Family members’ memories about starting school: Intergenerational aspects

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THIS STUDY INVESTIGATED MEMORIES about starting school across several family generations, and the impact of these memories on parents’ philosophies and actions when they were supporting their children during the transition to school. In this paper, we report the autobiographical narratives of two families and explore the ways in which the memories of school and starting school prompted both continuity and change in family decisions about education in general, and the transition to school in particular.

The study draws on generational and interpretive perspectives in exploring autobiographical memories and oral history. Results reflect the concept of ambivalence, highlighting tensions between processes of reproduction and innovation across families. The implications of these tensions for children starting school are considered.

Introduction

Transition to school may be a momentous time in a person’s life. Many people have memories of starting school, possibly constructed and reconstructed over time, and drawing on a range of sources. In this way, these memories are constructions of childhood experiences interpreted in adulthood (Turunen, 2012). The time of starting school represents a normative, institutionalised transition established by legislation and educational practices within a particular society (Elder, 2004). It is a phase of changing relationships and roles, and marks changes in children’s participation in the family and community (Dockett & Perry, 2007; Educational Transitions and Change [ETC] Research Group, 2011; Rogoff, 2003), as well as changes for the individual (Elder, 2001) and the family (Griebel & Niesel, 2009).

A range of research evidence supports the notion that parents’ own experiences of school influence their attitudes towards education and their educational choices. These attitudes can influence choices about the neighbourhoods families live in (Lauen, 2007), as well as the location and type of schools children attend (Gorard, 1997, 1998; Räty, 2003; West, Noden, Edge, David & Davies, 1998). Within this broader literature, limited research has considered intergenerational aspects of starting school experiences, such as how parents’ own experiences influence their decisions about their children’s transition to school.

Of the few studies that have explored intergenerational experiences of starting school, Taylor, Clayton and Rowley (2004) suggest that parents’ own experiences at school may have a strong effect on the academic socialisation of their child, including the experiences instituted to help prepare children for school. Barnett and Taylor’s (2009) study of parents’ recollections of their own school experiences, and the impact of these on transition activities with their children, also indicates some intergenerational trends. In particular, this study reported that mothers who recalled the school involvement of their parents were more likely than mothers without such recollections to engage in academic transition activities with their children.

This paper contributes to an understanding of starting school experiences by exploring intergenerational aspects of transition to school. The memories of educational experiences of past generations contribute to family attitudes towards, and decisions about, children’s education (Räty, 2011). In this paper we pay specific attention to family members’ memories about starting school across two or three generations in Australia. Our aim is to explore notions of continuity and change in the recalled transition experiences across multiple generations in the same family. We also aim to establish the impact of these memories on parents’ philosophies and actions as they support their children’s transition to school.
Within this, we acknowledge that the intergenerational transmission of social patterns in transition to school is a complex phenomenon including perspectives of ‘what parents do’ and ‘who parents are’ (Taylor, et al., 2004).

Families as contexts of starting school

Starting school happens within a number of socio-cultural contexts, including the home, school and home–school connections. Broader historical and cultural contexts also influence starting school experiences (Dunlop & Fabian, 2002). Contexts set the scene for starting school at a specific time and place and define the public consciousness of what school is about (Elder, 2001). The bio-ecological theory of Bronfenbrenner (1986) explains the ways the home acts as a microsystem, with established patterns of activities, social roles and interpersonal relationships. These patterns reflect intergenerational influences, as beliefs and values are internalised by children who later draw upon these same models in their own parenting (Barnett & Taylor, 2009; Puttallaz, Costanzo, Grimes & Sherman, 1998; Taylor et al., 2004). The same emphases are evident in Elder’s life course theory, which highlights the importance of patterns of interaction with people and places that occur over time, within specific contexts, that ‘affect the way we think, feel, and act’ (Elder, 1998, p. 9).

Families play key roles in the educational outcomes of their children. What happens within families, as well as within communities and schools, influences children’s educational experiences (Bowes, Watson & Pearson, 2009). Family spirit and sense of integration coloured with intensive affective bonds—referred to as habitus—helps family members feel and act as a unit (Bourdieu, 1998; Reay, 2004; Tomanovic, 2004). Family habitus is maintained through generations by shared ways of understanding (Atkinson, 2011). It provides a framework for making, and making sense of, decisions, including those about education. It can predispose people to act in certain ways. However, it also offers possibilities for individuals to construct different ways of being and doing (Reay, 2004). For example, some parents are eager for children to have school experiences similar to their own; other parents seek very different experiences (James & Beedell, 2010).

Examination of family habitus allows us to consider both continuity and change across generations by focusing on both the processes of reproduction and innovation within families. At the same time as values and practices are transmitted within families, each generation develops its own set of values and practices. The tensions associated with these potentially conflicting forces have been termed social ambivalence (Lüscher, 2000; Lüscher & Pillemer, 1998), as members of each generation assert both their independence and their interdependence—simultaneously seeking to be connected with, and distant from, the lives of their parents and grandparents. Social ambivalence is described as a tension between the reproduction of family traditions and innovations exploring new, possible ways of being and doing, challenging the balance between individual and social (Lüscher, 2002). The concept of ambivalence helps us recognise how each ‘generation stands for continuity and for beginning’ (Lüscher, 2000, p. 14).

Autobiographical narratives in families

Memories about starting school are part of a person’s autobiographical narrative. People tend to build narrative self-understanding by constructing a coherent life story of ‘continuing me’, an autobiographical narrative of self (Blagov & Singer, 2004; Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; Nelson, 2003). Memories from the past contribute to the ways people position themselves, construct identities and interact in a range of contexts. These stories about the past, interpreted in the present, are an important part of human meaning-making processes, influential in ordering life events into meaningful experiences (Bruner, 2001). Autobiographical narratives emerge from a mix of personal memories and social and cultural boundaries. The narratives are culturally framed; they are situated in a historical time and place that contributes to the meaning of recalled experiences (Nelson, 2003). In autobiographical narratives people make sense of their experiences and memories, themselves, the world, and their relationships, and link their life stories to wider social narratives (Haynes, 2006). Bruner (2001) argues that autobiographical narratives are not just for the person him/herself, but are also a way to present oneself to others and explain what happened, and why, in a culturally appropriate way. To be told, the stories need an audience. Stories told during interviews are designed for particular recipients: the interviewers and people who might read about them later (Riessman, 2008). The stories about starting school as they were told during the interviews in this study may not have existed before, but the interview situation provided a reason and purpose for these narratives.

In families, autobiographical narratives are constructed and individual narrative selves are created through everyday interactions with other family members and across generations (Fivush, Bohanek & Zaman, 2011). Narrative meaning is created and re-created in social interactions where personal experiences are interpreted and evaluated through the social frames and interactions in the family, and are shared with other family members. ‘[S]tories we create with others through socially shared interpretations and evaluations of our personal past constitute our very being’ (Fivush, 2008, p. 55).

Using people’s memories as data raises issues about ‘accurate’ and ‘inaccurate’ memories. Are an individual’s stories ‘correct’? In this study we consider stories about
starting school as part of constructed autobiographical narratives (Ghosh, 2007; Turunen, 2012). Part of this construction process involves interpreting family stories and making sense of them in the context of one’s life (McKeough & Malcolm, 2011). This approach emphasises a combination of individual experiences; stories told in family and community; photos and other artefacts; as well as the process of recalling them. The stories may not refer to what actually happened, but they are experienced and recalled constructions, and present part of ‘continuing me’ (Nelson, 2003). Following Thelen’s (1989) ideas, this brings the notion of constructed recollections, rather than the accuracy of the memory, into the centre of the study.

Research design and data

Data were generated through autobiographical narrative interviews (Morrissey, 1998; Riemann, 2006) in which participants were invited to tell their stories about starting school. Depending on the content of the narrative, some additional questions were asked about particular aspects of the transition, including preparation for school—both for participants and their children. By doing this, we aimed to encapsulate participants’ memories of the lived experiences of starting school and explore issues of continuity and change in the recalled transition experiences across multiple generations within the same family. The additional questions were asked only if the interviewee did not mention them in his/her story.

Each narrative gave a voice to a child in the form of a story told from the present, when the participants revisited their childhoods (Thompson, 2000). These life histories were about past experiences, but also about what the starting school experience meant later in the life of the interviewees (Hammerton & Thomson, 2005). The interviews lasted from 20 minutes to nearly two hours, and with the permission of participants were audio-recorded. The interviews were conducted by two interviewers at a time and in a venue convenient for participants. Some participants brought school-related artefacts to the interview, such as school photos and school reports. These artefacts were not analysed but served as ice-breakers and prompts for the storytelling during the interview.

The data were analysed by using qualitative content analysis with the emphasis on abductive inference (Krippendorff, 2004). Following Peirce’s (2001) thinking about the role of concepts in human thinking and interpretations, the analysis was led by theory-based concepts outlining the phenomenon (Josephson & Josephson, 1996). This approach assisted in delimiting the analysis and focusing on essential issues in the theoretical framework of the family as a place of primary relationships, and the influence of those relationships in a person’s life course. The data were analysed by exploring repetition of the same kind of experiences, and the emotions related to them, in different generations.

Members of six families participated in the study. Two families were represented by three generations and four families by two generations. In total, 16 participants who started school in Australia between 1935 and 1991 shared their stories. The families’ stories about starting school covered time frames from 60 to 100 years. The stories included several generations: the parents and even the grandparents of the first generation and the children of the second and third generations. In the following results section we represent a close-up picture of two families: Family Wilson with three generations, and Family Taylor with two generations. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the anonymity of the participants.

Family Wilson

The first generation of Family Wilson was represented by Mary and Bob. Mary started school in 1937, and Bob in 1935. During the interview Mary and Bob talked about their parents, and Mary also talked about her grandparents. Mary and Bob’s daughter, Lorraine, started school in 1961, and her son Kevin in 1991. Altogether, five generations were present in the stories. Figure 1 provides an overview of Family Wilson and the family members mentioned in interviews.

Figure 1. Family Wilson present in the stories

Ambivalence across the generations was noted in this family as a theme of being socially active and ‘liking school’ was continued, while change was evident in attitudes towards patterns of school attendance across the generations.

Wonderful mixture of people

Associating with people from various backgrounds was celebrated through the generations of the Wilson family. Bob’s father had been a doctor and used to work at mental hospitals. For Bob, this formed a significant school-related memory:
Wonderful mixture of people. That’s probably what comes to mind most is the mixture of people that we associated with every day. We had the intelligentsia, and we had workers, and we had the starving fishermen.

Mary also talked about people around her. From her early years at school she remembered more about her family’s social life than school-related things.

But marvellous, more than school I remember the families and they were, you know really, probably they were a big influence on our lives because of my grandmother was a very cultured woman and so we had lovely music and poetry and singing.

When Lorraine was at school age, the family lived in a rural area with a culturally homogenous population and she did not have many possibilities to familiarise herself with people from diverse backgrounds. Even though there were not many possibilities, she passed on the importance of getting along with everyone to her children:

I used to always emphasise like just being kind to people was the main thing, be nice to other children.

The theme of being socially active and broadminded continued into the third generation. Lorraine’s son Kevin’s story was full of people. He was aware that making friends and being ‘in love with people’ was a recurring theme for him. When asked how he was prepared for school, Kevin said:

She’d [Lorraine] also kind of read E.E. Cummings poems to us and all kinds of things, which were just about looking for good things in the bad and enjoying the beauty of things around you and socially connecting with people and not excluding people.

An active and broad social network, being interested in people and willing to get to know them was part of the Wilson’s shared family story. Even though it was not strictly related to starting school, it contributed to the family habitus that determined the tone of the early school experiences across generations.

We never missed school

In Family Wilson, education was regarded as important, and going to school was generally a positive experience through all of the generations. Bob did not remember much about his early years at school, but he had an overall positive feeling about it:

My strongest memories are fun. I’ve got no bad memories anyway. Life was good. We had no nasty teachers that I can remember.

After a few years at school Mary’s family moved and she started in a new school. Mary liked her first school. She recalled that she fitted into the new school, but did not like it as much as her first school.

I mightn’t have learnt very much there but it was absolutely central to my life [the first school] and my memories because when we went to [the new town], I never liked that very much. It [the place she moved from] was never … was where I loved. That was where I lived and I loved the countryside.

Lorraine was a family-oriented child and enjoyed her life at the family homestead. She started her education by correspondence with her mother as a tutor and had happy memories of that.

So Mum taught me correspondence and I can remember. Oh this is exciting. I can remember the envelopes and I can remember getting a certificate from the School of the Air it was called or the School of Correspondence or something like that. And the main thing I can remember about Mum teaching me is just I remember like it didn’t seem to be, it wasn’t very arduous but we made a dictionary, where you had to do your, cut out things that started with A and B, etcetera. So that was fun.

After one year at the correspondence school, Lorraine started at a primary school. For her, leaving home was a big thing and she missed her mother. Starting school changed the meaning of time. At the farm, there were no exact timetables, but at school everything was scheduled and Lorraine was disturbed by the feeling of being hurried during the school mornings. She had vivid memories about the preparations for the first day of school involving her grandmother and father:

I remember being very nervous. I remember the day before I was to start, it was a big deal, and my Grandma gave me a pair of rosary beads and Dad taught me to say … he said if you want to go to the toilet you have to say ‘May I be excused, please?’ and if you want to sharpen your pencil you say ‘May I sharpen my pencil, please?’ But I couldn’t remember. And so I said, I couldn’t remember the words so I didn’t ask, so I wet my pants. That was very embarrassing. And then the teacher said, he must have seen like drip, drip, drip but he said ‘Ah Lorraine do you need to be excused?’ so I did go outside.

Because being at school was important for the Wilsons, absence was not an option and Lorraine and her siblings went to school every day.

I probably would have rather stayed home and just played but I actually didn’t mind school. But I remember, oh once early in that first year of going to school, they got a new bus and I hated the smell of it because it was new so I got a day off. So like you hardly ever missed school, so I got a day off because of the smell. I said ‘Oh it will make me feel sick.’ So the next day I got to stay home. But we [Lorraine and her siblings] didn’t really … We never missed school.
Lorraine’s story included several instances of ambivalence. Even though starting school was an unnerving experience with some unpleasant incidents in her early school career, she kept saying that she liked to go to school, reflecting the shared family value of the importance of school. She had pleasant memories about friends, success and recalled her favourite things like colouring in and writing stories. Lorraine’s story was a rich narrative of negative and positive incidents and diverse emotional landscapes.

I missed mum I remember, like I missed home a bit but then got pretty used to it. I’m fairly practical. I think I worked out early that you have to go to school. I thought you had to go to school so there was no point making a big deal about it so then I just settled into it.

Ambivalence emerged in the ways Lorraine dealt with her children during their early school career. Based on her experiences, Lorraine changed some patterns of the previous generation, like attending school every day and feeling hurried in the mornings. She had made a conscious decision that her children should not have the same experiences that she had. Because she would have liked to be with her mother more, she changed the rule of school attendance with her children:

I didn’t make them [her children] go to school if they didn’t want to go, but it usually meant they weren’t, you know, if they weren’t well or were very tired they didn’t go to school.

In her story Lorraine kept coming back to missing her mother and pondered whether or not home schooling would have been a good option for her children. This was another example of ambivalence in her story. Despite this tension, Lorraine’s son Kevin started his education in a Montessori pre-school at the age of three. Kevin had positive recollections of his time at pre-school:

I remember the presence of a teacher, the teaching. Whoever was in charge. I don’t remember what she looked like or anything but I do remember how she kind of felt in the classroom, which was very warm and friendly and I think I felt quite safe there.

Lorraine recalled that Kevin was taken out of the Montessori school because it seemed to not be the best place for him. Kevin recalled this incident:

And eventually I didn’t do the last, the year prior to kindergarten. Mum took me back out of Montessori and I remember feeling a little bit, I was happy about that but I was also a little bit, felt a bit weird about leaving my friends.

After the Montessori school, Kevin continued his school career at primary school when he was five. He remembered how he had dressed up in his new school uniform and he had a vivid memory about walking up the stairs to the school building. Kevin’s story followed the theme of ‘liking school’ that characterised the experiences of Family Wilson. He liked being at school, the activities encountered, and especially his teacher:

I don’t know what her [teacher] name was but I just remember sitting cross-legged, a very good pupil and looking up at my teacher and just being overwhelmed by the urge to go up and hug her or something, like make some kind of physical contact with her. We’d had a very good day of arts and crafts and I’d made a face on a paper plate. Again, I was very proud of my artistic abilities. But yeah, that was, I remember that feeling very strongly.

Like Lorraine, Kevin’s story was rich and detailed. He had memories about doing arts and crafts, being proud of his achievements and being with other children. He could still remember many of his school friends by name. Kevin ended his story by saying:

But it [school] was fun. I think that’s about it. I think in terms of actually starting school ... Yeah, I don’t really recall that first period. I guess people are the main things yeah. Falling in love with girls with blonde hair.

Family Taylor

Family Taylor was represented by two generations: Don, who started school in 1938, and his daughter, Margie, who started school in 1979. There were four generations present in the stories including Don’s parents and Margie’s sons. Figure 2 provides an overview of the Taylor family mentioned in interviews.

Figure 2. Family Taylor present in the stories

Patterns of both continuity and change were evident in the narratives from this family. In particular, there was a distinct and deliberate change in the ways education was valued within the family.
I remember the day I started school

Starting school was exciting for both Don and Margie and they both liked their first teachers. Don could vividly remember his first day:

I remember the day I started school. I was very excited because my mother dressed me up and put shoes on my feet and got me going and I went to school on the petrol tank of a motorbike [with his father].

Margie’s older sister had already started school and Margie was keen to go to school:

I was so looking forward to it. I was so excited about it but when I got there it was very different to what I thought it would be. I used to watch my sister go off to school and I used to think ‘Oh I wish I could go, I wish I could go’.

Despite the good start, school was not an enjoyable place for Don. Several times during the interview he said that he had not liked school:

Oh there was nothing much that I liked at school, in regards to the school work, in regards to maths and all that sort of thing. I didn’t like them. It didn’t suit me.

Margie’s experiences varied. She recalled that her first week at school had been traumatic. She had looked forward to going to school, but her expectations were not met:

But when I actually got there [to school], the reality of it was very different to what I imagined it would be and I think that’s probably where, I guess, the disappointment came in, is that I had this vision of what starting school would be like and it didn’t match the vision.

Margie recalled that in her early school career, she struggled with finding her place among other children. Margie started her story by recalling that she had enjoyed her school years but, throughout the interview, kept coming to her difficulties making friends:

I did enjoy school. I found it difficult to make friends, that was hard. But I did love the school work, which was wonderful. (Margie, at the beginning of her story.)

My memory of starting school was excitement and disappointment. And then fitting in. And then finding a place where I fit. (Margie, in the final part of her story.)

Margie also reflected on her experiences with her two sons’ transitions to school. She was worried that her older son might have the same experience as she had:

And he [her son] was an October baby and I don’t think he was really ready but because of his age he kind of had to go. And that was difficult for me because I knew he wasn’t ready socially and I guess from the memory of me starting school I didn’t want him to go through what I’d gone through. And it took him a little while but he finally adjusted.

In the Taylor family, going to school was not always a pleasant experience. Based on her own experiences, Margie was concerned about her sons’ transition to school. She wanted to change the starting school experiences and had given her sons opportunities to practise their social skills in play groups and kindergarten before they went to school. With these activities, Margie found new ways of doing things and managed to break the pattern of her family not fitting into school. Her concerns about her sons coping at school eased when her older son seemed to do well, and she was more relaxed when her younger son started school.

You don’t need a bloody tech school education to milk cows

The ambivalence in Family Taylor emerged in the changing status of education over generations. In his interview, Don told of many incidents of misbehaving at school. One example involved putting sheep droppings into grapes and giving them to other children. He also quipped that his best subject at school had been smoking. Don had not liked school, and when he was young he did not regard education as important in his life. Later he felt sorry about missing the opportunities:

I overheard my Mum say to Dad, ‘You know, you should send Don to tech school’. And I heard Dad, typical, say ‘You don’t need a bloody tech school education to milk cows’. I thought he was a great father. Now I regret all those things, but what can you do?

Margie knew that her father’s ‘best subject at school had been smoking’. The story of missed possibilities was shared across generations and it had become a family narrative. Margie referred to it in her story:

And he [Dad] said that was one of his regrets, that he didn’t [continue with the education]. And yet his mother really believed in education but his father wanted him back on the farm.

As a father of two daughters, Don actively aimed to change the attitude towards education in his family. He wanted his children to behave well at school and encouraged their school work:

I’ve seen different kids get into trouble for different things you know, and I always said [to his children] ‘If you want to do something that you shouldn’t do, do it at home, don’t do it in school’. And they didn’t. And they learned. They have done well, my two girls.

It was important for Don that his daughters were prepared to go to school and he had made sure that they ‘were ready’:
So they were about four and a half but they were both ready to go to school. They could read and they could recite and they could do lots of things. And they used to read well and write before they went to school. They were encouraged to do that before they went to school. They were ready.

In her story, Margie reflected this changed status of education:

And from Dad’s perspective, he wanted to give us every opportunity that we wanted to take … They [her parents] wanted to make sure we had the opportunities we wanted and they’d provided them for us and left that up to us in a way.

**Discussion and conclusions**

The participants could recall starting school and memories about it were part of their autobiographical narratives. In the stories, transition to school was a time of changes in each individual’s positions and relationships in the family and outside of it. This notion is consistent with current literature (Dockett & Perry, 2007; Rogoff, 2003; Turunen, 2012). The stories about starting school were not only part of personal narratives but also part of stories shared in the families and across generations. They covered a significant timeframe including the previous and following generations of the interviewees.

In the stories, the families formed microsystems in which the lives of different generations were linked (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Elder, 2001). In these microsystems, parental practices were either transferred to the next generation or actively resisted and transformed into new practices. Parents’ own experiences at home and school had an impact on their actions with their children’s transition to school and generated spaces of social ambivalence between generations (Lüscher, 2000). In Family Wilson, the importance of social activities and relationships outside the family was passed on from generation to generation, and it was a significant part of starting school memories in all the generations. However, the rule of school attendance changed between the generations. In Family Taylor, starting school included unpleasant experiences in both generations, but there were efforts to break this tendency. The meaning of education and the importance of ‘doing well’ was also changed in this family. These results resonate with previous studies (Barnett & Taylor, 2009; Taylor et al., 2004) but our study adds that not only incidents at school, but also in the family and home environment, have key roles in promoting positive and successful transitions to school.

The results of this study indicate that the experiences of previous generations, shared family stories and the family habitus can influence expectations and experiences of children’s transition to school. This might happen in a conscious way, in which a parent either follows or tries to change approaches to school. It might also happen unconsciously, by just doing things as they have always been done in the family. The time of transition to school affords opportunities for parents to reflect on their own experiences about starting school and ponder if and how they might shape their interactions with their children. Based on the results of this study we encourage educators to consider the intergenerational experiences within families and find ways to provide spaces for parents and other family members to share their reflections about starting school. Such an approach reflects the social and interactive nature of the transition, acknowledging that the experiences of many people contribute to the process, in various contexts, over time.

**References**


