

THE ASSESSMENT OF CHILDREN'S ATTITUDES BEFORE THEIR TRANSITION FROM PRIMARY TO LOWER SECONDARY EDUCATION

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Abstract

The transfer of pupils from one school cycle to another one, is associated with children's difficulties in adaption to the new conditions. The focus of this study is to present the difficulties that children think that they will have when they move from primary school to Lower Secondary Education¹. The first aim of this study was to provide answers of these research questions: What are the difficulties that pupils think they will have to Lower Secondary Education (LSE)? What are their attitudes towards primary school and LSE? While the second goal was the comparison of the results of this study with two main theories of students transfer. For this study, it was conducted a questionnaire with fifth grade pupils of elementary school the last three weeks of the school year 2011-2012. The questionnaire contained open-ended questions where the children would write about the difficulties they would have in the LSE, positive and negative attitudes to their primary school and LSE. Results showed children's enthusiasm for starting a new cycle, but also concerns on adapting with many new teachers, with new and difficult subjects, with longer timetable teaching, teaching overload, the severity of teachers, etc., confirming in this way the two theories of transfer.

Key words: pupils, attitude, adaptability, primary school, lower secondary education.

¹ Lower Secondary Education is the new denomination for grades 7, 8 and 9 of the 9-year school according to the New Law of Pre-University Education approved on 21. 06. 2012 by the Albanian Parliament.

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Introduction

The education system is constructed such that the child during his education, will definitely follow some education levels that correspond with the child's physical, psychological and cognitive development. Let me make a clarification: Compulsory education in Albania is 9-year education, which includes primary and lower secondary education. Primary education, *currently*, consists of five classes, from first grade to fifth grade. Lower secondary education consists of four classes, from grade six to grade nine.

Therefore, this study included fifth grade pupils (who are in their final year of primary school), to assess their attitudes toward elementary school and the difficulties that they thought they would have when they start lower secondary education.

But, now, according to the new Law of Education for Pre-University Education System in the Republic of Albania (June, 2012)², became a new division of the 9-year compulsory education and primary education now includes also the sixth grade.

The transition of pupils from one school cycle to another one, is accompanied with difficulties in pupils' adaptation with the new cycle. These transitions present challenges for children and youth in their adaptation to their new environment, with new rules, routines and ways of working with teachers and young students (Cox and Kennedy, 2008, p. 17).

The primary purpose of this study is to present the difficulties that children think that will have when they pass from primary education to lower secondary education.

The paper intends to provide answers to these research questions:

- What are the difficulties that pupils think they will have to lower secondary education (LSE)?
- What are their attitudes towards primary school and LSE?

Children's responses about these issues give us a complete picture of how children perceive their transition from primary to LSE. Also, here will be given the attitudes of pupils towards the best and the worst things of elementary school, the most desirable things and things that LSE students dislike intensely at LSE.

The second purpose of the study is to compare the results of this study with two main theories of student's transition.

Two main theories of student's transition

These two theories have dominated the debate about transfer of children from primary to secondary school and are very competitive with each other – one favouring continuity, the other, discontinuity. According to Galton (2009), the first of these might be described as a 'matching' theory, whereby it is argued that transition works best when the school environment fits the young adolescents' perceived psychological needs and dispositions. In the USA, this *stage-environment fit* hypothesis was first proposed by Eccles et al., (1984; see also Eccles and Midgley, 1989), based on the earlier work of Mitchell (1969) on person-environment fit theories (all cited in Galton, 2009, p. 6-7).

² Thus, according to the New Law of Education for Pre-University Education System in the Republic of Albania (No. 69/2012, Official Notebook of the Republic of Albania, June, 2012), Article 22, paragraph 2 of this law, basic education includes primary and secondary lower secondary. Primary education consists of six classes, from first grade to the sixth grade. Lower secondary education consists of three classes, from grade seven to grade nine.

The notion of a 'stage–environment fit' suggests an approach based on gradual change to match the developmental changes taking place within the young adolescents. This highlights the degree of continuity in the transition, particularly curriculum continuity, including both subject matters and teaching methods (Gorwood, 1986, cited in Galton, 2009, p. 6). According to a stage–environment fit perspective, adolescents whose environments change in developmentally regressive ways are more likely to experience difficulties. In contrast, adolescents whose social environments respond to their changing needs are more likely to experience positive outcomes. The work by Eccles and Midgley (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles et al. 1993; all cited in Gutman & Eccles, 2007, p. 522) provides strong support for this hypothesis.

An alternative view offers a different perspective on the above research findings (Galton, 2009). Borrowing from anthropology, it makes use of the concept of "status passage" (Measor & Woods, 1984). According to them in most societies the transition from childhood to adolescence, involves a number of special rites that are designed to initiate an individual into his new roles. Going to "big school" marks a point in time when "grown-ups" such as parents and teachers no longer see pupils as children but as "young adults" (p. 7).

As Measor and Woods (1984) point out, viewing the transfer process as a status passage is at odds with the previous notion which stated that the main task of the primary and secondary schools is to ensure that there is as much continuity as possible. These authors are of the opinion that if the process of transfer was so well managed in such a way that the changes before and after the move to the big school were minimal, then pupils would have little evidence to suggest a change in status. In this approach, therefore, the desire for continuity needs to be balanced by an element of discontinuity, which recognises the need in pupils for some "outward signs" that they are successfully managing the change from childhood to young adolescence (Galton, 2009, p. 7).

Methodology

In this paper are described the attitudes of 102 fifth grade pupils of three schools in the city of Shkodra, before they start sixth grade of Lower Secondary Education (LSE). For this study it is used a questionnaire to pupils of fifth grade of Primary School three weeks before the end of the school year 2011 - 2012. The selection of three schools was done in order to represented different geographical areas of the city. The instrument used was a questionnaire which contained 8 Likert scale questions and 5 open-ended questions. This article will analyze the 5 open-ended questions³. The purpose of these questions was to obtain free thought of the children about the difficulties that were thought they would have at LSE, best/worst things of primary school, favorite and most hated things about LSE.

For processing information from the questionnaire was followed this way: All the answers the students gave, were launched into Microsoft Excel program in their original way. Later became the codification of responses. On the basis of the codification, major categories were constructed by the name of the most frequent answers given by children. The data were selected in the following categories and then was made the delimitation of the percentage of each of them.

³ Five open-ended questions are borrowed from the Canadian longitudinal study of Tilleczek et al. (2010). Fresh Starts or False Starts: Young People in Transition from Elementary to Secondary School. Toronto, Canada. This study lasted 3 years and attended the temporal and the dynamic process of transition of the students in grade 8, 9 and 10.

Results and Discussion

Difficulties that children think they will have in LSE are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Difficulties in LSE

Main categories	No.	%
Adaptation to many teachers, difficulties in learning and in subjects	53	52
Teaching loads, longer timetable teaching	22	21.6
Adaptation to new pupils	14	13.7
Foreign languages, difficult tests	8	7.8
Teachers will misbehave with me	5	4.9
Total	102	100.0

Let's analyze them on. As you can see too, 52% of kids think it will be difficult for them to adapt to many teachers, challenging lessons and different subjects. This was the main trend of children in terms of difficulties in LSE. Two boys wrote: *"I will have difficulty in adapting to the highest cycle, difficult lessons and new subjects"*. *"Difficult lessons, teachers for each subject, longer and more tiring timetable teaching"*.

For the big number of teachers and their adaptation to them, a girl wrote: *"I think it will be difficult because it will be different teachers for each subject, and so I have to adapt to all teachers"*.

Children expressing their dislike to the difficult lessons. For illustration I brought the sayings that two children reported in the questionnaire: *"The subjects are difficult, and I don't think I will like them so much"*, *"I think, I won't learn some difficult subject, because I don't like them"*.

High loads and longer timetable teaching was worrying to 21.6% of children. They expressed that in LSE would have until 7 classes per day and for them it was too much. A boy expressed: *"I think it's hard to stay 6-7 classes at school, I don't like many subjects and tests will be difficult"*. Long timetable teaching perceived like this: *"we will stay longer at school"*, *"timetable will be longer, the break will be shorter"*.

13.7% of children felt that it would be difficult for them adapting to new students. Foreign languages and difficult tests were concern for 8 students, where the French language perceived by children as difficult language and not very pleasant for them. Five students from 102 respondents said that teachers will misbehave with them through reprimand or disfavour. A girl wrote: *"The only difficulty I may have is that teachers would disfavour me"*.

As for gender differences in the perception of difficulties in LSE, there were no significant changes between boys and girls. Difficulties were the same for both genders.

What was the attitude of children to primary school, now that they have finished it?

Which were the three best things of primary school?

Answers to these questions are given in Table 2 listed by the main categories. One of the best things of primary school is that children had the same teacher for 4-5 years. I became impressed by the phrases they used to define their teacher: *"Dear teacher"*, *"good/a very good teacher"*, *"model teacher"* *"tireless teacher"*, *"goodwill teacher, her patience to teach us"*, etc. *"The fact that I had a teacher who helped me improving"* - wrote a girl and gave only this reason for the best thing of primary school. A boy wrote: *"Care of the teachers to the students, clear explanation of teachers and their behavior with us"*.

Large percentage of children (60%) and assessment that they had for their teacher/teachers strongly indicates how important the teacher is, especially in grades 1-5 of the primary school.

They are young and the relationship they establish with their teacher is very strong. For children the primary school teacher occupies a special place.

Table 2: Three best things of primary school

Main categories	No.	%
Dear teacher, easy lessons, good friendship	61	60
Many excursions, birthday celebrations, activities	26	25.5
When we had Physical Education	8	7.5
An only teacher, short time teaching, less subjects	7	7
Total	102	100.0

Besides teachers, children list like a very good thing of primary school, easy lessons and good friendship. Excursions, birthday celebrations and activities were liked by 26 pupils. Interesting was the fact that most of the boys perceived the three best things of primary school, only excursions and parties. Some of them expressed: *"Excursions in Tirana, Durres, party with classmates," "Excursions in Kruja, Durres, Tirana", "Numerous excursions, birthdays celebrations"*.

For girls it was not so. They also provide other evidence than excursions. *"Good Teacher, many excursions, good friendship"*.

Seven pupils enjoyed teaching process with only one teacher and short timetable teaching (4-5 classes per day). Weekly teaching load for primary school pupils is average 22 classes. This load is only for public schools, because the weekly load in private schools is bigger because of the program plus they offer.

The duration of the teaching day in these schools is different because of the politics that private schools attend. Usually timetables in private primary schools is 8.00 - 14.00 and additional classes belong to foreign language classes which are introduced in their curriculum since the first class. Only Turkish College in Shkodra, compared to other private schools, except of foreign languages that has in its program, also included two food meals for their students (breakfast and lunch). In this school, children attend from 6 classes a day since the first grade of primary school and the weekly load is 30 classes.

For eight pupils it was nice when they had Physical Education classes. Also from Table 3 below, we note that among the worst things of primary school, children have emphasized not having the class of Physical Education (29.4%) and having many classes of Albanian language and many classes of Math (8.8% of children).

Here I would like to stop for a while. What does this mean?

In primary schools in the city of Shkodra the subject of Physical Education is not organised as it should be. Even in conversations with elementary school teachers, it was highlighted the fact that many times instead of the Physical Education class, teachers were obliged to do two Albanian Language classes and two Math classes per day.

Why does this happen? Albanian Language and Maths are the main subjects in the primary school and their program is very densed, loaded. Considering that for many years I am an elementary school teacher, I think that the phenomenon of having two classes of Albanian Language and two Math classes has the following reasons:

Teachers often substitute the Physical Education class or other classes with Albanian Language and Math classes to complete several tasks and activities.

The first reason I think it is the pressure of the school director for the full accomplishment of these basic subjects. While the second reason is the request that teachers themselves have to

acquire the necessary skills of pupils in Albanian language and Math. Planned classes in transmitting necessary skills to the pupils in these courses are not enough, because their densed program. As a result, children are often prevented from having their favourite class (Physical Education). Another reason for not having Physical Education, I think it is the lack of fitness (indoor sports spaces) in many public schools. This fact is the barrier of not having this classes on bad weather and rainy days, which in the city of Shkodra are numerous due to the climate of the town.

What are the attitudes of children to the worst things of primary school? Responses are listed in the table 3.

Table 3: Three worst things of primary school

Main categories	No.	%
Failure in having Physical Education	30	29.4
Afternoon classes, reproof of teacher	27	26.5
Nothing	27	26.5
Accident of teacher in the first grade, change of teacher in the 4-th grade, the treatment as a little boy/girl	9	8.8
Many classes of Albanian Language and many classes of Maths	9	8.8
Total	102	100.0

Not-having the Physical Education classes and the category "Many classes of Albanian Language and many classes of Maths" (8.8%) was explained when we discussed the results of Table 2.

26.5% of the children expressed that one of the worst things of the primary school was afternoon classes and the reproaches of the teacher. Many primary schools in the city of Shkodra start school in the afternoon from 12.30 - 16.30 and this fact is perceived by children not as a good thing. Although for the vast majority of children surveyed, the teacher was the most beloved figure, for some children it was not so. 16 children, of whom 6 boys and 10 girls, said that teachers were too strict. A few of them wrote: *"Treatment as a little child, few activities, sometimes strict behavior of teacher"*, *"We don't have Physical Education, afternoons classes, strict teacher"*, *"Disagreements with the teacher of Social Education and Drawings"*, *"English teacher, the reproof of the teacher, difficult tests"*. As a bad thing they considered the treatment as a little child.

The same number of children (n = 27) stated that primary school had nothing wrong. They didn't give any reason or anything else that they did not like from the primary school. So their perception for the primary school was very positive and the ratio between boys and girls was 10 to 17 girls.

First grade teacher accident and replacing the teacher in fourth grade was a bad thing for 8.8% of the children. Reflect a little. Children surveyed are at the end of fifth grade and remember as a very bad thing, first grade teacher accident. It was deeply embedded and had left an indelible impression on them that even after four years children remembered and perceived as the worst thing that had passed in the primary school.

What are the attitudes of pupils towards lower secondary education?

Let see now children's thought for the three better/worst things in LSE.

From Table 4, it is noticeable the number of children (n = 39) that among the things that they like in LSE are new teachers, new friends and new subjects. For new subjects children's preferences varied. Some liked the classes in the laboratory, some physics, chemistry or learning two foreign languages.

Table 4: Three things that you like in LSE

Main categories	No.	%
New teachers, new friends, new subjects	39	38
Many activities, excursions, I feel grown-up understanding of the world around me	32	31.5
New knowledge, new environment, greater educational development	24	23.5
Morning lessons, having the Physical Education classes	7	7
Total	102	100.0

During processing of the data obtained from the questionnaire, I noticed that the preferences between boys and girls for new teachers, new friends and new subjects were the same for both genders (19 girls and 20 boys).

As for activities, they still remain the favourites of children. In the questionnaire children answered that being older, excursions would take place further than those had done in the primary school. The gender ratio between girls and boys who liked activities and excursions were 19 girls against 13 boys. Another consent of them to start a higher school cycle, was the feeling of being grown-up. A boy expressed : *"I will be more mature, most comprehensive with teachers, I will understand things better"*. A girl wrote: *"I'll be adult, I will make new friends and I will begin to build my future."*

The perception over themselves sometimes accompanied with the statement *"better understanding of the world around me"*. So, children feel that they are growing, they will know better themselves, the others and the environment that surrounds them. I was impressed by another fact about *"I feel more adult"*. This feeling was stronger in girls than in boys. So the rate between them was two girls against a boy.

New knowledges and new environment were among the things that children liked to LSE (n = 24). Changing the environment was seen as an attractive new thing for them. Children expressed that they were happy to change the classroom (in school), teachers and friends. In addition, going through to a higher cycle, they said it meant greater educational development (n = 24).

So, from this category we can judge for an awareness of children about learning new things and "raising higher scale" of their knowledge. One girl expressed: *"We will take more educational knowledge, we will acquaint with the new environments at school, we will make new friends"*.

But even for these preferences gender differences were significant. The number of girls who liked new knowledges and greater educational development was 20 versus 4 boys.

Also, children do not forgot their desire for morning lessons and their favourite subject, Physical Education (n = 7). Ratio of girls versus boys was almost the same.

Children were enthusiastic that when they would begin sixth grade, they would have the Physical Education class regularly taught. They mentioned in their reports that this subject will be taught with a particular teacher. *"I will have many teachers, I will make new friends, I will have a Physical Education teacher"* – wrote a boy.

What are the three things that pupils dislike in LSE?

Categories for this question you can see in Table 5 with all relevant percentages.

Table 5: Three things that I do not like at all in LSE

Main categories	No.	%
Longer timetable teaching	37	36
Teaching loads, difficult subjects, more subjects, more teachers	26	25

Strict teachers	20	20
Relations I will build with teachers, difficult tests	10	10
Strong competition, the French, the noise of other students	9	9
Total	102	100.0

The category "Longer timetable teaching", was one of the main things that children do not liked at all in LSE (n = 37). Children know that now there will not have 4-5 classes, but 6-7 classes a day. 26 children did not like teaching load, difficult subjects and the big number of subjects and teachers. For teaching load a boy wrote: *"Too many lessons, we may have many projects to do and excessive fatigue from the lessons"*. As you can see, the boy emphasizes the teaching load twice by the expressions *"to many lessons"* and *"excessive fatigue"*. Also from Table 1, among the difficulties that children thought they would have at LSE, it was the adaptation with many teachers, difficult subjects and longer timetable teaching, which had the highest percentage.

20% did not like at all the severity of the teachers. Teachers are young and unknown for pupils. LSE teachers perceived by children as *"strict and careless teachers"* against them.

For this, they wrote: *"I don't like things like less tolerance of teachers, teaching loads, now there are no more games like in primary school when we had fun"*; *"Stringency of teachers. Sometimes they get nervous with us for something not really important"*. A girl wishes to have the primary school teachers: *"New teachers for us (I would like to have primary school teachers), new subjects, more difficulties"*. Also from Table 1, five children were afraid that the teacher would behave badly with them.

Difficult tests and the relations with teachers troubled 10% of the children expressing to them *"difficult tests, difficult exams"*, *"difficult tests, the cycle with many classes, strict teachers"*. Nine children did not like strong competition between students, foreign language (French) and the noise of students, for which they reported: *"Unbearable noise of older students"*; *"The adults that come and go running in halls"*.

Are there gender differences in the definition of the three not favourite things at AMU?

From the survey resulted that there are no differences between boys and girls for the following categories: difficult subjects; many subjects; longer timetable teaching; difficult tests and strict teachers. While for categories below, the girls tend to dislike more than boys: many teachers (the ratio: 19 girls - 7 boys); the relations that will be build with teachers (the ratio: 10 girls - 0 boys); strong competition (the ratio: 8 girls - 1 boy); the French (the ratio: 7 girls - 2 boys); the noise of the older students (the ratio: 7 girls - 2 boys).

If we compare now Table 1 and Table 5 with Table 4, we note that there is a contradiction in the attitudes of children toward LSE. In Table 4, children said that among the things they liked the most at LSE and felt enthusiastic, were: the development of many new subjects, new teachers, new students. While in Table 5 there are the same things that children don't like at all. So children feel both enthusiastic and concerned at the same time for the same things. The reason of this contradiction is explained in this way, according to Galton (2009):

The apprehension mingled with excitement that arises during the transfer process is therefore largely a result of this continuity-discontinuity mix. This can be seen in the way that pupils talk about their hopes and fears during the last few weeks of primary school. They worry about losing existing friends but are looking forward to making new ones. They are looking forward to doing new subjects but worry about whether they can cope with the work. In the same way they look forward to having more teachers but are concerned about whether

some will be too strict. In this version of events transfer is full of these kinds of dilemma (Galton, 2009, p. 7).

Conclusion

This study revealed pupils' attitudes toward primary and lower secondary education. According to them:

- Positives of the primary school: dear teachers, good friends, easy lessons, few classes, many activities and excursions.
- Negatives of the primary school: afternoon lessons, the reproaches of the teacher, no Physical Education classes, many classes of Albanian language, many classes of Maths.
- Positives of LSE: new teachers, new subjects, being grown-up, new environment, greater educational development, morning lessons and Physical Education classes.
- Difficulties that the primary school pupils thought would have at LSE: The adaptation with many teachers and new students, learning difficulties and new subjects, greater teaching loads, longer timetable teaching, strict teachers, difficult tests, strong competition and the noise of students.
- The study also showed gender differences between girls and boys as regards the difficulties and their preferences to primary school and LSE. Girls liked more than boys: new knowledge, greater educational development and primary school. Also, the girls tended to dislike more than boys: many teachers, the relations with teachers, strong competition, the French and the noise of older students. While other categories were equally perceived by both genders.

Pupils liked the idea of having new teachers, but at the same time they feared that some of them will be very strict; they wanted to have new subjects, but feared by teaching overload and difficulties in them; they felt grown-ups and thought for a greater educational development, but at the same time they worry about of longer timetable teaching.

From this study conducted with the primary school pupils three weeks before the end of the primary school, resulted that Albanian children experienced both fear and enthusiasm before their transition in LSE, confirming in this way the two theories of transfer.

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