the train. There were plenty of children in the railway carriage, some of them crying inconsolable. The destination was unknown. All the children had a cardboard nametag on their neck. (A Finnish child who was sent to Denmark during the Second World War. She started school in Denmark, 1942.)

The following memory was told in the very beginning of the interview. It was a strong memory and the narrator told that it was the reason he wanted to participate in the study:

> I remember being chased through the, it must have been at lunchtime, I got chased, now how they got, they used to call me Mount Kosciusko … but to be chased by these people. Of course once you start running that is it. I remember most vividly, I saw a nun and I was running towards her and I was hiding behind her dress, you know the veil and everything. I see her smile, but I don’t remember her face. (Started school in Australia 1954, immigrant heritage)

This kind of event-specific knowledge can become part of self-defining memories. They are the most significant memories that influence a person’s emotions and behaviours and can often be referred as ‘turning points’ in one’s life course (Conway and Pleydell-Pearce 2000; Singer and Salovey 1993). They are important to understand a person’s life goals and essential conflicts and become

repeated touchstones in one's autobiographical narrative (Blagov and Singer 2004; Singer and Salovey 1993).

Blagov and Singer (2004) have studied self-defining memories and define four dimensions of them: specificity, integrative meaning, content and affect. Self-defining memories are specific episodic memories which a person uses as integrative tools in the construction of his/her autobiographical narrative. They are lessons about the self, important relationships or life in general. The content of self-defining memories is associated with success in relationships or achievement, personal adjustment and levels of distress, and they arouse positive or negative feelings at the time of recall.

The following extract can be understood as a self-defining memory. Recalling this memory of bullying was still seemingly stressful for the teller, over 70 years after the event:

> I hated being different. I had plaits, bucked teeth, Chinese so I didn't have much going for me. They used to tie my plaits, the ribbons on the chair and then … And I used to get taunted at the high school. It was really … You wanted to make yourself this big [showing a tiny space with her fingers] so people didn't notice you. Anyway, I became form captain, house captain. I played in school hockey teams. So I think that it was all in my head, this inferiority complex, but it carried … I carried that right through until I was married, this inferiority complex. (Started school in Australia 1935, immigrant heritage)

In her story, this person kept coming back to her ethnic background and how it had affected her throughout her life course. In the following extract, the narrator draws inferences from his childhood experiences to how he acted later as an adult:

> [after telling about bullying] Then I decided: when I am an adult and the boss, I surely will be in the side of the underdog and will not allow anyone to bully a defenceless person! I was able to fulfil the promise when I worked as a regular in the army and later in a position of responsibility. (Started school in Finland 1943)

Self-defining memories integrated the autobiographical narratives and narrators often interpreted the meaning of them via the present and the future as we can see from the previous example. They became repeated 'touchstones' in one's autobiographical narrative (Blagov and Singer 2004). The construction and integration process can be seen in 'time travelling' during the story. The following extract is a good example:

> I didn't like reading so much and I found it really difficult. We used to have to stand up in front of class and read out and I found that really difficult. That actually went right through school. I even found that difficult in later years, until one of my teachers encouraged me to join the debating team and that really helped. And I haven't shut up since in public really. But that was a challenge and yet I could … We used to have morning talk and we used to just have to stand up and talk about what's happening and that I found really easy. (Started school in Australia 1970, Australian heritage)

The narrator first describes her anticipation to read aloud and then jumps to her later school years and from that to adulthood. When she has given an explanation, she comes back to her starting school experiences.

11.3 Starting School Within Life Course

According to Elder and Shanahan (2006), life course is a sequence of socially defined, age-graded events and roles that define the contours of biography. Individual life happens in a time and place and is linked with other people's lives (Elder 1998). Life courses consist of transitions combining a role exit and entry, of leaving a state and entering a new state (van Gennep 1960). Transitions in the life course and especially the first transitions in early childhood can affect further transitions because the advantages and disadvantages tend to accumulate (Elder 1998). Accordingly, Dunlop (2007) talks about "transitions capital" and how a child can gain this through successful transitions. With transitions capital, a person has more knowledge and skills to successfully address transitions later in his/her life.

As Elder (1998, p. 1) puts it, transitions 'are always part of social trajectories that give them distinctive meaning and form'. Starting school represents an institutionalised transition established by laws and educational policies (Elder 2004). It starts a new trajectory, school days, and influences people's identification of themselves as learners and members of school communities. In the following extract, the narrator tells about her feelings related to this new identity:

> Tomorrow it finally starts, the school. I am allowed to visit my grandma to pick some apples which are good snacks on the way to school. In the spring I had to sit in on my sister's class and now I was treated like a schoolchild. (Started school in Finland 1950)

Many transitions are age-graded and can be evaluated as a cohort status. People are located in special cohorts, and there are expectations of timing and the order of the transitions within that cohort (Elder and Shanahan 2006). Starting school is very much linked to age. It happens to nearly all children when they are 'old enough'. The age of schoolchildren thus has a socially constructed meaning in the life course; one needs to do it on time, not too early or too late (Elder and Shanahan 2006).

In the stories, the expectation of starting school at the right age was often revealed:

> I don't know, it [starting school] was just something we all did. We all had to go to school and once you turned … [right age]. My birthday is in June but I know I would have probably started pretty much at the beginning of the year. But I was probably a bit young you see, 4 ½. (Started school in Australia 1944, Australian heritage)

The failure to start school at the right age can be a difficult experience:

> Well I think it is important because it is different to most children's story of starting school where you automatically start school and there is no question whether you should or shouldn't go to school and you had a right to have an education regardless of your ability or disability. Because of my disability I had to wait until my brother was four and a half and I was six years old before the education department would allow me to go to school instead of staying at home and not getting an education. (Started school in Australia 1942, Australian heritage)

In the first of these two examples, the narrator first talks about the 'right age' of starting school and then explains that he was not quite 'old enough'. In the second

example, the narrator was ‘too old’ when she started school. Because of her disability, she had to wait for her young brother to grow up so that he could assist her. This failure to fulfil the cohort status was a difficult experience for the narrator, and she kept coming back to it throughout the interview.

11.4 Starting School in Context

Starting school happens in time and place, just like all the other transitions during the life course. It is embedded in and shaped by the context (Elder 1998). Memories are culturally framed, and the context is used to make sense of experiences (Nelson 2003). Autobiographical narratives are the places where individual memories and sociocultural contexts meet and are linked to wider social narratives (Haynes 2006; Markowitsch and Welzer 2009).

In the stories, starting school happens within numerous sociocultural contexts. Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological model describes children’s development as influenced by direct and indirect experiences within sociocultural contexts and describes the interaction between individuals and contexts as the driving force behind an effective transition to school. It provides a framework for considering the ways in which different contexts, processes and people interact and intersect over time. In the transition to school, the contexts of family, preschool and school intersect and are influenced by broader community, political and social contexts and the people and processes operating within these.

The macrosystem is shaped by home and school cultures and the historical time, and it influences the narratives of starting school. For example, in Finnish stories, the wartime narratives were more sombre than the post-war ones (Turunen 2012). The narratives from the years 1937 to 1943 were affected by war, and it was somehow present in all of them. In the wartime narratives, there were many sinister events, including events that were not related to war, such as accidents and sickness. Latvala (2006) has indicated that memory knowledge related to home and school shows how children perceive the unusual everyday life, for example, during wartime. Children see, hear, experience and sense the war and the threat of death and loss. The war memories of childhood are not forgotten (Latvala 2006).

Starting school in Finland between 1937 and 1957 was influenced by the Second World War, the post-war reconstruction of the country and paying war debts to the Soviet Union. These incidents influenced the sociocultural context in general and starting school in particular during those decades and can be identified in the narratives as can be seen in the following extract:

> After walking about three kilometres, the road ended with a railway and a freight train was greeting me. I was startled and panicked. I plunged for ‘a shelter’ behind the road and under a fir. (Started school in Finland 1943)

This extract tells about a fear of bombing. During the Second World War, Finland was heavily bombed. Because most people lived in rural areas where no

bomb shelters were available, people ran to forests when they heard bombers coming. For children, a stentorian noise was frightening, because it was a sign of a danger.

Transition to school is meeting an unknown school culture for the majority of children (Broström 2007), but added to that, immigrant children encounter people from the other culture, habits that they are not familiar with and often also a language barrier. It appears that starting school is also often the first meeting with the mainstream culture without the parents. In the following extract, the narrator illustrates this:

> Then when it was my time and I was given permission to go, even in primary school, it was like I was going over a fence into another culture. Of course when I went over the fence my language changed, my behaviour changed, my food changed-because if I was having lunch at someone else's place there was stuff I didn't eat at home. (Started school in Australia 1957, immigrant heritage)

These examples of the influence of macrosystems on starting school experiences illuminate how the narrators were required to cope with demanding macro-level circumstances simultaneously with starting school.

The exosystem is the level where a child is not participating but which influences his/her life indirectly (Bronfenbrenner 1979). From a child's point of view, it is usually the adults' world. In the stories about starting school, the exosystem is noted by the child and often interpreted by the narrating adult in the stories. For example, it could be the absence of father because of the war or seeking work:

> In Block 21 [Reception and Training Centre for immigrants, in Victoria, Australia] for a few days until they were shifted to Block 15 that was the official hostel block for long term people staying as we were. Meanwhile dad ended up walking or mostly hitch-hiking all the way up to Sydney, all over the place trying to get some work. Poor old mum was left to look after the four of us. (Started school in Netherlands 1950 and in Australia 1952, immigrant heritage)

or financial challenges after the immigration:

> So things were 'pretty tight' in those days. The joy of my life was when I was given a pair of shoes, but they were school shoes —that was my Christmas present, [laughing] because that was something special, you know. Parents could not afford things in those days because we lived in poor, very poor circumstances. (Started school in Australia 1951, immigrant heritage)

The microsystems are the systems where a child is personally involved (Bronfenbrenner 1979), like home, school, friends and their homes. In stories about starting school, microsystems were often intertwined. The life of the child is an entity and school is part of it, and not always the most important part.

> I think the best thing about school and the best thing about being in New Guinea was that my mum came from a village and every weekend we would drive three hours to the village and spend the weekend at the village and then come back for school. So I just liked being there, a break, a mini-break and then coming back, it was good. (Started school in Papua New Guinea 1980, immigrant heritage Australian)

> My memory of that time was that we had a very free life, running around outside because I can remember running around with my friends, all around [the name of the town]. (Started school in Australia 1956, Australian heritage)

In the following extract, academic learning was not recalled, and that seemed to surprise the narrator:

> I remember getting chastised for playing in the school garden, by the teacher, just silly things really. But the actual schooling, subjects and such I don't remember much, just that I used to talk a lot in school. (Started school in 1949 in Germany, immigrant heritage Australian)

In the stories, some of children's microsystems were invisible for adults. They were the children's own places, which adults did not understand or have access. Often this 'secret world of childhood' was explicitly expressed:

> And if you wanted to swim above the water you held this ball, you held a ball and you could sort of manage to keep your head up above water. Well my parents would have been … Mum would have been horrified to think that I'd let my children do that but she did it. She didn't know what we were up to. But we all survived. (Started school in Australia 1950, immigrant heritage)

11.5 Future Directions and Policy Implications

According to Elder (1998), studying the life course is important in order to identify and understand the impact of various changes in children's lives. It is not always possible or expedient to have extended longitudinal studies. Studying memories is one way to use life course theory to investigate the past and interlocking trajectories in human life. Transitions, like starting school, are substantial times of change and can be represented as turning points (Elder and Shanahan 2006). Starting school is an educational marker which may influence coming school years and even the choices a person makes later in his/her life. In their stories, people construct starting school as part of their autobiographical narratives and interpret it in their life course. It becomes part of the story of 'continuing me' (Nelson 2003).

These autobiographical narratives are oral histories which mediate relationships of individual and public life and provide insights into how macro-level social, cultural, economic and political changes are experienced by individual people (Clary-Lemon 2010; Portelli 2004; Schiffrin 2003). Portelli (2004) says that oral history as a coherent narrative story does not exist in nature, but people tell pieces and episodes about their lives. Thus, the stories about starting school told during research interviews had usually never been told in that form before. They were stories about the past, interpreted and constructed in the present (Freeman 2007).

Studying memories is about studying things that happened in the past, and this makes a question of historical methodologies relevant. Historical incidents need to be taken into account, and that leads the researcher to historical resources like archives and documents. These sources are important to illuminate the context of the stories, even though the emphasis of this kind of study is to contribute understanding of starting school memories as part of a person's constructed autobiographical narrative (Ghosh 2007).

This study approach also arouses issues about ‘accurate’ and ‘inaccurate’ memories. Are the memories of starting school historically correct? The stories may not be verifiable in terms of their correspondence to the actual event as it happened at the time but are illustrative of how the past gets revisited and reshaped across one’s life course. They are combinations of a person’s own experiences, stories told in family and community, photos and other artefacts and the time and place of starting school and recalling it. They represent experienced and recalled constructions of an individual person’s self-history, unique to him/her (Nelson 2003). Following Thelen’s (1989) ideas, this brings the constructed recollections into the centre of study, rather than the accuracy of the memory.

Understanding transition to school in the autobiographical context can help educators and parents to become more aware of the impact of their own experiences and memories about starting school when working with children. There is some research evidence that shows intergenerational trends in experiences from generation to generation (Barnett and Taylor 2009; Elder 2001; Turunen and Dockett 2011). Starting school experiences and memories through generations in the same family are worthy of further study.

By understanding and reflecting on their own experiences, educators and parents can move towards empathy and understanding around a child’s experiences (Rosewarne et al. 2010). This can provide the basis for positive relationships – the essence of a successful transition to school (Dockett and Perry 2007). Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory sets up some interesting scenes on starting school. Understanding the meaning and impact of the macro- and exosystems requires paying attention to the meaning of starting school for children, who nowadays live in critical situations such as financial difficulties, violence, war or natural catastrophes. Elder and Shanahan (2006) emphasise how sociocultural context and historical changes affect the life course. They define them as exogenous processes in human development. Children live in sociocultural contexts which influence their experiences and memories about starting school and will become part of their autobiographical narratives and self-understanding. In difficult situations, starting school can represent a normal and safe everyday life.

Beside the macro- and exosystems, children live their individual lives and have their own microsystems. Some of them can be invisible for adults and represent “the secret world of childhood”. Home and family, friends and their homes, lessons and playtime at school are parts of children’s microsystems and are all intertwined. An interesting question for further study might be what impact children’s own microsystems have on transition to school.

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