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# The emotional and relational impact of starting kindergarten for non-native speaking children: a case study of a three-year-old child

Toth, Angelika

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This paper presents a case study and some results of a longitudinal study conducted from 2013 to 2018 in preschools in Hungary and Switzerland. This study has been prepared as part of the author's PhD research at the University of Geneva (Toth, 2018). The objective of this research was to reveal the relational and emotional experience of entering kindergarten/ school<sup>1</sup> for non-native speaking children, i.e., children who do not speak and understand the language spoken at kindergarten or school. (In this case study, the chosen child did not speak Hungarian when she started kindergarten). To capture the complexity of the emotional experience, a special observation form has been chosen called the Esther Bick method (Bick, 1964; Franchi & Toth, 2014), which has been developed in the training of child psychotherapists in the Tavistock Clinic in London. Through the unconscious, projective, and transference movements captured by the observations and completed by other mainly qualitative tools, I could reveal the internal movements that go through the children and approach their fears and their anxieties.

*Keywords:* emotional experience, anxieties, starting kindergarten, non-native speaking

## Introduction

The preliminary hypothesis was to consider that the transition to kindergarten is in itself an emotionally intense period. For non-native speaking children who enter the compulsory schooling system, this transition might be even more challenging. The reason for this not only lies in the language barrier but also in the difficulties of their families linked with the fact that they are foreigners (migrants or asylum seekers) and living in physical and/or emotional insecurity (for example, they can be afraid of being forced to leave and return to their country at any time). These uncertain conditions represent the reality of many young non-native speaking children in kindergartens and schools throughout Europe.

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<sup>1</sup> In Hungary, compulsory education starts with kindergarten for three-year-old children whereas in Switzerland children start school at the age of four and preschool is not obligatory. In this paper, we will focus on the Hungarian kindergarten context.



The study focuses on factors that influence children's emotional states, their evolving relationships with adults and peers, and their capacity to communicate and share experiences regarding their first year in kindergarten. This doctoral research draws upon different research fields and areas, such as educational sciences, intercultural education, child psychoanalysis and observational studies (Tavistock Clinic – Kleinian model), developmental psychology, and the psychology of immigration. For data collection, one Swiss primary school and one Hungarian kindergarten with a high-concentration of immigrant scholars have been chosen, with non-native children in each class. This case study is based on observations realised between 2013 and 2014 in a kindergarten in the eighth district of Budapest with a high concentration of Chinese, Vietnamese, Mongolian, and Iraqi children.

### **A case study of Ivett**

Ivett is a Vietnamese, three-year-old girl. She has a younger sister who stays at home with their nanny while Ivett is at kindergarten. Her parents work at one of the Asian markets of the city. Her mother only appeared on the first days of kindergarten: from this point on, the nanny accompanies her to the kindergarten every morning. Ivett was born in Hungary a few years after her parents moved to the country. Before starting kindergarten, she went to nursery. Physically she is of medium height and looks somewhat babyish because her chest is tilted back and her stomach is pushed forward. She has white skin, black hair, and slanting eyes. Her steps are unstable especially during the first days, like babies who have just learned how to walk. She usually wears two pigtails, a style that lends her a friendly and cheerful appearance. Most of the time she wears nice dresses with colourful tights. Despite her neat appearance, she seems to be emotionally neglected. She is capable of settling down and handling her anxiety on her own. She easily establishes contact with the observer. When she arrives at kindergarten and the observer is already there, Ivett takes her hand and puts her head in her chest. She seeks the observer's physical proximity, gaze, and attention, but does not try to interact with her. Sometimes the way she connects is abrupt, unexpected, and intrusive. For example, she can suddenly jump on the observer and try to sit on her knees.

#### ***The experience of separation from the parents***

On the first day of kindergarten, Ivett explores the room under the gaze of her mother. They look at each other with love and tenderness. Ivett seems to have a secure and strong attachment to her mother. From the third day of school, her nanny brings Ivett to kindergarten. Her behaviour with the nanny is very different to what she exhibits when with mother: she is distant with her and does not say goodbye when she leaves. Unlike some of the children who cling to their parents and cry desperately, Ivett walks among the tables and explores the classroom without showing any anxiety. However, her uncertain steps and her disharmonious movements seem to reflect her unstable internal state. After several weeks of preschool, when she arrives at the classroom, she freezes, does

not move, and walks awkwardly among the tables. She gives the impression of being caught in a state of 'in-between state': she is not in her family area anymore, but she has not yet arrived at kindergarten. This 'in between' state has been observed in most of the non-native speaking children, particularly in moments when the routine changes, for example before breakfast, before going to the playground or after nap time. All changes and unexpected situations seemed to cause fear and anxiety in these children. The following excerpts were taken from an observation made by the author for her doctoral research.

The children line up for breakfast then they sit down to eat. Ivett, looks very unstable as she stands in the queue and then walks to the table. I worry that she might fall on top of the other children any time. I have the impression that I'm observing a baby who just learned how to walk.

(Excerpt of observation of Ivett in the second week of kindergarten)

Throughout the first few weeks at kindergarten, after entering the classroom, she sits down at the table where she spent the first days with her mother. Even if she is alone, she seems to be in connection with a loving person.

After entering the classroom, Ivett spends minutes standing between the drawing board and the door. She watches the children, then she looks at herself in the mirror and gently caresses her face with both hands. She then caresses the drawings on her tights while she looks through the window. It seems like she is in contact with something or someone outside the class.

(Excerpt of morning observation of Ivett in the fourth week of kindergarten)

### ***Forming relationships***

During observations, Ivett interacts almost exclusively with the observer, especially in the beginning of the year. Their non-verbal communication contains a lot of tenderness and affection. She shows the observer the games she has discovered. It seems to be important for her to share her experience and gain recognition from a unique person.

She tells me "Szia" (Hello) and gives me the wooden booklet she is playing with. She asks: "Kérsz?" (You want some?) [...] She gives me the booklet again and asks "Szép?" (Beautiful?).

(Excerpt of morning observation of Ivett in the first week of kindergarten)

Her first contacts with teachers and classmates are flat and rare. She observes them but does not go towards them. She establishes contact with her teachers about a month after the beginning of the school year. Little by little, Ivett accepts the teachers' invitation to participate in activities. With help and under the gaze of the teachers, her movements are increasingly fluid and steady, but as soon as she is left alone, her movements become disorganised and discontinuous again. It looks as if her body is held by the gaze and the attention of an adult.

The teacher calls her to the painting activity. Ivett joins her immediately. The teacher helps her to get on a chair, then she puts her hand on Ivett's hand and shows her the movements of painting with a brush: repetitively up and down. The continuous movement enfolds me and puts me in a state of calm. The teacher leaves Ivett to help other children. Alone, her painting movement becomes increasingly jerky, rough, and she stops the up and down move and paints dots. The teacher comes back to her and shows her again what to do. [...] I lean back on my chair and feel peaceful.

(Excerpt of morning observation of Ivett after one month of kindergarten)

After about two months of kindergarten, she begins to have 'crises' (*krízisek* is the Hungarian term for outbursts that is used by her teachers): she screams, slaps, and cries when her classmates approach her. During these moments of distress, Ivett asks her teachers for some consolation. After she receives their help, she regularly goes to them and invites them in various playing activities. With her teachers, Ivett is calm and reassured.

A little girl presses so hard on her hair clip that Ivett jumps up, makes a high-pitched sound and starts to cry. She runs in the direction of the door with her hand on her head and a sad face. The teacher bends down and Ivett falls into her arms. She puts her face in the crook of his neck and the teacher cradles her like a baby, speaking to her very softly. Ivett looks at the girls while keeping her face half-hidden. The teacher continues to cradle her back and tells her that everything will be fine.

(Excerpt of morning observation of Ivett after 2.5 months of kindergarten)

During the first month of kindergarten, Ivett is not interested in her classmates. She does not try to interact with them, avoids proximity, and retreats to an isolated corner during group time. She only looks at them when there is a new situation and she is trying to figure out what is going on and what she should do. About a month-and-a-half after the beginning of kindergarten, Ivett starts to interact with older girls. She lets them play with her like a doll: they do her hair and hold her. The teachers call them Ivett's 'new girlfriends'. They sometimes qualify their exchanges as 'violent and aggressive'.

This morning, two older girls (5- to 6-year-olds) welcome Ivett by hugging her on both sides. Ivett smiles tenderly. The girls pull, push, stroke her as if she were a doll. She does not interact with the girls, does not look at them but lets them manipulate her like an object. She continues to smile as she caresses the 'Hello Kitty' on her T-shirt as if she were trying to calm herself.

(Excerpt of morning observation of Ivett after 1.5 months of kindergarten)

She does not seem to know how to protect herself from the aggression and the harshness of interactions with her classmates. At the beginning of the school year, she often bumps her feet and her chest and drops toys accidentally. She proceeds the same way with her classmates: she puts herself in dangerous

situations, she does not defend herself when the contact is too intense, then she becomes overwhelmed and dissolves into a 'crisis' by crying or yelling at her classmates. She does not seem to know how to regulate contact with others. Conflicts with her classmates are more and more frequent. Before the Christmas holidays, her reactions to the slightest interactions are very fragile and sensitive.

The teacher calls for tidying up. A boy asks Ivett to tidy up. He takes pieces of the puzzle she is playing with and tries to put them in a box, but Ivett protects her game: she lays on the table and covers the game with her arms. She shouts very loudly which scares the little boy who walks away from her. Ivett continues to yell at him in a very aggressive way: her face is red, and her facial expressions are tight. (Excerpt of morning observation of Ivett after two months of kindergarten)

At other times, when her classmates are playing next to her, she looks at them as if she wanted to join their game but does not know how to participate. In spring, after six months of school, Ivett is more and more tolerant with her classmates. Towards the end of the year, she is comfortable during group times and tolerates the closeness of her classmates. She has friends and seems to be proud of the relationships she constructed with some of her classmates.

Ivett touches Ana's nose while looking at me. She points at her and tells me the girl's name, looking at me with a big smile. I have the impression that she wants to introduce me to her new friend. (Excerpt of morning observation of Ivett after eight months of kindergarten)

### ***Ivett's verbal and non-verbal communication and the lack of communication***

As was mentioned earlier, Ivett communicated with the observer from the first days of kindergarten and sought the adults' attention and consent.

Ivett completely colours in a tiny area on her sheet of paper, then she raises it in the air and gives it to the teacher, who congratulates her and shows her where to continue. In the next few minutes, this scene is repeated several times. She raises the sheet after each stroke she makes and seems to need the teacher to give her a positive response. (Excerpt of morning observation of Ivett after two months of kindergarten)

Her 'crises' decrease as she gains growing confidence in speaking Hungarian. The more she understands and the better she is understood, the less she seems to struggle, and her crises disappear. Even if she does not yet speak fluently in Hungarian at the end of the year, she seems to be more comfortable and calmer in her verbal and non-verbal communication. She does not need to scream, hit or cry in order to express when something bothers her. Also, the confidence and reassurance that the teachers give her help Ivett tolerate when she is not understood by words since she feels to be understood emotionally.

Ivett looks at the teacher from time to time. I notice that there are a lot of moments of silence which are very calming and soothing. There is a good atmosphere and a lot of kindness between Ivett and the teacher. When the teacher gives her full attention Ivett calms down and seems to be contained. (Excerpt of morning observation of Ivett after three months of kindergarten)

### Discussion

The excerpts taken from observations of Ivett have highlighted the complexity and the fragility of the experience of being a non-native child starting kindergarten. Regarding the separation experience, Ivett and also the majority of the nine children observed in classrooms (Toth, 2018) stayed for a long time in an *'in-between', frozen state* when they entered the classroom. They also froze in unexpected transition situations. We can imagine how disturbing it might be not to understand what is going on. Fortunately, children found strategies to reassure themselves. Some of them leaned on loving internal relations while others found support from adults or peers in their new environment.

Ivett chose the observer as the person to lean on emotionally. After three months of kindergarten, when she was less worried and more confident, she could gradually open up to others. We can imagine that the observer's presence remained her *early experiences of a fusional "one-on-one" relationship* with her mother. She perhaps needed to be in contact with this unique relationship before opening up to collective experience. Knowing this, the question remains of what is needed to establish a relationship between children and teacher.

The teachers' openness to children, their trustful behaviour and sensitivity to the children's unspoken signals promote confidence and help children contain their anxieties. On the other side, the ability of teachers to connect with children's fears is also influenced by their apprehension of being able to understand them (Franchi, 2014a). This ability to understand is not only due to language skills but also *to the cultural similarities or differences* they consider with children (Franchi, 2014b; Payet et al., 2011; Rosenbaum, 2010). Sometimes, cultural factors can interfere in these evolving relationships, and it becomes difficult for teachers to see the child behind his/her slanting eyes, the different smell of his/her clothes or his/her strange behaviour.

Children's reactions to a language barrier can be numerous. Some of them respond with anger to the feeling of not being understood. As was mentioned above, Ivett initially responded with indifference when her classmates did not understand her. She let them manipulate her like a doll. Then she reacted violently by screaming, slapping, and crying. Her aggressive behaviour changed when she began to feel that her teachers understood her. She was then more able to tolerate the missing words and started to use non-verbal language to express herself. At this point, the teachers' ability to recognise how difficult it was for her not to be understood helped Ivett feel better. The teachers' willingness and ability to interact with non-native speakers can reduce children's anxieties regarding the unspeakable and untalkable experience they were having (Rosenbaum, 2010).

To conclude, the language barrier for non-native children can not only render the children more fragile but also threaten their emerging relationships with teachers and peers. Being separated from their parents and finding their place in kindergarten is in itself full of fears and struggles. The way teachers and peers consider communication difficulties and cultural differences with non-native children can strengthen their fears and struggles. This is why it is essential with all children and with non-native speakers in particular, that teachers stay emotionally available to children's needs and manage their own needs elsewhere. This is also one of the main challenges of being a teacher.

This paper shows only a tiny part of the findings highlighted by the PhD study. The whole study was based on 82 classroom observations of nine children conducted in Geneva and Budapest, with dozens of interviews, surveys and other tools (e.g., relationship scales). Other findings and case-studies will be presented in future publications. Last but not least, it would be worthwhile to mention again the originality of the Esther Bick (1964) observation method used as a tool in Educational Studies. The observer's conscious and unconscious attention and the emotional turbulences he/she identified and tolerated in classrooms allowed the observer to gain an insight into the internal states and the emotional experiences of children. This psychoanalytical orientation is ground-breaking in educational research.

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