Author(s): Eskelä-Haapanen, Sirpa; Lerkkanen, Marja-Kristiina; Rasku-Puttonen, Helena; Poikkeus, Anna-Maija

Title: Children's beliefs concerning school transition
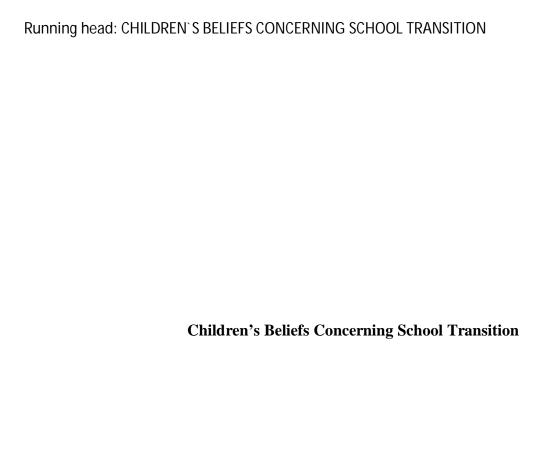
Year: 2017

Version:

Children's Beliefs Concerning School Transition

Abstract

The present study examines preschoolers' positive and negative beliefs concerning their transfer into primary education. Data from 1,386 Finnish preschoolers were obtained using interviews with parents at the end of the children's preschool year (age 6). Using qualitative content analysis, the data were analysed and interpreted. The analysis revealed a total of 11 core categories, which encompassed peer relationships, relationship with teacher, learning, formal schoolwork, informal activities, comfortable school entry and no concerns. The results indicated that children's beliefs concerning their prospective school entry centred on maintaining friendships and making new friends, and that children possessed both negative preconceptions and positive expectations about their relationship with their future teacher. Concerns about managing school life were expressed by both girls and boys; however, in general, worries about school entry were not very common as nearly one-third of the children did not express any concerns. Children anticipated new learning experiences and were eager to meet more challenging tasks. The anticipation of positive learning encounters emphasises the gradual, proactive construction of children's self-conceptions as learners. Finally, some differences were found between girls and boys, as well as the type of preschool context.

Keywords: Beliefs; preschool; transfer; positive expectations; negative preconceptions

Children's Beliefs Concerning School Transition

1. Introduction

The transition to school is a major change in children's lives, which has an impact on children's later schooling as well as their immediate context (family, peer and adult relationships). Children transitioning to school encounter many changes in their physical surroundings (Dockett & Perry, 1999, 2004), learning environments (Fabian, 2002), and social relationships (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Positive transition experiences have been linked to future well-being, academic achievement and social competence (e.g., Dockett & Perry, 2007; Einarsdóttir, 2007; Fabian, 2007). With respect to this transition, children's school readiness has been studied extensively (e.g., Fabian, 2007; Fabian & Dunlop, 2002; Johansson, 2007; Niesel & Griebel, 2007). Numerous previous studies have examined the factors that contribute to the smooth transition to formal schooling (e.g., Ahtola et al., 2011; Ahtola, Poikonen, Kontoniemi, Niemi, & Nurmi, 2012; Ahtola et al., 2015; Broström, 2002; Einarsdóttir, 2006). However, previous studies have emphasised the parents' (Dockett & Perry, 2007) and teachers' (Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, & Cox, 2000) viewpoints about the school transition, and the children's own voices have been given less attention (Dockett & Perry, 2003), especially during the preschool years (Dockett & Perry, 2004). Furthermore, studies concerning gender differences and the effect of the preschool environment are lacking. One exception is the study by Stipek et al. (1998) in which preschoolers were asked about their perceptions of ability, expectations for success, enjoyment of school and school-like activities, preference for basic skill tasks and challenges, dependence on the teacher, pride in accomplishment, and anxiety or concerns. In a study by Broström (2002), children were interviewed by their teachers about their expectations concerning the preschool year and the first grade. She found that many children were insecure and nervous about starting school. Children felt comfortable when they had learned what they were expected to learn at school. Eide and Winger (1994) interviewed

preschool children about starting school, and found that only a few children had negative presuppositions. The children had quite traditional and stereotypical views of school as a place in which one will read and write, do math and other school tasks. Einarsdóttir (2002; 2003) showed that preschool children are typically excited and look forward to starting school, but some are worried about meeting the school's expectations. Consequently, in the present study, we examined Finnish preschoolers' beliefs about their forthcoming transition to primary school. Also of interest were the potential associations between gender differences and children's beliefs, as well as the type of preschool context.

In this study the concept belief refers to children`s own understanding and ideas. Beliefs are seen as concrete anticipations of the future and relationships and the adaptation of oneself in the new environment. Beliefs can be understood as positive expectations to look for or success as well as negative preconceptions to be afraid or tensed of.

1.1. Transition to school

A positive transition to school has been found to predict positive academic outcomes and development of social skills (Dockett & Perry, 2007). The present study draws from the conceptualisations of Bronfenbrenner's (1979; 1989) ecological model proposing a system of human development and socialisation with reciprocal interactions between the individual and the environment. Conceptualisations of the ecological model can aid in gaining an understanding of the factors affecting the child's transition from preschool to primary education. In this study, the individual level is seen to consist of the children's self-concept, motivation (beliefs, goals and values), skills, capacities, expectations and concerns regarding the forthcoming change. The relevant microsystem of the school transition refers to the child's immediate living environment, as well as the system of microsystems, i.e. relationships in the child's home with parents and siblings, in the preschool with teachers and peers, and in the

neighbourhood with other adults and peers (Penn, 2005). The mesosystem comprises connections and processes between the immediate environments, such as the cooperative relationships of those who are directly involved with the child, including the home, preschool, peer group and neighbourhood (leisure time). The external environmental settings consist of a network of professionals and stakeholders, for instance, at the level of the exosystem, and affect the child indirectly. In this study, the role of supporting transition practices within the local authority's policies have been taken into consideration. The macrosystem comprises the wider cultural context with values and beliefs affecting children as well as adults in their care environments.

The major interest of the present study is on the children's beliefs, intertwined with those of the adults and peers close to them, concerning the forthcoming mesosystemic change, which represents an important reconstruction of the child's microsystems. Niesel and Griebel (2007) see the child's transition from preschool to school as a major developmental task which entails changes at every system level, and also means discontinuities in the child's and the family's experiences. The factors affecting the child are interconnected and interdependent with one another before and during the transition period (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). A smooth transition to school requires supportive relationships among all the participants (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000) as the child encounters new academics, and needs to adjust to a novel social environment, learning environment and interactive patterns (Fabian, 2002; Hamre & Pianta, 2001) with typically less access to adult individual attention (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003). There is also an expectation for the children to take more responsibility for transmitting information between the two microsystems of the school and home, and parents report a change in one-to-one interactions when their children start school (Dockett & Perry, 2004).

Ahtola et al. (2011) have documented that the school transition is most successful when relationships between the child, family, preschool and the school staff are supported and enhanced. Children who experience home and school environments as similar are likely to feel more comfortable, whereas children who find school unrelated and unfamiliar to their home environment are more likely to experience negative feelings about the transition (Dockett & Perry, 2007).

1.2 Children's beliefs concerning the starting school

Motivation theories are concerned with beliefs, values and goals affecting an individual's actions (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). Motivation influences academic performance by directing student's behaviour and effort in learning situations (Wigfield, Eccles, Schiefele, Roeser, & Davis-Kean, 2006). According to Eccles and Wigfield (2002), an individual's beliefs about oneself, expectancies of success, and values placed on achievement in a task are also influenced by perceptions of other people in the environment. Expectancies for success predict how individuals actually manage different tasks. Children starting school typically manifest high motivation and learner self-concept (e.g., Lerkkanen et al., 2013; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). Parental beliefs about their children's school performance have been studied more extensively during the first year of primary school (e.g. Alexander & Entwisle, 1988; Aunola, Nurmi, Niemi, Lerkkanen, & Rasku Puttonen, 2002; Aunola, Nurmi, Niemi, Lerkkanen, & Rasku-Puttonen, 2003; Baker & Entwisle, 1987; Spinath & Spinath, 2005), than at and before the transition to school (e.g., Englund, Luckner, Whaley, & Egeland, 2004; Mägi, Lerkkanen, Poikkeus, Rasku-Puttonen, & Nurmi, 2011). However, young children's own beliefs concerning the change and their expectations and fears about school life have been studied only marginally.

Kinlaw and Kurtz-Costes (2007) have studied the malleability of intelligence among kindergartners, second graders and fourth graders, and identified contextual factors constructing children's self-concepts of their abilities during the transition from preschool to basic education. Prior findings indicate that first graders' self-beliefs do exhibit differences (Eccles, Wigfield, Harold, & Blumenfield, 1993). Children with similar backgrounds, similar grades at school and similar performance histories in other activity domains may have very different goals for themselves and have different opinions of their abilities (Wigfield & Eccles 2002). Highly motivated students with positive beliefs about their own abilities and competencies show high effort and engagement in learning (Wigfield, Eccles, & Rodriguez, 1998) and do well at school (Eccles et al., 1993). It has been shown, however, that younger children's (seven years of age) perceptions of competence and subjective task values are typically more positive than those of older children, and boys tend to have more positive competence beliefs for sports activities and mathematics, and girls for reading (Eccles et al., 1993).

1.3 The Finnish educational system

In Finland, compulsory formal education consists of nine years of comprehensive school with a relatively late school entry age of seven years old. Children usually attend the nearest school from their catchment area. Since the beginning of 2015, preschool education has been obligatory for six-years-olds. However, almost the whole age cohort (99% of six-year-olds) attended preschool during the last decade when pre-primary education was voluntary (Kumpulainen, 2014). In 2013, almost one-fifth of children attended preschool education in conjunction with comprehensive schools, while the majority of the children received preschool education in daycare centres (Kumpulainen, 2014). Preschool education has a uniform curriculum regardless of the setting, i.e. whether in daycare centres or in primary school. High

professional competence and child-centred teaching practices fostering children's activities as learners are seen as important values among the teachers (Hytönen, Krokfors, Talts, & Vikat, 2003; Ojala & Talts, 2007).

1.4 The aim of the present study

The aim of the present study is to gain an understanding of children's beliefs about the school transition at the end of their preschool year. The research questions were as follows:

1. What kind of beliefs about school and positive expectations and hopes do preschoolers have about starting school before the transition to basic education?

2. What kind of concerns or negative preconceptions do preschoolers have about starting school before the transition to basic education?

3. Are there differences between the beliefs of girls and boys of school?

4. Are the children's beliefs associated with the type of preschool setting?

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

The present study is part of a longitudinal large-scale age cohort study (AUTHORS, 2006), comprising a total of 1,386 preschool-aged ($M = 73.89$ months) children (650 girls, 736 boys) from 174 different preschools in four municipalities (two municipalities located in Central Finland, one in Eastern Finland, and one in Western Finland). Of the preschools, 16.1% were in conjunction with comprehensive schools and 83.9% in daycare centres. The children's family backgrounds were representative of the general Finnish population. The majority of the children, 75.2%, came from nuclear families. Parents had provided their written consent for their own and their child's participation in the study. The data were collected at the end of the children's preschool year.

Measures

The data were collected via the parents' interviews with their children, who wrote down the children's answers as instructed in a parental questionnaire. The instructions to the parents were as follows: 'What are your child's own thoughts about starting school? Please ask your child the following questions and write down his or her answers below.' The questions were as follows: (1) What do you find is nicest (most pleasant) about starting school? and (2) What kind of concerns or fears do you have about starting school?

2.2. Data analysis

The data were analysed using qualitative content analysis and inductive reasoning. The children's answers were read several times by the first author. Theoretical literature and previous studies on children's school transition were utilised in the analysis. Main patterns and meanings came into prominence through the interpretative process of careful examination and constant comparison (Patton, 2015). The translations of the extracts of data used in reporting were carefully checked by a native speaker of English.

2.2.1. Identification of positive and negative expressions and core themes

We applied a qualitative content analysis to the data in which both the children's expressions of positive expectations concerning school and expressions of worries, concerns or fears about starting school were first identified.

We continued with a step-by-step analysis of the emerged expressions to deduce patterns. The analysis revealed 15 patterns that can be connected with pleasant expectations about starting school. These were further synthesised to form six core meanings. The analysis of negative expressions revealed 14 patterns connected to children's worries about starting

school, which were synthesised to five thematic core meanings. The analysis required reducing the data to classify patterns and core meanings for interpretation.

3. Results

3.1 Children's positive expectations concerning the start of school

Table 1 shows the children's responses to questions concerning their positive expectations about forthcoming school experiences. Only 1.4% of the children (n = 20; three girls and 17 boys) expressed *dissatisfaction* when responding to the question about the most pleasant things about starting school. These children responded by commenting that there is 'nothing' pleasant about starting school, with one child elaborating: 'The whole school should not exist at all. There is nothing nice'. A similar proportion of children (n = 17; three boys and 14 girls), on the other hand, responded with an overall positive statement: 'Everything is pleasant'. Quite a few children (5.3%, n = 74) failed to pinpoint any specific things that would be nice about starting school. Some of these children mentioned that they do not yet know what to expect because they are not in school, or that they have not visited or seen their school, with one child commenting: 'I can tell you then when I am a school child'.

Peer relations and especially the prospect of maintaining and gaining *friendships* was mentioned by one-third of the children as something that they looked forward to in school (n = 466, 33.6% of children). One-fourth of the girls (25.5%) and one-fifth of the boys (20.0%) expected to make new friends among their *future classmates*. Having *old friends* to accompany them to school was important for 11% of the children: 'You can go to school with your old friend'. A few children made remarks with respect to experiences of bullying and stated a wish that a specific child would not be in the same school or classroom. From the child's point of view, it is very important with whom they share the process of transition. The change is likely to be experienced more positively if the new school environment is familiar and child has the

safety network of friends to ease the adaptation. Children with older siblings in the school mentioned that a nice thing about starting school would be the opportunity to walk to school with the sibling or to meet her/him during playtime or breaks, and to have the sibling introduce her/him to new places at school.

[Table 1 near here].

Almost one-third (n = 396; 28.6%) mentioned positive expectations associated with *learning*. These responses could be divided into learning more and learning new things *in general* (11%), learning *to read and write* (13%), and learning *mathematics* (4.5%). In addition, some children mentioned more specific skills that they expected to learn at school, such as 'learning to play baseball', 'learning to know the school area', and 'learning new languages'. Only 1.8% of the children (n = 25) mentioned the *teacher* among the nicest things about starting school.

Formal schoolwork was also a source of joy among preschoolers (28.6% of children) of which *school tasks* were mentioned by 7.6% of the children. Some children were eagerly waiting for more challenging tasks: 'We are going to have more difficult tasks at school', 'Tasks are too easy at preschool'. *Homework* was mentioned by 6.6% of the children as something that children had positive expectations for: 'We are going to have more homework than in preschool'. 'Homework is more difficult at school than in preschool'.

Informal activities were mentioned by a little more than 10% of the children as something that they look forward to in school.

Close to 10% of the children's (9.2 %, n = 128) responses referred to increased maturity, autonomy and growth, and along with these, more responsibility as an exact expectation. Children mentioned, for example, enhanced independence: 'Learning to cross the road without being hit by a car', 'You are able to be alone at home', and 'You can come home

earlier'. A significant sign of increasing independence was also having permission to get to and from school by oneself, which was mentioned by 18 children (1.3 %), for example: 'You are able to walk to school by yourself'. Children also found enjoyable that, as a schoolgirl or schoolboy, 'you do not have to take naps' and 'you do not have to put on dungarees'. Teacher-child relationship was mentioned in rather few (25, 1.8 %) responses as a positive expectation. Expressions were mostly 'teacher', 'new teacher', 'nice teacher' and 'it is nice to see a teacher and getting to know him/her'. Children also appreciated certain tokens linked with the higher status of a school pupil, such as having one's own desk, new books and school materials.

3.2. Concerns and fears about starting school

Table 2 shows the findings on children's responses to the second question regarding concerns or fears about starting school. The responses of 379 children (27.3%) showed optimism in their beliefs concerning adaptation to school (24.8% of girls, 29.6% of boys). They expressed *no worries* by stating, for example, that 'Nothing concerns me. It's only fun starting school', and 'Nothing, because I have learnt to be a real schoolboy in preschool'.

The responses of 319 children (23%) represented concerns about *starting school in general*. Their responses mentioned *tension, anxiety* and *fear* (3.7%). 'It is a new big thing and it worries me'. Many of the concerns were linked *to* apprehension about *school adjustment* (10.7%), i.e. whether one will successfully adapt to the rules, norms and expectations of the school. Children's worries concerned, for instance, not having anything to do, not having enough breaks at school, having to work the whole day and having too much work. Some children worried about their ability to take responsibility and regulate one's work and emotions: 'Can I keep still at the desk', 'Am I able to look after all my school things', and 'Because I am so shy, I might long for my parents'. Some children expressed uncertainty about the new surroundings and demands: 'I am afraid of school, because I don't know the things that are

happening there', 'What is going to happen on the first day of school?', and 'I am afraid of everything new'. The *way to school* was also a source of fear for some children (4.7%): 'Walking alone to school and back', 'The way to school is dangerous, for example, when traffic lights are not working', 'The way to school in the dark', and 'I'm afraid of crossing the road'. *School as a new environment* worries and scares children, too (33 girls, 5.1% and 22 boys 3.0%). In addition to finding one's way to school, learning to navigate the new building worried several children: 'Can I find the right places?', 'It (the school) is different than preschool', 'If I get lost', 'Will I find the right classroom?'

[Table 2 near here].

A third area that worried children (9.0 %) was not knowing who was going to be their future *teacher* and what kind of a person the teacher is. Some children raised concerns about the teacher's behaviour: 'If the teacher shouts', 'If the teacher is harsh and angry', or 'If the teacher is scary'.

As with positive expectations, peer relations was an area mentioned in many children's (19.6%) responses concerning negative preconceptions. The possibility for bullying at school was a worry for 8.3% of the children. Children commented that one may end up bullied if 'you have a speech problem' or 'you can't do your homework'. Girls expressed concerned about boys' rough behaviour: 'Boys bully more', 'They hit and they exclude you from play', and 'Boys shove you and call you mean names'. There were also *fears and tensions* about friendships, i.e. making new friends at school, maintaining preschool friendships, and loneliness: 'Which of my friends are coming to my classroom?' and 'What if I can't have friends at all?'.

Worries about learning at school were relatively common among the preschoolers (16.5%). Some children were worried about *learning in general* (3.5%): 'Is the school too difficult for me?', 'Am I able to learn anything. . .'. Some children expressed concerns about managing *homework* (4.2%): 'Can I do my homework during one evening?' Children were also worried about not being successful at *school tasks and about making mistakes*: 'Tasks, if they are too difficult and if you are not able to complete them with others, you have to stay in the classroom while others go out and play', and 'If I don't understand or I make mistakes'. *Reading and writing* worried some children (2.7%): 'I am afraid that I will not learn to read at all', and 'I worry that I can't read yet when others do'. Difficulties with math worried a somewhat smaller proportion of children (1.2%).

3.3. Gender differences in school-related beliefs

Although there were only 20 children who expressed dissatisfaction about starting school in general, the majority (17) were boys (85%). More than one-third of children were excited about having old *friends* as future classmates or making new friends. Girls (25.5%) expressed a higher belief than boys (20.0%) in making new friends among their future classmates, but boys (12.5%) mentioned more often than girls (9.4%) that they expected to retain their old friends at school. Girls (22.0%) were somewhat more worried about becoming a target of bullies, and their beliefs about peer relations concerned more fears, scares and tensions than those of boys (17.5%).

Learning was mentioned by the children in respect to both positive expectations and negative preconceptions. Boys (14.6%) expressed slightly more positive expectations about learning than girls (14.0%), but boys (17.5%) also voiced more concerns about learning than girls (15.4%). Girls (12.8%) had more positive general beliefs about their learning at school than boys (9.6%), and girls (13.7%) also attached more positive expectations to reading than

boys (12.4%). On the other hand, boys (5.4%) mentioned more positive expectations regarding learning mathematics than girls (3.4%).

Formal schoolwork was mentioned a little more often among the girls (14.9%) than the boys (13.5%) as something they were looking forward to. The biggest differences between the genders emerged with respect to beliefs about the opportunities that the school offers for *informal activities*. Outdoor activities, breaks, physical exercises and play were mentioned much more often as positive school-related expectations by the preschool boys (15.8%) compared to the girls' (6.0 %).

Teacher-child relationship seemed to concern more girls (75, 11.5 %) than boys (50, 6.8 %). On the other hand only seven boys expressed positive expectations to their teacher-child relationship before beginning the school whilst there were some more girls (18) doing so.

More boys (218, 29.6 %) were optimistic about transition from preschool to school than girls (161, 24.8 %) did and couldn`t express any worries starting to school at all. 'There is nothing to be afraid of' or 'I'm waiting for school and nothing concerns'. Some boys but not girls, however, specifically mentioned as a positive expectation the higher status of being at school: 'It is nice to be a big schoolboy'.

3.4 Links between children's beliefs and the preschool context

A tentative finding emerged in the pattern analysis concerning the children's beliefs by specific preschool environments. The children seemed to produce the same kind of expressions in the same classroom context in many cases. A total of 47 preschool teachers worked in these environments, and only one of the teachers was male.

Extremely *positive* expectations were found to come from 15 preschool environments (8.6%). Nine of these environments were located in daycare centers and eight were in

preschools in operating conjunction with comprehensive schools. In these 15 environments teachers had more working experience, there were fewer school assistants, and group sizes were smaller than in the environments where negative talk was frequent. In these preschool classrooms, every child could name at least one positive expectation associated with starting school or did not mention any concerns or fears. Positive expectations could be affiliated with *learning* in general ('I will learn new things') or learning a certain subject ('I'm able to learn to write properly'), *friends* ('I'm going to be in the same classroom as my friend'), and *starting the school in general* ('I'm finally going to be a schoolboy!').

Negative preconceptions were typically expressed more than positive expectations. Negative talk was frequent in particular in 17 preschool classrooms (9.8 %). The negative preconceptions were expressed as worries about learning and coping in general (10 preschools), worries or concerns about the future teacher (six preschools), and in one case, uncertainty about the future school in general. In environments where negative talk was connected to learning, all teachers had less working experience, group sizes were larger, and there were a higher number of more classroom assistants than in environments with more positive talk and in environments where negative talk was connected to future teacher. With one exception these preschools were located in daycare centers. All six preschools where negative talk was connected to teacher were situated in daycare centers, the group sizes were larger and there were more assistants than in environments with extremely positive talk. These worries appeared in every child's comments in these preschool environments. Negative preconceptions about oneself as a learner were expressed in comments such as: 'How can I learn to read and write?', 'I don't know the right answers', 'There are certainly tasks that are too difficult'. Children's worries that focused on the *teacher* consisted mostly of fears concerning the teacher-child relationship: 'Is the teacher nice?', 'I'm wondering what kind of person he/she is going

to be?' Every child from these preschools named at least one negative preconception or worried about some belief.

Taken together, it appears that more extensive preschool teachers` working experience and smaller group sizes seem to contribute to more positive beliefs concerning preschoolers` school transition preschools operating in daycare centers or in conjunction with comprehensive schools. When preschools are in conjunction with comprehensive schools preschoolers are able to become familiar with their future school environment and possibly also their future teacher. A higher number of assistants was not linked with positive talks and beliefs concerning school transition in contrast to smaller group size.

4. Discussion

The present study examined Finnish preschoolers' beliefs about their forthcoming transition to primary school. Most of the children indicated both positive expectations and negative preconceptions about the relationships, the physical environment and their adaptation with respect to the new demands as a school pupil. Our findings suggest that children actively form views about their future school based on their prior experience with the microsystems of preschool, home and other settings within their mesosystem. In our analysis, four main contexts emerged as most prominent in children's views about the pending change: learning connected to formal schoolwork, peer relations, relationship with the teacher, and characteristics and affordances of the environment.

Children's positive expectations about their ability to learn and to engage successfully in the formal schoolwork and social networks were more prominent than concerns about learning. The perception of oneself as a competent learner who possesses positive expectations and attitudes for learning (e.g., Entwisle & Alexander, 1998; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000) is critical for a successful future school career, and early encounters of successes and failures are

powerful shapers of one's self-concept as a learner (Viljaranta, Lerkkanen, Poikkeus, Aunola, & Nurmi, 2009). Our study shows that peer relations, and especially maintaining and making friends, forms the most meaningful microsystem in the preschoolers' views of school. Both being able to accompany old friends to the same classroom and making new friends seemed to be very important for the children, which is in line with earlier studies (e.g., Einarsdóttir, 2002; Pianta, 1999). Preschool-aged children's relations with friends constitute a microsystem which plays a strong role in their future school adjustment (Ladd, 1990; Ladd, Kochenderfer, & Coleman, 1996). Consequently, according to this study, a positive school transition appears to be based mostly on friendship and beliefs of learning.

The findings by Einarsdóttir (2003) indicated that many preschoolers are worried about meeting the school's expectations. In our study, many children voiced similar concerns about starting school in general and uncertainty about the future. Children were, for instance, worried about their ability to independently manage the way to and from the school and to navigate the new environment. Some children considered the learning demands of the school a challenge, especially those attached to learning to read and write, and to a lesser extent, learning mathematics (Eccles et al., 1993; Stipek, Feiler, Daniels, & Milburn, 1995; Upadyaya & Eccles, 2015). Einarsdóttir's (2003) study indicated that many preschool children had an image of school as a place where children need to sit quietly at their desks. The children were worried that their days of play would be over once they started school, and they would have to take on many new tasks. In our study, however, quite a large proportion of the participating Finnish preschoolers, both girls and boys, were eagerly awaiting formal schoolwork and expressed excitement about school tasks and homework. For these children, the preschool seemed to have awakened the joy of learning (Salminen, Hännikäinen, Poikonen, & Rasku-Puttonen, 2013; Vitiello, Booren, Downer, & Williford, 2012). This positive anticipation of more challenging tasks and school status among a sizable subgroup of children may partly be linked to the later

age of preschool in Finland (at 6 years of age) and the nature of the kindergarten curriculum, which emphasises play and collaborative activities and does not contain any formal instruction of decoding or arithmetic. Finnish preschoolers are aware that informal activities such as outdoor activities, physical exercises, and play are included in the school curriculum, and they look forward to them as well.

The teacher-child relationship was also a microsystem that was prominently mentioned in both positive expectations and negative preconceptions of the preschoolers. Children were excited about having a new teacher, learning to know what he or she is like, but also worried about the prospect of having a teacher who might not be warm or accepting. This major change of a significant adult in the child's life may be thrilling and upsetting simultaneously. One child voiced these conflicting emotions by commenting: 'I want to have my preschool teacher also at school'. Prior studies have documented the meaningful role of preschool teachers in facilitating the smooth transition to school (Ahtola et al., 2011), and in promoting children's future development and learning and positive teacher-child relationships (e.g., Ahtola et al. 2012; Birch, & Ladd, 1997, 1998; Pianta, 1999; Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003).

In the present study, there was a tendency for boys to express positive expectations, especially those concerning informal activities and learning mathematics at school, whereas girls tended to mention learning to read and write more often as nice things about starting school. This kind of gender difference aligns with prior findings of the preferences of girls and boys (e.g., Eccles et al., 1993). Some preschoolers also mentioned as positive expectations their growing independence, developmental progress and changes in one's identity associated with being a schoolchild (Niesel & Griebel, 2007).

Experiences gained in the preschool environment form the fourth meaningful microsystem connected to preschool-aged children's development (Penn, 2005). Our tentative findings suggest that children who experience supportive preschool environments show

curiosity, interest and motivation as they anticipate transitioning to school (c.f., Hännikäinen & Rasku-Puttonen, 2010). On the other hand, a subgroup of children expressed worries about school and uncertainty about coping with academic learning and homework. These findings imply that it is important for children and their families to receive sufficient information about the school's practices, and to be given an opportunity to visit the facilities before the school is formally in session in order to ensure a smooth beginning of school (Ahtola et al., 2011; Rimm-Kaufman & Malaspina, 2008).

Prior studies have indicated significant differences between individual preschool settings and their impact on children (Stipek et al., 1998), and some environments are more effective than others in promoting positive child outcomes (Sammons, 2010). Children's perceptions of teachers' attitudes, beliefs and expectations also affect children's self-concept and motivation (Wigfield & Eccles 2000). It is, thus, important to gain a better understanding about the meanings that children attach to starting school and the significant factors that influence their beliefs and, further, those that affect their adaptation and motivation once they start school.

Taken together, the preschoolers in the present study conveyed more positive than negative beliefs about starting school. It is a significant finding as highly motivated students with positive beliefs about their own abilities and competencies show higher effort and engagement in learning and cope well with the transition from preschool to basic education, and continue to construct a positive self-concept of ability as well (Eccles et al., 1993; Wigfield et al., 1998).

The findings offer practical implications for building collaborative support practices for the transition phase and a continuum from preschool to primary education (Hamre & Pianta, 2007). The results can inform cooperation between preschool and primary education, as well as cooperation between home and school. This cooperation should optimally involve

the four microsystems that emerged in the study: learning relationships, peer relationships, teacher-child relationship, and the relationship between the child and the educational environment. Cooperation between the early childhood education setting and the school environment are seen as competencies of the social system to form the competence for transition (Entwisle & Alexander, 1998; Niesel & Griebel, 2007).

Limitations

There are some limitations that need to be taken into account in any attempts to generalise the findings of the present study. First, the study was carried out in one particular cultural context, Finland. It is possible that the specific features of preschool practices may influence the preschoolers' beliefs, and comparative studies are needed in other cultural environments. Second, transition practices differ in different preschool settings. Some preschool children may already have visited their future school and met their future teacher, while at the same time, visiting the new context was still ahead for others. This may have an impact on the children's beliefs. Third, the data were collected as instructed in a parental questionnaire. Parents wrote down their children's answers without tape recording. Children may have given answers in order to fulfil the beliefs of parents.

Conclusions

Preschool-aged children seem to have precise beliefs concerning their school transition. For a smooth transition, maintaining many elements of the microsystem, such as close friends, seems very relevant. Children's positive expectations about new and exciting challenges in school may reflect a positive appraisal of oneself as a learner and a willingness to try one's skills at a more advanced level, but it may also reflect that the preschool environment is not stimulating enough for some children. This poses a challenge for the

preschool programs to better adapt to each child's proximal zone of development in individualising activities. To maintain boys' motivation and high engagement, it is important to provide space and time for informal activities and play that is in line with the boys' positive expectations of school. To prevent negative preconceptions towards school, transition practices familiarizing children with the new environment as a whole need to be planned in collaboration with the preschool and the classroom teacher. Partnerships and the exchange of information between the school and preschool, as well as continuity in the structures, will be important. Overall, the implication of preschool children's beliefs when planning transition practices should be enhanced in the future.

References

Ahtola, A., Poikonen, P. -L., Kontoniemi, M., Niemi, P., & Nurmi J. -E. (2012). Successful handling of entrance to formal schooling: Transition practices as a local innovation. *International Journal of Transitions in Childhood, 5,* 3–21.

Ahtola, A., Silinskas, G., Poikonen, P. -L., Kontoniemi, M., Niemi, P., & Nurmi, J. -E. (2011). Transition to formal schooling: Do transition practices matter for academic performance? *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 26,* 295–302.

Ahtola, A., Turunen, T., Björn, P. M., Poikonen, P. -L., Kontoniemi, M., Lerkkanen, M. -K., & Nurmi J. -E. (2015). The concordance between teacher's perceptions of school transition practices: A solid base for the future. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research, xx*(x). doi:10.1080/00313831.2014.996598

Alexander, K. L., & Entwisle, D. R. (1988). Achievement in the first two years of school: Patterns and processes. *Monographs of the Society for Research on Child Development, 53,* 1–157.

Aunola, K., Nurmi, J. -E., Niemi, P., Lerkkanen, M. -K., & Rasku-Puttonen, H. (2002). Developmental dynamics of achievement strategies, reading performance, and parental beliefs. *Reading Research Quarterly, 37*(3), 310–327.

Aunola, K., Nurmi, J. -E., Niemi, P., Lerkkanen, M. -K., & Rasku-Puttonen, H. (2003). The roles of achievement-related behaviours and parental beliefs in children's mathematical performance. *Educational Psychology, 23*(4), 403– 421.

AUTHORS, 2006

Baker, D., & Entwisle, D. (1987). The influence of mothers on the academic expectations of young children: A longitudinal study of how gender differences arise. *Social Forces, 65*(3), 670–694.

Birch, S. H., & Ladd, G. W. (1997). The teacher-child relationship and children's early school adjustment. *Journal of School Psychology, 35,* 61–79.

Birch, S. H., & Ladd, G. W. (1998). Children's interpersonal behaviors and the teacher–child relationship. *Developmental Psychology, 34,* 934–946.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1989). Ecological systems theory. *Annals of Child Development, 6,* 187–249.

Broström, S. (2002). Communication and continuity in the transition from kindergarten to school. In H. Fabian & A.-W. Dunlop (Eds.), *Transitions in the early years. Debating continuity and progression for children in early years* (pp. 52–63). London: Routledge Falmer.

Dockett, S., & Perry, B. (1999). Starting school: What matters for children, parents and educators? *Australian Early Childhood Association Research in Practice, 6*(3), 1–18.

Dockett, S., & Perry, B. (2003). Children's views and children's voices in starting school. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood, 28*(1), 12–17.

Dockett, S., & Perry, B. (2004). Starting school: Perspectives of Australian children, parents and educators. *Journal of Early Childhood Research, 2*(2), 171–189.

Dockett, S., & Perry, B. (2007). *Transitions to school: Perceptions, expectations, experiences.* Sydney: University of New South Wales Press.

Eccles, J. S., & Wigfield, A. (2002). Motivational beliefs, values and goals. *Annual Review Psychology, 53,* 109–132.

Eccles, J. S., Wigfield, A., Harold, R. D., & Blumenfield, P. (1993). Age and gender differences in children's self- and task perceptions during elementary school. *Child Development, 64,* 830–847.

Eide, B., & Winger, N. (1994). Du gleder deg vel til å begynne på skolen. [Aren't you looking forward to starting school!]. Oslo: Barnevernsakademet.

Einarsdóttir, J. (2002). Children's accounts of the transition from preschool to elementary school. *Barn, 4,* 49–72.

Einarsdóttir, J. (2003). When the bell rings we have to go inside: Preschool children's views on the primary school. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal, Themed Monograph Series, 1,* 35–50.

Einarsdóttir, J. (2006). From pre-school to primary school: When different contexts meet. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research, 50,* 165–184.

Einarsdóttir, J. (2007). Children's voices on the transition from preschool to primary school. In A.-W. Dunlop & H. Fabian (Eds.), *Informing transitions in the early years. Research, policy and practice* (pp. 74–91). Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Englund, M. M., Luckner, A. E., Whaley, G. J. E., & Egeland, B. (2004). Children's achievement in early elementary school: Longitudinal effects of parental involvement, expectations, and quality of assistance. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 96*(4), 723–730.

Entwisle, D. R., & Alexander, K. L. (1998). Facilitating the transition to first grade: The nature of transition and research on factors affecting it. *Elementary School Journal, 98*(4), 351–364.

Fabian, H. (2002). Empowering children for transitions. In H. Fabian & A.-W. Dunlop (Eds.), *Transitions in the early years. Debating continuity and progression for children in early education* (pp. 123–134). London: Routledge.

Fabian, H. (2007). Introduction. In A.-W. Dunlop & H. Fabian (Eds.), *Informing transitions in the early years. Research, policy and practice*. Maidenhead: Open University Press, 3–17.

Fabian, H., & Dunlop, A. -W. (2002). Introduction. In H. Fabian & A.-W. Dunlop (Eds.), *Transitions in the early years. Debating continuity and progression for children in early education* (pp. 1–7). London: Routledge.

Hamre, B. K., & Pianta, R. C. (2001). Early teacher-child relationships and the trajectory of children's school outcomes through eighth grade. *Child Development, 72,* 625–638.

Hamre, B. K., & Pianta, R. C. (2007). Learning opportunities in preschool and early elementary classrooms. In R. C. Pianta, M. J. Cox, & K. L. Snow (Eds.), *School readiness and the transition to kindergarten in the era of accountability* (pp. 49–83). Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.

Hytönen, J., Krokfors, L., Talts, L., & Vikat, M. (2003). What educational objectives are considered important by preschool teachers in Helsinki and Tallinn? *Trames, 7,* 257–268

Hännikäinen, M. & Rasku-Puttonen, H. (2010). Promoting children's participation: The role of teachers in preschool and primary school learning sessions. *Journal of International Research & Development, 30,* 147–160.

Johansson, I. (2007). Horizontal transitions: What can it mean for children in the early school years? In A.-W. Dunlop & H. Fabian (Eds.), *Informing transitions in the early years. Research, policy and practice* (pp. 33–44). Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Kinlaw, C. R., & Kurtz-Costes, B. (2007). Children's theories of intelligence: Beliefs, goals, and motivation in the elementary years. *Journal of General Psychology, 134,* 295–311.

Kumpulainen, T. (Eds.) (2014). Koulutuksen tilastollinen vuosikirja 2011. [Statistics in Finnish Education 2011]. Koulutuksen seurantaraportti 2014:10. Helsinki: Opetushallitus.

Ladd, G. W. (1990). Having friends, keeping friends, and being liked by peers in the classroom: Predictors of children's early school adjustment? *Child Development, 61,* 1081–1100.

Ladd, G. W., Kochenderfer, B. J., & Coleman, C. C. (1996). Friendship quality as a Predictor of young children's early school adjustment. *Child Development, 67*(3), 1103–1118.

Lerkkanen, M. -K., Kikas, E., Pakarinen, E., Poikonen, P. -L., & Nurmi, J. -E. (2013). Mothers' trust toward teachers in relation to teaching practices. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 28,* 153–165.

Mägi, K., Lerkkanen, M.-K., Poikkeus, A.-M., Rasku-Puttonen, H., & Nurmi, J.-E. (2011). The cross-lagged relations between children's academic skill development, task-avoidance, and parental beliefs about success. *Learning and Instruction, 21* (5), 664–675.

Niesel, R., & Griebel, W. (2007). Enhancing the competence of transition systems through co-construction. In A.-W. Dunlop & H. Fabian (Eds.), *Informing transitions in the early years. Research, policy and practice*. Maidenhead: Open University Press, 21–32.

Ojala, M., & Talts, L. (2007). Preschool achievement in Finland and Estonia: Cross-cultural comparison between the cities of Helsinki and Tallinn. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research. 51*(2), 205–221.

Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods. Integrating theory and practice.* Fourth Edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Penn, H. (2005). *Understanding early childhood education. Issues and controversies.* Glasgow: Bell & Bain Ltd.

Pianta, R. -C. (1999). *Enhancing relationships between children and teachers.* Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Pianta, R. -C., & Kraft-Sayre, M. (2003). *Successful kindergarten transition.* Baltimore: Paul Brookes Publishing Co.

Rimm-Kaufman, S., & Malaspina, D. (2008). Early predictors of school performance declines at school transition points. *Research in Middle Level Education Online, 31,* 1–16.

Rimm-Kaufman, S., & Pianta, R. (2000). An ecological perspective on the transition to kindergarten: A theoretical framework to guide empirical research. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, 21*, 491–511.

Rimm-Kaufman, S., Pianta, R., & Cox, M. (2000). Teachers' judgements of problems in the transition to kindergarten. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 15,* 147–166.

Salminen, J., Hännikäinen, M., Poikonen, P. -L., & Rasku-Puttonen, H. (2013). A descriptive case analysis of instructional teaching practices in Finnish preschool classrooms. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education, 27,* 127–152.

Sammons, P. (2010). Does pre-school make a difference? Identifying the impact of pre-school on children`s cognitive and social behavioral development at different ages. In: K. Sylva, E. Melhuish, P. Sammons, I. Siraj-Blatchford, & B. Taggart. *Early childhood matters. Evidence from the effective pre-school and primary education project* (pp. 92–113). New York: Routledge

Spinath, B., & Spinath, F. M. (2005). Development of self-perceived ability in elementary school: the role of parents' perceptions, teacher evaluations, and intelligence. *Cognitive Development, 20*(2), 190–204.

Stipek, D., Feiler, R., Byler, P., Ryan, R., Milburn, S., & Salmon, J. (1998). Good beginnings: What difference does the program make in preparing young children for school? *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, 19,* 41–66.

Stipek, D., Feiler, R., Daniels, D., & Milburn, S. (1995). Effects of different instructional approaches on young children's achievement and motivation. *Child Development, 66,* 209–223.

Upadyaya, K., & Eccles, J. (2015). Do teachers' perceptions of children's math and reading related ability and effort predict children's self-concept of ability in math and reading? *Educational Psychology, 35*(1), 110–127.

Wigfield, A. & Eccles, J. S. & Rodriguez, D. (1998). The development of children's motivation in school contexts. *Review of Research in Education, 23,* 73–118.

Wigfield, A., & Eccles, J. S. (2000). Expectancy-value theory of achievement motivation. *Contemporary Educational Psychology, 25,* 68–81.

Wigfield, A., Eccles, J. S., Schiefele, U., Roeser, R. W., & Davis-Kean, P. (2006). Development of achievement motivation. In W. Damon & R. M. Lerner (Series Eds.) & N. Eisenberg (volume Ed.), *Handbook of child psychology* (6th ed., Vol. 3), *Social, emotional, and personality development* (pp. 933–1002). New York: Wiley.

Viljaranta, J., Lerkkanen, M. -K., Poikkeus, A. -M., Aunola, K., & Nurmi, J. -E. (2009). Cross-lagged relations between task motivation and performance in arithmetic and literacy in kindergarten. *Learning and Instruction, 19*(4), 335–344.

Vitiello, V. E., Booren, L. M., Downer, J. T. & Williford, A. P. (2012). Variation in children's classroom engagement throughout a day in preschool: Relations to classroom and child factors. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 27,* 210–220.

Table 1

Children's Beliefs Involving Positive Expectations for Starting School

Core themes and sub-themes	Girls (n = 650)		Boys (n = 736)		Total (n = 1,386)	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
1. Comfort	17	2.6	20	2.7	37	2.7
- Satisfaction	14	2.2	3	0.4	17	1.2
- Dissatisfaction	3	0.5	17	2.3	20	1.4
2. Friendships	227	35.1	239	32.3	466	33.6
- New friends	166	25.5	147	20.0	313	22.3
- Old friends	61	9.4	92	12.5	153	11.0
3. Teacher-child relationship	18	2.8	7	1.0	25	1.8
4. Learning	194	14.0	202	14.6	396	28.6
- Generally	83	12.8	71	9.6	154	11.1
- Literacy	89	13.7	91	12.4	180	13.0
- Math	22	3.4	40	5.4	62	4.5
5. Formal schoolwork	97	14.9	99	13.5	196	14.1
- School tasks	54	8.3	51	7.0	105	7.6
- Homework	43	6.6	48	6.5	91	6.6
6. Informal activities	39	6.0	116	15.8	155	11.2
- Outdoors, breaks	28	4.3	72	9.8	100	7.2
- Physical exercise, play	11	1.7	44	6.0	55	4.0
Exact expectations	55	8.5	73	9.9	128	9.2
No specific opinion	42	6.5	32	4.3	74	5.3

Table 2

Children's Beliefs about Starting School Involving Concerns or Fears

Core themes and sub-themes?	Girls (n = 650)		Boys (n = 736)		Total (n = 1386)	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
1. Worries						
- No-worries	161	24.8	218	29.6	379	27.3
2. General concerns	163	25.0	156	21.2	319	23.0
- Tension and fear	24	3.7	27	3.7	51	3.7
- School adjustment	71	10.9	77	10.5	148	10.7
- Way to school	35	5.4	30	4.1	65	4.7
- New environment	33	5.1	22	3.0	55	4.4
3. Teacher-child relationship	75	11.5	50	6.8	125	9.0
4. Peer relations	143	22.0	129	17.5	272	19.6
- Bullying	60	9.2	56	7.6	116	8.3
- Fears and tensions	83	12.8	73	9.9	156	11.3
5. Learning	100	15.4	129	17.5	229	16.5
- Learning in general	20	3.1	29	3.9	49	3.5
- Homework	24	3.7	34	4.6	58	4.2
- Making mistakes	36	5.5	32	4.3	68	4.9
- Reading and writing	14	2.2	23	3.1	37	2.7
- Math	6	0.9	11	1.5	17	1.2
No specific opinion	8	1.2	54	7.3	62	4.5