

# Children's Accounts of the Transition from Preschool to Elementary School

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## Introduction

The purpose of this study is to investigate Icelandic preschool children's views and attitudes concerning their preschool education, their transition into elementary school, and their expectations regarding elementary school.

In Iceland, preschool and elementary school have different histories and build on different traditions. The first day-care centers (later called preschools) were established in the 1920's by the Women's Alliance in Reykjavik. Designed as a response to the need to feed and shelter poor children and to keep them off the streets, these centers aimed to provide the children with warmth, wholesome nourishment, and hygiene (Sumargjöf 1976). The main aims of the elementary school, on the other hand, were to teach children to read and write (Lög nr. 40 um fræðslu barna, 1926).

Both institutions have changed over time. The Icelandic preschool has evolved in a relatively short time, from being a refuge for children of underprivileged families to being an educational institution. With the passage of a 1994 law, preschool education became the first level of schooling (Lög um leikskóla, no. 78, 1994). The Ministry of Education now formulates national educational policy and a curriculum for preschool as well as for elementary school. Children are not required to attend preschool, but according to legislation, all children must have the opportunity to do so. Approximately 89 % of children aged three to five attended preschools in 1999 (Hagstofa Íslands 2001).

Children in Iceland now start compulsory school in the fall of the year they turn six years old. In 1970, special classes for six-year-old children were established in the elementary schools, and it became the practice to

enroll 6-year-old children in the elementary school. These classes resembled the Danish børnehaveklasse and the original American kindergarten classes. They were not compulsory, and the children only attended for an hour and a half a day. In 1991, when school became compulsory for the six year olds, the class became first grade. The children attended first grade for a half-day, either in the morning or in the afternoon. Today, six-year-old children attend first grade from 9am-2pm and may attend optional after-school programs. Gradually, the curriculum and the textbooks are becoming more demanding and academically oriented.

The lack of continuity between preschool and elementary school has been attributed to their different histories and traditions as well as different guiding philosophies. Dahlberg and Taguchi (1994) claim that there are two predominant views of the child in preschool and elementary school. In the preschool philosophy, childhood is the innocent period, and freedom and innocence are emphasized. In the elementary school philosophy, on the other hand, the child becomes a culture and knowledge reproducer. The elementary school has primarily focused on subjects, while the preschool has centered on the child. That is, while the preschool starts with the learner, the elementary school starts with the content. Child-directed and play-oriented methods have predominated in preschool, but in the elementary school, the emphasis falls on teacher direction, content areas, and large-group instruction (File & Gullo 2002, Hansen 2002, Kagan 1991).

Numerous studies have been conducted on the transition to elementary school and the transition activities teachers use to prepare children for the challenges and demands they will face there (e.g. Broström 2001b, Margetts 1999, Pianta et al. 1999, Love et al. 1992). Studies on the expectations of parents and teachers have also been widely conducted (Harradine & Clifford 1996, Rescorla 1991, Lewitt & Baker 1995, Knudsen-Lindauer & Harris 1989, Pramling-Samuelsson & Willams-Granelid 1993, Reaney et al. 2002). In recent years, growing interest has emerged in seeking children's views on matters that involve them and their environment.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Children's Perspectives**

In recent years, an increasing number of professionals have emphasized giving children a voice in factors that influence their lives, including their involvement in research. The reasons for this interest in children's views

are manifold (Brooker 2000, Clark 2001, Hennessy 1999, Poulsgaard 2001, Tolfree & Woodhead 1999).

One reason is the belief in children's rights to express their views and that their views should be respected. The foundation for this view is the Convention on the Rights of the Child drawn up by the United Nations in 1989, which recognizes the right of children to have an influence on their own lives. Article 12 argues that state parties should assure that a child who is capable of forming his or her own views should have the right to express those views freely on all matters affecting him or her, and that those views should be given due weight in accordance with the child's age and maturity (The Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989).

Another reason for the growing emphasis on listening to children is the view of children and childhood that has increasingly been presented in academic literature. In this view, children are seen as strong and knowledgeable and as having their own unique perspective. Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence (1999) view the child as a co-constructor of meaning and point out that children have their own voice and should be taken seriously. Wood (1998) claims that young children should be regarded as powerful thinkers who are active citizens, capable of learning about their rights and responsibilities. Similarly, Clark and Moss (2001) consider children as experts on their own lives.

Behind the third reason for the growing emphasis on listening to children is a belief in children's abilities to express opinions, thoughts, and feelings. When the right mode of communication is used, children are competent at communicating and giving valuable and reliable information (Clark 2001, Clark & Moss 2001). Finally, giving children a voice in decision-making processes gives them a sense of ownership, and consulting with children shows respect.

Children's right to participate in decision-making processes has inspired discussion and encouraged authorities in many European countries to involve children in matters concerning them (Poulsgaard 2001, Peeters et al. 2001, Koebel 2001, Kjörholt 2001). But children's participation must be used carefully. Kjörholt (2001) pointed out that recognizing children as citizens involves "more than just asking their opinion and allowing them to decide for themselves. Children's active participation is a complex theme which needs to be approached from a variety of angles" (p. 77-79). Hart (1992) has observed that there is a tendency on the part of adults to underestimate the competence of children while at the same time using them in events to influence some cause.

## **Children's Views on Early Childhood Programs**

In recent years interest in looking at education from the children's perspectives has grown (see for example Katz 1999). An example of a notable way to do that is by using the Mosaic approach developed in England. It presents a way of listening that acknowledges children and adults as co-constructors of meaning. Individuals using this method attempt both to see the world from children's perspectives and to acknowledge their rights to speak or to remain silent. It is a multi-method approach that combines the visual -- such as photographs, tours, and maps -- with the verbal (Clark 2001, Clark & Moss 2001).

Studies exploring children's perceptions indicate that children have opinions on how they want their preschool to be. In England, the Effective Early Learning Programme has included children in the evaluation process (Pascal & Bertram 1997, 2000, Pascal et al. 1997). The results from a study where children were asked what they do and do not like to do at nursery school show varied responses (Dupree et al. 2001). The majority of responses, however, fell into the creative domain of learning. Children mentioned imaginative play, creative activities, play with water, sand and clay, and physical and outdoor play. While the children's responses about their dislikes were similarly varied, again they most frequently mentioned the activities within the creative domain. When the children were asked what they were not allowed to do, most of them referred to dangerous/harmful things, and when asked what they must do, most referred to playing and sharing, doing as told, learning/doing activities, and being quiet/listening.

Sheridan and Pramling Samuelson (2001) interviewed children from low quality and good quality preschools in Sweden about their conceptions of decision-making and how they experienced their own opportunities to influence their preschool setting. In the preschools evaluated as high quality, the children expressed more often that they could participate in decision-making and that they were listened to, compared to those children attending the preschools evaluated as low quality. The results of the study show that children can decide about their own play, their own activities, their own belongings, and to some extent, themselves. However, they seldom seem to participate in and influence the overall organization, routines, content, and activities that are initiated by the teachers. Most of the participating children answered that playing with other children is what they want to do when they are in the preschool and they often related their experience of decision-making to play.

Like Sheridan and Pramling Samuelson in Sweden, Wiltz and Klein (2001) explored American children's perceptions of their child-care experiences in classrooms that varied in quality. The results show that the children verbalized an accurate understanding of procedures, events, and activities, but their responses differed by classroom quality. Children in all classrooms mentioned play as the favorite activity. Children's responses to what they did not like at school varied widely. Their primary dislikes revolved around teacher-mandated activities and social and disciplinary concerns. Cruel behavior, circle time, and nap time were primary dislikes that did not vary with classroom quality.

### **Children's Views on Starting School**

Although there has been a strong focus on the adult viewpoint of what is important as children start elementary school, there is a growing recognition of the importance of listening to children's views about what they think starting school will be like and what their experiences and perceptions of children are once they have started in school.

Eide and Winger (1994) interviewed six-year-old Norwegian preschool children and asked them what they thought they would do in first grade and what other children had told them that they did in school. The results show that the children seemed to have internalized a traditional and stereotypical view of school. They had a general idea of the daily routine in the elementary school, most of which came from older children. They seemed to understand that which separates traditional school activities from play. Many of them mentioned that in school you would read, do arithmetic, write, and do assignments. Norms and regulations in the school were also discussed. The children mentioned that they had to be aware of certain routines and rules, such as you only play during recess, but they seemed to take the rules for granted and did not question them. Most of the participating children did not seem to worry much about starting school; however, one child mentioned that she would not know anyone, and some children worried about meeting the principal.

Broström (1999, 2001a, 2001b) studied Danish preschool children's expectations of attending kindergarten and preschool. When asked what they thought they would do and learn in school, children were insecure and nervous about starting school. They expected to encounter an authoritarian culture characterized by a scolding teacher who commands children to sit still and be quiet. They expected that in school they would mainly learn to read, write, and do mathematics. The children's conceptions about school

came not only from parents and preschool teachers, but also reflected cultural views.

Corsaro and Molinari (2000) studied preschool children in an Italian preschool and followed them when they started elementary school. The preschool children viewed school as a place where children did lessons and received homework. They saw elementary school as more work-focused than play-focused. The children viewed their abilities to read and write as important in their forthcoming transition to elementary school. The children also expected that they would not play as much in the first grade as they had in preschool, and that they would have to work quietly at their desks. When the children entered first grade, they discovered that time was differentiated into time periods more strictly than in preschool. For example, different parts of the school day were signaled by ringing bells. They also found a sharp dichotomy between work and play that had not existed in the preschool. The lack of play-time was one of the children's major concerns, as was the large number of new rules. The authors conclude that children brought certain expectations about "work" to the first grade, as a result of their experiences in priming events in the preschool, and they also often referred to the experiences of older siblings.

LeCompte (1980) examined how American children living in a southwestern city described school in terms of their own and the teacher's role. The children were interviewed before they started kindergarten and again around the end of the school year. The results show that the children viewed their lives in kindergarten as dominated totally by what the teachers wanted them to do. When the children talked about their schoolwork, they most often mentioned cognitive activities, especially reading, followed by minding the teacher and art. The children appeared to anticipate school positively, and to enjoy learning once they got there. Reading was singled out as a much anticipated learning event.

Pramling and Willams-Graneld (1993) interviewed seven-year-old children who had attended first grade for three months about their first experiences in school, the different subjects, the differences and similarities between preschool and elementary school, and play. The children described beginning elementary school with mixed feelings. The positive feelings included learning new things, being in new surroundings, and making new friends. They also worried about what would be expected of them in school. Concerns included the fear of being lonely, curiosity about the new teacher, fear of the unknown, fear of making mistakes, and trepidation about low grades. The differences noted included the fact that ele-

mentary school had benches to sit on, more difficult tasks, less time to play, and a long day of working. These were seen as positive because they indicate that they fit into the school culture. The greatest difference between preschool and elementary school, according to the children, is that there was more time in preschool for unstructured, freely-chosen activities, such as playing. When the children talked about what they learned in elementary school, they primarily mentioned learning to count, read, and write. Everything would become more difficult and serious in elementary school, according to them. The children believed that the elementary school stands for the right way of learning, and that preschool was training for elementary school. The preschool represents play and free learning, while elementary school represents seriousness and structured learning.

The Starting School Project is a multi-dimensional Australian study of a range of issues encountered in young children's transition to school (Dockett & Perry 1999a, 1999b). As a part of that study, children who had recently started school were interviewed about their experiences, expectations, and perceptions. The category most often mentioned by the children was rules; for example, children believed that they needed to know the school rules in order to function well within the school and keep out of trouble. Almost as strong as the focus on rules was the emphasis on disposition. For many children, liking school involved making friends and being with those friends. The children showed concern about the big kids and the scary nature of interactions with them. They also acknowledged the high status of the principal. Children also saw school as the place in which they would learn, but they did not describe learning in terms of their active manipulation of ideas or materials. Rather, they assumed learning to involve activity on the part of the teacher whose job it was to make them learn.

Peters (2000) examined transition experiences of young children, their families, and their early childhood and primary school teachers in New Zealand. Participants were seven case study children and their families who were visited a number of times from the time when the children were four-years-old until they turned eight. For many of the children, the lack of continuity between kindergarten and elementary school was temporarily unsettling. This was reflected in a number of aspects, including the physical environment, the size of the school buildings and grounds, the number and size of the other children, the length of the day, and the demands of the curriculum. They noted that there was less freedom of choice at school, compared with their experiences in kindergarten. The children also mentioned the compulsion to follow routines for work and for play, regardless

of what you felt like doing. The children disliked not being able to play when they wanted, having outside time restricted, not having access to resources like art materials, and being told what to do all the time. The results of the study indicate that although aspects of discontinuity provided challenge for the children on entry to school, in general they adapted quickly to the new environment and the demands of the new curriculum, and showed pride in their achievements. The authors concluded that although discontinuities in the children's experiences as they move from early childhood to school can be a source of distress for young children, discontinuity was also associated with delight in learning new things.

The purpose of the present study was to investigate preschool children's views and attitudes concerning their preschool education, and their transition and expectations for the elementary school. The study was based on the following research questions:

- What are the children's views of their preschool education?
- What will the children miss from preschool?
- What do the children expect that they will do and learn in elementary school?
- What do the children look forward to in elementary school, and what are their concerns?

## **Methods**

The research was conducted in preschools in Reykjavik, Iceland. Forty-eight 5- and 6-year-old children were interviewed on site during school hours towards the end of their preschool year. The preschool authorities and the children's parents gave permission for the interviews, and the children were informed that they did not have to participate and that they had the right to withdraw at any time.

The study was guided by the assumption that information about childhood must start from children's experiences, and that research should be done with children instead of on children (Mayall 2000). Studies based on interviews with children have shown that young children can give reliable information. Keats (2000) points out that young children are often more relaxed and honest and less concerned about socially acceptable answers, and their naiveté helps to sustain their opinions. Yet interviewing and con-



sulting children may also involve some difficulties: Children may not have experience conversing with adults and may not know what an interview is or what is expected of them (Graue & Walsh 1998). There are also ethical considerations to be taken into account, including the power dynamics inherent in the adult/child relationship, which may cause the child to try to please the adult. Furthermore, consideration needs to be given to the children's level of communication skills (Greig & Taylor 1999, Evans & Fuller 1996, Hennessy 1999). In addition, it has been pointed out that children have vivid imagination and the researcher has to be able to separate what is based on experience and what is fantasy (Keats 2000).

Graue and Walsh (1998) assert that "Children know more than they know they know" (p. 112). The purpose of interviews is to get them to talk about what they know and the best way to do that is implicitly. The participating children were interviewed in groups of three, as recommended by several authors (e.g. Graue and Walsh 1998, Greig & Taylor 1999, Mayall 2000). Graue and Walsh (1998) claim that children are more relaxed when with a friend than alone with an adult, and friends help each other with the answers and help keep answers truthful. This became the case in these interviews. The children were relaxed, they stimulated and helped each other, and their discussions became interesting and valuable data.

A research assistant, who is both a consulting preschool teacher and familiar with many of the children and their preschools, conducted the interviews. The methods on interviewing children developed by Pramling and Doverborg-Österberg (1986) proved to be useful guidelines, as well as Graue and Walsh's (1998) recommendations.

The interview questions were semi-structured, consisting of questions about what they had been learning and doing in preschool and if there was anything that they would miss from the preschool. They were also asked what they thought children were learning and doing in the elementary school and whether they were anxious about elementary school, if they looked forward to anything in particular, and how they thought elementary school would be different from preschool. Following a pilot interview the questions were reworded, and some alternate questions were created. These alternate questions included hypothetical questions such as, "If you had already started school, what would you be doing?" and third-person questions such as, "What do the children who attend the East Town School learn there?" The interviews were allowed to float, and in many instances they resembled conversations more than interviews. As Keats (2000) points out, children have vivid imaginations, and the participating children

often switched topics. As a result, the interviewer had to bring the theme of the interview back on topic without denigrating the child's narration.

The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed afterwards. Data was analyzed using the strategies of qualitative inquiry outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994) and Graue and Walsh (1998). The transcribed interviews were coded and categorized using the computer software NVivo. First the data were coded and categories developed according to the research questions. Then each category was coded, and the researcher looked for patterns, regularities, and recurrences. Things that stood out in the data and things that appeared to be salient were also noted.

## **Results**

The children who participated in the study were at ease when they described what they had been doing in the preschool. They had also formed a clear picture of what children would do and learn in elementary school. They saw a clear distinction between the preschool and the elementary school. When they talked about what they had been learning and doing in preschool they mentioned many and diverse areas and activities. Their descriptions of the activities of the elementary school, on the other hand, contained fewer activities, with reading, writing and arithmetic mentioned most often. When they talked about what was done in elementary school, they tended to talk about how it differed from preschool. For example, they mentioned that they would need to bring their own lunch, meet new classmates, and go to physical education class and swimming class. They focused on features of the elementary school that were unknown in the preschool. These features included recess and having a school bell. They were also preoccupied with the structure, rules, design, and size of the elementary school.

### **Preschool**

When the children explored what they had been doing in preschool, they mentioned many and diverse activities. Play in various forms was frequently mentioned, for example, dramatic play, construction play, and pillow play. When they were asked what they liked most in preschool, interaction with peers was on top of their lists; many of them mentioned that what they liked most with preschool was being able to play with their friends. Below is an example from one of the groups:

R: And what do you choose? What do you like most to be able to choose?

Stefan: The blocks.

R: But what do you like most Jon?

Jon: I like most, you see, when I have chosen what to do, is to talk to the other boys. But during the summer time I like most being outside with Stefan and talk to him. He is my buddy.

R: Yes. He is your buddy? And you like to talk together? What do you like most to do inside?

Valur: Just build with the unit-blocks.

When the children were asked what they had learned in preschool, many activities were mentioned, including learning to read, sing songs, learn to eat well, and learn how to behave in school. Below is an example from one of the groups.

R: I would like to know if you learn something in preschool.

David: Yes to sing.

Margaret: To sing in a chorus.

R: Yes. You learn how to sing in a chorus. Is there something else that you have learned in preschool? Aren't they teaching you something?

Larry: Yes they are teaching us how to behave.

David: And also to sit down.

Larry: They are also teaching us not to hurt and punch people.

Margaret: And everyone has to clean up....

R: How does it go, teaching you this?

David: Good. We just learn this. We learn how to read.

Margaret: I have learned how to read in preschool

R: Have you learned how to read in preschool?

David: They do not teach us how.

R: How did you learn how to read?

Margaret: I just read a small book... and then I could read by myself.

When the children talked about what they would miss from the preschool, they most often mentioned their friends and the preschool staff. Some also mentioned that they would miss the food. The groups also frequently discussed that there would be a lot less playtime in elementary school, especially indoor playtime. The children stated that they would miss the toys and the playground. One girl said, for example, that she wanted to take the

computer, the housekeeping corner, and the Lego blocks with her to the elementary school. Below is an example from a discussion about what the children would like to see transferred to elementary school from preschool.

R: Is there something that you like in preschool that you would also like to have in elementary school?

Magnus: Just unit-blocks and all kind of toys.

R. Unit-blocks?

They: Yes.

R: Would you like to continue having them?

They: Yes.

Margaret: And the hall and the crayons.

Olaf: Know what, sometimes you can't play with the unit-blocks because sometimes we have choice time...

Margaret: I would like to have swings at school, because there aren't any.

### **Elementary School**

When the children talked about what happens in elementary school, the discussion often revolved around differences from the preschool such as organization, size, and structure. For example, when one girl discussed the difference between preschool and elementary school, she said, "It is bigger and you learn more." One of the boys described the differences in this way:

John: It is full of desks that you have to sit at the whole time. And then there are desks and you have to have a pencil besides and reach down to what you need and up again.

R: Do you have to sit at the desk at all times?

John: Yes and write and write. And then there is recess, take your bag and go outside.

Recess was mentioned often, but the children were not familiar with this concept. They were aware that this is the time when they have a break and can play. Below is an example from one of the groups.

R: ...Are you sometimes outside in the elementary school.

Benni: Yes you have recess.

R: What is that, recess?

Benni: Recess? Don't you know?....

Johanna: It's where you rest and go outside.

R: Rest?

Margret: No, you get fresh air.

R: Get fresh air, I see.

Margret: If you are like suffocating inside.

The children were concerned about having their time divided into time periods more strictly than in preschool and dominated by the school bell. The bell, like recess, was foreign for the preschool children. They understood the purpose of the bell, but they were unsure of exactly how it would work. They knew that when the bell rings, they should go outside if they are inside and inside if they are out, and they also knew that it would ring at the end of the day. Below is an example from a discussion about the school bell.

Sigrídur: Shall I tell you, when the bell rings then the kids have to go outside. But when it rings again then you have to go inside again. It sounds like cling clang!

R. Who controls the bell?

Gunnar: The principal.

R: And can everyone go outside when they hear the bell?

Ingi: When they hear the bell again they will go inside. You have to go inside then.

The children seemed to have formed conventional views of the elementary school, discussing with confidence what they believed children learned in the elementary school. The most common answers to the question about what children learn in elementary school were: Reading, learning the alphabet, writing, and learning mathematics. They also talked about homework and special classes like physical education and swimming. Below is a typical discussion on what the children believed they would learn in the elementary school.

R: What do you think children learn in school?

Bjarni: They learn to read small letters. I don't know how to, of course.

Diana: And write small letters.

R: Yes. And something more? What do you think the children are doing all day in school?

Bjarni: In the first two classes, somewhere there, in the two first classes is toy-day. You get toy-day if everyone behaves.

R: Will there be toy-day if everyone behaves?

Bjarni: Yes, the next day.

R: I see. But what do you think the children are doing all day in school?

Diana: Learning.

R: What are they learning all day?

Bjarni: To write and read and do math.

Diana: And it is also physical education class and swimming.

Besides learning how to read, write, and do mathematics the children assumed that they would learn certain rules, customs, and behaviors in the elementary school as part of the first grade curriculum. Below is a discussion from one of the groups.

R: What do you think children learn in school?

Holly: Learn to read, do math, and write.

Magnus: You also learn other things.

R: What?

Magnus: To raise your hands.

R: To raise your hands?...

Holly: To behave yourself.

Anne: And learn.

Holly: And sometimes there are exams.

Magnus: And also physical education class.

### **Differences Between Preschool and Elementary School**

The participating children had been in preschool for some time and their preschool years were coming to an end. They had first hand experience of the preschool, but their ideas about elementary school had on the other hand been formed by their environment, including family and friends, as well as what they had seen and heard when they had visited the new school. As can be seen in figure 1, the children mentioned many different things that they had been learning and doing in preschool, but the activities of the elementary school were more limited to subject areas, customs, and rules.

Do in Preschool	Do in Elementary School
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Puzzle, play games, lego-blockplay</li> <li>• Ballgames, carplay, pillowplay, matressplay</li> <li>• Play-dramatic play, play outside</li> <li>• Art, draw, paint, color</li> <li>• Tease</li> <li>• Write stories, read books, learn how to read</li> <li>• Mathematics, computers</li> <li>• Plays, theater</li> <li>• Watch movies</li> <li>• Movement, physical education</li> <li>• Eat</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Principal - classmates</li> <li>• Recess, school bell</li> <li>• Sit at desks</li> <li>• No play</li> <li>• Toy day as reward</li> <li>• Football</li> <li>• Mathematics</li> <li>• Writing</li> <li>• Read, learn the alphabet</li> <li>• Prepare food, sewing</li> </ul>
Learn in Preschool	Learn in Elementary School
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Art, draw, paint, color</li> <li>• Play, build, play games, playing with beats</li> <li>• Be quiet, be good, not to talk all at the same time</li> <li>• Learn to be a helper</li> <li>• Learn how to be in school, sit still, not hurt and beat</li> <li>• Read, make books, write</li> <li>• Sign-language</li> <li>• Mathematics</li> <li>• Sing, learn songs, learn verse</li> <li>• Climb up on the roof, bike without training wheels</li> <li>• Eat well</li> <li>• Tie your shoelaces</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Write</li> <li>• Mathematics</li> <li>• Learn the alphabet, read</li> <li>• Exams</li> <li>• Sports, physical education, swimming</li> <li>• Handiwork, knitting</li> <li>• Behave well, raise your hand</li> <li>• Rules and customs</li> </ul>

*Figure 1. Children's ideas regarding the activities of preschools and elementary schools*

According to the children, the learning that took place in elementary school was different from learning in preschool, more serious and difficult. Although they mentioned more and more varied things that they had done in preschool that they expected to do in the elementary school, some of the participating children did not consider what they did in the preschool as learning or that they had been taught anything; instead, the children found that they had learned things by themselves. Below is an example from a discussion in one group:

R: Haven't you learned anything in the preschool?  
Adam: No. And I have been here several years.

R: You have been here many years and you have not learned anything. But do you think you will learn something when you start the elementary school?

Eva: Yes, to read and write and stuff.

R: And you do not know how to read and write?

Maria: I know how to read and write.

Eva: I only know how to write my name.

R: Where did you learn that?

Eva: From the name-tags.

R: Did you learn how to write your name in preschool?

Adam: I knew it before the name-tags came.

Maria: I know how to write everything...

R: Where did you learn to write?

Maria: I learned it by myself.

One group discussed the physical education classes in elementary school and the difference between them and the movement and physical education in preschool, and it is obvious from the discussion that they see it as much more demanding than anything that they had done in preschool.

R: What do you think is different from the preschool and the elementary school?

Kathy: Physical education.

David: But we have physical education here in the preschool.

R: There is physical education here.

Katy: No, you see I do not mean like that, it is different kind of physical education, you have to try to stand on your hands and things like that.

### **Anticipation and Worries**

The preschool children who participated in the study described their transition into elementary school with mixed feelings. Many of them did not seem to worry much because they had visited the school they were going to attend. Some children worried about going to swimming classes, others about being shy around other children, and still others worried that they would not know how to do what they were supposed to do, such as math, reading, writing, knitting, or sewing. The most common source of worries, however, was the principal, who was seen as a foreign and distant authority figure, and in some cases an intimidating part of elementary school. Some



children mentioned that the principal was very strict, and some declared that they were afraid of him. Below is an example from one of the groups.

Daniel: Do you know that there isn't a preschool-lady. There is a principal.

R: A principal?

Daniel: Yes.

R: And in what ways is he different from the preschool-lady?

Margret: He is much more strict.

Daniel. He is not fat. He has glasses.

R: Have you seen him?

Daniel: Yes, yes. He is a bit fat.

Other things that the children mentioned were older children who could hurt them and bully them.

R: But is there something in school that you have to be afraid of?

Bjork: The big boys. The teenagers.

R: Really?

Olafur: No, rather the principal.

R: And the principal? Why are you afraid of the teenagers?

Bjork: Because they are hurting you all the time.

Bjarni: And bullying you.

R: Bullying and hurting? Really?

Rakel: And they are always doing something.

R. How do you know that?

Rakel: We know because when I see a teenager and he, the teenager he became rude to us, Sara and my brother.

R. Really? Why do teenagers do things like that?

Bjarni: I don't know. But I have a friend named Johannes. And he is only six. And he is a friend of a teenager.

Many of the children expressed excitement about starting school. They seemed to look forward to learning new things, meeting new friends, and being in new surroundings. One girl said: "I look forward to doing mathematics, I look forward to meeting new kids, and I look forward to making new friends."

## **Discussion**

The purpose of the study was to investigate preschool children's views and attitudes concerning their preschool education, and their transition and expectations for the elementary school. The research was conducted in preschools in Reykjavik, Iceland, using group interviews with 5- and 6-year-old children near the end of their time in preschool. The results of the study show that the participating children feel that they had a choice of diverse activities in preschool and that they would miss playing, the other children, and the preschool staff. The children frequently noted differences between preschool and elementary school, including the structure, the organization, and the size. They saw the main purpose of going to elementary school was to learn reading, writing, and mathematics. They also noted that learning the rules and customs of elementary school was essential. The children described their transition into elementary school with mixed feelings. Many of them seemed excited about learning new things and being in new surroundings, while others worried about what was ahead of them.

In the minds of the participating children, play and playing with other children were integral parts of preschool. This is consistent with research results elsewhere (Wiltz & Klein 2001, Dupree et al. 2001). When the children talked about elementary school, they were preoccupied with the ways in which it would be different from preschool, including the presence of a school bell and recess. This is consistent with previous research on children's perceptions about the transition between preschool and elementary school. Peters (2000) found that many of the children in his study thought that the differences in the physical environments, the size of the school buildings and grounds, and the number and size of the other children were unsettling. In a study by Corsaro and Molinari (2000), the children found that time was differentiated into periods more strictly in the elementary school than in preschool by ringing bells.

The results of the present study show that the children saw learning the school rules and how to behave in school as an important part of what they would be learning in first grade. These results are also congruent with research results elsewhere (Dockett & Perry 1999a, 1999b, Eide & Winger 1994). Corsaro and Molinari (2000) also found that children believed that the need for order and control was greater in elementary school and therefore there were more rules there than in preschool.

It is interesting to note that many of the children had formed conventional views of elementary school. They had the image of school as a place

where children sat quietly at their desks learning how to read, write and do mathematics. These results are in substantial agreement with Eide and Winger's (1994) study on Norwegian children, Broström's (1999, 2001a) study on Danish children, and LeCompte's (1980) study on American children. In their study on Italian children, Corsaro and Molinari (2000) also found that the children saw school as a place for work instead of play, and this lack of play-time was one of the children's major concerns. Similarly, the Swedish children in Pramling and Willams-Graneld's (1993) study noted that there was more time in preschool for playing and freedom of choice.

The children in the present study saw elementary school as a more serious place than preschool. They saw it as a place where learning would be their task. Everything would be bigger and more difficult there. What they had been doing before, in preschool, was simplistic compared with what was ahead of them in elementary school. For instance, they had been running, jumping, and climbing on the playground in preschool. During physical education classes at the elementary school, they would, however, have to perform more complicated tasks, like standing on their hands. Although they had been in preschool for some time, they did not perceive it as school. For them, first grade was real school. Although they acknowledged that they had been doing and learning many things in preschool, they believed that elementary school would be much more difficult, and some did not feel that they really had been taught anything in preschool. For example, they believed that they had learned the letters of the alphabet in preschool by themselves, but in elementary school they would be taught how to write small letters. One can assume that due to the indirect teaching methods of the preschools, the children believed they had learned things by themselves.

The participating children seemed to have formed ideas about the nature of education that imply that you are only learning during formal situations, by sitting down with books and writing utensils and interacting with a teacher who tells you what to do. One can ask how these ideas are generated. Cultural psychology advocates that human beings should be studied as members of social systems and as historically and culturally situated (Säljö 1991). Schweder (1991) crystallized the notion of cultural psychology when he wrote, "...no sociocultural environment exists or has identity independently of the way human beings seize meanings and resources from it, while, on the other hand, every human being's subjectivity and mental life are altered through the process of seizing meanings and resources from

some sociocultural environment and using them” (p. 74). Similarly, Bruner (1996) points out the importance of culture in shaping the human mind and argues that children show a strong “predisposition to culture” (p. 47) since they are sensitive and eager to adopt the folk-ways they encounter around them. It can be assumed that the views on school expressed by the participating children reflect sensitivity to their surroundings; that is, their views reflect the cultural views regarding education and the role of the preschool in contrast to elementary school in Icelandic society.

The children who participated in the study described their transition into elementary school with mixed feelings. Many of them seemed excited and looked forward to starting school, being in new surroundings, and learning new things; while others worried about not being able to meet the school's expectations, do what they were supposed to, and deal with the older children and the principal. These results are consistent with Pramling and Willams-Graneld's (1993) results. The children in their study said they were excited about new surroundings, new friends, and learning new things, but they also worried about what was expected of them in school. Other studies have shown evidence of various degrees of worry. For example, the children in Eide and Winger's (1994) study did not seem to worry much about starting school. Only one child worried about not knowing anyone, and some children worried about meeting the principal. The children Broström (2001b) interviewed were, however, quite insecure and nervous about starting school. Similarly, Dockett and Perry (1999a, 1999b) found that the children in their study worried about the older children and the principal

When the children talked about what they would miss from preschool, they most often mentioned the preschool staff and the other children. They also mentioned that they would miss playing and the toys. They saw recess in elementary school as something to look forward to because it was perceived to be playtime. This is consistent with other research results where children were asked what they liked most in preschool or what they would miss from preschool (Wiltz & Klein 2001, Sheridan & Pramling Samuelson 2001, Dupree et al. 2001). For the children, play is a vital part of life, and they seemed to begin realizing that elementary school could change that.

Preschools and elementary schools have different histories, different traditions, and different philosophies. Dahlberg and Taguchi (1994) highlight that there are two different views of children predominant in preschools and elementary schools. In the preschool philosophy, childhood is

the innocent period of a person's life, and freedom and innocence are emphasized. In the elementary school, on the other hand, the image of the child is as that of a culture and knowledge reproducer. Child-directed and play-oriented methods have predominated in preschools instead of teacher direction, content areas, and large-group instruction in the elementary school. The results of the present study indicate that the children are very much aware of these differences and seem to have internalized these ideas. They seem to view starting elementary school as a turning point in their lives. The innocent playful period in their lives has now come to an end, and more serious times lie ahead.

The goal of this study was to add to the knowledge on children's transition from preschool to elementary school by involving children in the research and by listening to their voices. The results of the study indicate that children are valuable participants in research about themselves and their environments. The participating children were able to communicate, expressing their likes, dislikes, worries, and excitement. The results provide notable information on the child's view of the difference between preschool and elementary school and the transition from preschool to elementary school.

There are, however, several limitations to the study. Although interviewing young children is a reasonable technique for discovering children's views and perceptions, other methods used in conjunction with interviews, as outlined in the Mosaic approach (Clark 2001, Clark & Moss 2001), might give more reliable results. In the present study, the children were only interviewed once, near the end of their time in preschool. Better information about children's views about preschool and elementary school, and how the elementary school meets their expectations, could be gained by following the children through a longer period of time, e.g. from their last year in preschool through their first year in the elementary school. Further research might also focus on the views and expectations of parents, preschool teachers, and elementary school teachers and compare these views with those of the children.

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