

Children’s Voices: Providing Continuity in Transition Experiences in Singapore

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Abstract The issue about when children should begin primary schooling continues to be an area for discussion amongst educators, parents, and children who indeed have some views about this. The compulsory entry age of children into formal schooling is different in many countries. It is not only the starting age that has invoked discussion, but also the types of practices that occur to facilitate transition and minimise stress in young children. In this regard the ‘ready school concept’ has grown in acceptance and provides for the needs of children of diverse backgrounds, knowledge and experiences. This paper examines what is happening in transition experiences in Singapore and presents the voices of a small sample of children who wanted primary school to be a place for both work and play.

Keywords Transition · Starting school · Play · Singapore

Introduction and Background

A child’s successful transition to formal school is one of the important milestones that has to be achieved, irrespective of

the culture in which the child is reared (Kitson 2002). Research on transition has shown that a positive transition may benefit the child in the long term and set the path to success in later schooling years (Pianta 2004; Owens 2008; Bernard van Leer Foundation 2011).

Children make many transitions during their life time and the continuity of experiencing is important. The infant brought home from hospital makes the first transition into the home environment. It is hoped that this is an accepting transition because it, along with the many other transitions during early childhood, may be influential for the development of trust, resilience and a positive sense of self in the developing child. The types of relationships that children form with their caregivers and teachers provide emotional continuity for children as their sense of security develops and they adapt successfully to the many transitions during childhood (Merry, as cited in Dunlop and Fabian 2007). Sound communication between teachers and parents is essential in assisting with emotional continuity and the sharing of what happens in the home helps teachers to understand the experiential background of each individual child (Dockett and Perry 2009). Again, this is relevant, whether it is in reference to transition to child care, kindergarten, or primary school. A major research study on transition indicated, amongst other findings, that having well developed social skills and pre-academic skills are important for successful transition (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network 2002).

What Does the Term ‘Transition’ Mean?

Brostrom (2005) writes that transition is referred to as “the process of change that is experienced when children (and their families) move from one setting to another” (p. 17).

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Transition can affect the child's on-going ability to respond and adapt to the demands of school life. Dunlop and Fabian (2007) comment that transition is likely to involve a change of culture and status. It can entail leaving something behind that has constructed an identity. In reality, it means leaving the 'comfort zone' and encountering the unknown—a new culture, place, people, roles, rules, and identity. Jindal-Snape (2010) proposes that educational transitions are moving from one context and set of interpersonal relationships to another. Transitions can be satisfying and fulfilling, they can provide an opportunity to move on and move up with increased choices. However, transitions also can be challenging and stressful. Kitson (2002) proposes that starting school is a rite of passage for both the child and the family, and serves to represent a demarcation between the influence of the family and the influence of society as a whole (p. iv).

The Ready School Concept

Some traditional views of transition to school have placed emphasis on the child getting ready for school. Brostrom (2005) comments that research on school transition calls attention to the rapid and often unanticipated changes children face in a compressed period of time before starting school. However, he further states that research about commencing school has often focussed on the knowledge and skills that children need in order to be 'ready' for school. He agrees that these are important prerequisites for success at school, but that there are other prerequisites that need to be considered, including the readiness of the class and school to accept the child. This, in essence, is the ready school concept where the school gets ready to accept children and their particular needs.

Noel (2010), writing of a wide range of international views, states that "In the past, views on school readiness focussed primarily on the characteristics of the child. School entry was considered ill-advised until the child possessed certain characteristics that were seen to be necessary for success in school" (p. 28). He goes on to state "Readiness for school is broader and acknowledges the responsibilities of the school and community in regard to school readiness" (p. 29). Noel (2010) further explains that 'ready schools' are prepared to meet the needs of children of diverse backgrounds, knowledge and experiences.

The concept of 'ready schools' accepts that the school is nested within the community, larger society, and governmental structures (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006; Dockett and Perry 2005, 2009; NAEYC 2004). The practices and policies of each of these entities impact directly and indirectly on children. School transition programmes are meant to encourage a seamless transition for children

moving into formal school. "It is a cumulative life course for children that may impact their future transitions in later life" (Elder, as cited in Turunen 2012, p. 316). Using the 'ready school' concept has benefits. Research by Margetts (2007) suggests that children make the transition to primary school successfully if the school is ready to accept the child. The social and emotional well-being of the child become paramount and parents welcome opportunities to make the school transition positive for their children.

Margetts (2007) also proposes that in order to minimise the impact of changes and discontinuities when moving from home to preschool, to primary school, transition programmes need to take into consideration the diverse socio-economic and cultural background of children and to partner with families and communities so as to address any adjustment difficulties prior to starting primary school. Involving all stakeholders in the transition process, namely children, parents, preschool and primary teachers, can occur with the ready school concept as it can become a shared partnership benefiting all (Dockett and Perry 2009).

Traditional views of transition have placed responsibility for making a smooth transition on children and their families. There have, however, been significant changes in views from the traditional one. The earlier view that only children have to be 'ready' for school has been called into question (Brostrom 2005; Dockett and Perry 2009; Dunlop and Fabian 2007; Margetts 2003, 2007). There is a shared responsibility of both school and children when preparing for a start together.

Singapore: Transition Experiences for Children

Like children in most countries of the world, starting school in Singapore is an important milestone in a child's life and brings with it joys and challenges (Clarke and Sharpe 2003; Yeo and Clarke 2005). Children commence formal schooling at age six, having spent one or even 2 years in what is known as Kindergarten 1 and Kindergarten 2. An environment is provided in kindergartens for children to learn from one another. Children learn in two languages, English as the first language, and Chinese, Malay or Tamil as the Mother Tongue Language (Ministry of Education [MOE] 2012a). They make the transition to the first year of formal schooling in a range of primary schools and not many of these are located geographically close to the kindergartens that the children have attended. Transition from preschool to primary school in the Singaporean context usually involves the child having to adjust emotionally and socially, which are not necessarily related to the physical location of the primary school.

Children come from a range of different cultural backgrounds. Given the ethnic mix of Singapore, the expectations

of parents are usually high in relation to wanting their children to succeed in primary school (Yeo and Clarke 2005). There is one admission date each year for all children to start primary schooling and, depending on the school size, there could be several hundred 6 year olds starting school on the same day. The normal class size is 30 children to one teacher (MOE 2012b).

Ideally, children in preschool move to primary school having met their primary school teacher. However, in Singapore such a situation is not always possible as children do not have the opportunity to make prior visits to the school. The Ministry of Education does offer seminars to parents in order to provide useful information for transition to primary school (MOE 2012c). Positive communication between teachers and parents has been found to foster effective transition to school (Niesel and Griebel, as cited in Dunlop and Fabian 2007).

Different Systems for Different Countries

Just when and how children commence school varies greatly in administrative systems from country to country. Some systems have just one admission time in a year, while others may have two. New Zealand and some states in Australia have introduced more flexible systems of admission. The mandatory starting age for primary school varies greatly across countries from 4 years of age in some countries to 6 years of age in other countries (Eurydice at National Foundation for Educational Research [NFER] 2010).

The differences across countries between preschool and primary school education are common in most countries irrespective of the starting age. Sharp (2002) noted that these are:

- Children spend less time on tasks of their own choosing in primary school;
- Children are less physically active and spend more time sitting still at primary level;
- In primary school, the curriculum is more subject-related and places emphasis on number, reading, and writing, rather than play, and the development of oral and social skills;
- Adult-child ratios are generally higher in preschool settings; and
- Teaching staff in preschool settings usually have qualifications that are specifically focused on the needs of young children.

The age when children start school is usually governed by each country's parliamentary acts. In Singapore there is a Compulsory Education Act which was implemented in 2003, mandating that children would commence school at 6 years of age (MOE 2011).

A Recent Research Study

In view of the importance of transition and recent developments, including the concept of the 'ready school', it was decided to interview a group of stakeholders in Singapore—children, parents and teachers—about their views of starting school. This paper reports only on the voices of the children.

The research question in relation to the voices of children now in primary school was: *What was starting primary school like for you?*

Interest in this area was generated by reviewing a study undertaken some years ago in Australia when two well-known Australian researchers, Goodnow and Burns (1985), asked many hundreds of 6 year old children in primary schools in Australia what they liked and disliked about starting primary school. From the many responses gained, children wished that (p. 1):

- You could have a drink when you are thirsty.
- You could go to the toilet when you wanted to.
- You could put your head down when you are tired. In preschool we could, but not in school you can't.
- You could go outside sometimes.
- You could talk to your friends sometimes.

As Goodnow and Burns commented, "Seemingly small matters like those mentioned here are highly significant to young children" (p. 2). This perspective does remind us of how vulnerable young children are, especially when they start primary school.

Although the Goodnow and Burns (1985) study is a 'dated' reference, it was decided to investigate if children's views today are the same as those documented by Goodnow and Burns.

Research has also highlighted that children's voices need to be heard (Woodhead and Faulkner 2000). The evolving perspective of how children and childhood is viewed has derived from the need to have children's voices heard in matters concerning their social well-being (Dunlop and Fabian 2007). Hence, there is a need to see children as active participants in research with their voices heard. The UNICEF Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 13) states that every child has the right to the freedom of expression either orally, in written words, or print (Bae 2009, p. 393; UNICEF 2011). "The views, perspectives and feelings expressed by them, especially on issues concerning important aspects of their lives, such as their transition, should be accepted as genuine, valid evidence" (Woodhead and Faulkner, as cited in Dockett and Perry 2005, p. 31). Being mindful of children as active and capable agents in their own learning encourages us to consult with and involve children in decisions that affect them (Cheeseman and Fenech 2012).

The Sample in the Research Study

Using convenience sampling with parents' and carers' permission, 15 children (7 girls and 8 boys) attending two after-school programs were recruited for the sample. Children were asked if they would like to participate after the study was explained to them. Children willing to participate were from a range of primary schools, six in total, who were in the first year of school which, in Singapore, is termed Primary 1. The mean age of the children was 6.7 and they had attended a preschool for at least 1 year before making the transition to primary school.

Children in the sample responded to questions asking their views of what happened to them as individuals in different contexts.

Methodology

A qualitative, naturalistic methodology was deemed appropriate as the children's views about transition were sought. The use of a qualitative approach, which seeks information about an individual's perception of the world or social phenomena, is well backed-up in research methodology literature (Bell 2010; Kumar 2005; Lincoln and Guba 1985; McMurray et al. 2004).

Interviews were held with children who started primary school recently, that is, between the prior 2–6 weeks, so that the transition experience would be fresh in their minds. Individual, face-to-face interviews were conducted with 15 children. They were asked to think about their early experiences when starting school. The interviews with the children were conducted sensitively and a rapport between the interviewer and interviewee was established. The questions posed were worded simply, according to the child's level of understanding and a conscious effort was made to facilitate these by setting the children at ease (Wilson and Powell 2001).

The following were the questions asked of the children and their responses presented:

Question 1 What was it like starting primary school? What did you do on the first day of primary school?

(Numbers of responses are in brackets if more than one response.)

- I can draw, play on the first day, but now, I cannot, I need to do work.
- When recess time is over, I can play for a while and then after that the Chinese lesson starts.
- We must raise our hand if we need to ask questions. (5)
- We must sit quietly and listen to the teacher, but we didn't do that in childcare. (8)

- After recess, I queued up in twos and walked back to class and greeted the teacher.
- We did reading in class, we read together as a class, we did school work, we did Maths and English worksheets in school.

The overall findings from these questions were that school is a place for both play and work, doing routine tasks, following school rules and doing academic work.

Question 2 Did you make any friends in school?

Child-participants also expressed their views about the social environment in school.

- I made a lot of friends in class.
- I sat with other children in groups of 3, but now we have 4 children. I talked to my friends, played games.
- I like to do Art and Craft, I sat in a group of 5.
- I met John, my ex-classmate, we played cowboy games.
- I have 8 friends from preschool.

The responses showed that for many (10 responses), school is about making friends and for social interaction. Children were given the opportunity to make friends, and there was room for social interactions through school activities and the classroom setting.

Question 3 Which is the most difficult subject?

- Chinese is the most difficult subject to learn. (5)
- Maths is difficult. (3)

English was noted as being the easiest subject of all. (15)

Question 4 What is your favourite time in school?

- PE or outdoor time. (12)
- Recess time. (9)
- Others—lesson time, Art and Craft, Music—singing songs. (3)

The following are some of the responses as to why children preferred PE or outdoor time and recess time:

- I can play games with friends. (9)
- I can run in the fields, play hide and seek, play ball. (5)
- I get to buy food to eat. (3)

In summary, the children's favourite time in school was PE or outdoor time.

Question 5 Who is your class teacher? Can you tell me more about your teacher?

- I think I like my teacher. She is nice, but if you are very, very, very naughty or do something wrong she will scold you.

- My teacher is Miss S. I like Miss S because she is very nice and talks to me nicely. But she will scold the children if they don't behave themselves, especially the boys.
- Primary school teachers are sometimes friendly, sometimes fierce.
- She is different from my teacher in the childcare. She does not allow us to talk.
- My teacher is Miss T, she is nice, talks loud. I like her. Sometimes she will scold us if we do wrong things or if I do not do my work properly, but I'm not scared of her.

The message from children in response to this question was that primary teachers were generally nice, friendly, helpful, but firm—especially with the boys.

Question 6 Do you have homework? Who helps you with the homework?

The majority of the child-participants expressed the view that they needed to do school homework:

'Yes'—13 respondents,
'No'—2 respondents.

Most of them mentioned that their mothers help them with their school work at home, and their fathers were more competent in helping them out on subjects such as Maths and Science (Mother—9 responses, Father—6 responses, Grandparents—1 response. Only 2 child-participants mentioned that they could do homework by themselves.

Question 7 How is primary school different from childcare or kindergarten?

- The school is very big, school is bigger than my childcare, the playground is very big, the classroom is very big, more children, 30 children.
- Here, there are all boys no girls, but my childcare centre had boys and girls.
- Childcare is better, I can play all the time, primary school is not the same. I need to sit down and listen to the teacher, need to study a lot. Science homework is very hard.
- Cannot play during class lesson, in our preschool, after we finished our work we could play.
- In my previous school I can play more, now I can only play during recess time.
- The teacher allows us to go to the toilet only if it's urgent, 2 children at a time, if not I can only go when the bell rings, before the next class starts. I must go quickly and be back in the classroom.

Question 8 What makes school fun?

- I can do homework, but I want to also play, it is more fun.

- Not to do work at my desk every day, I want also to play games in class.
- Sometimes to sit down to do class work, but sometimes just to play.
- I can play many games in class, but I also want to go out in the school field.
- I can learn together with friends, not learn alone or sit at the desk alone to do work.

The children interviewed also expressed their need for social activities that catered to children's diverse interests and abilities.

When asked about how to make school fun, some of the ideas expressed by the children included a classroom that strikes a balance between play and work. Below are some of their responses:

- I like outside (outdoor) activities, to do more Maths—my favourite subject, will be fun.
- To hold birthday party celebrations, party time during June holidays, so I can get to celebrate with my friends. (2)
- I like to go to the zoo, visit places, to go for excursion e.g. Kid's Kampong. (2)
- Perhaps to go camping, swimming.
- To have a drawing competition, my friend Mabel won a trophy and a hamper for a drawing competition, I also like to draw.
- I like Physical Education. I can run very fast, I like to run.
- I would like more exercise running. I like track and field and school outings. I went to Snow City this year, last year my childcare centre also brought us to Snow City. I went 2 times already.

The responses to the question about how to make school fun showed that children expressed the need to have opportunities to engage in a variety of subjects in school, which catered to their interests and abilities.

Discussion of the Children's Responses

In summing up the children's responses, it was found that there were some similarities with the Goodnow and Burns' study completed in 1985. The main similarity was that there remains a sharp discontinuity between the approaches taken in preschool and primary school. In the children's views, in preschool and childcare they had opportunities to play and to make choices. In primary school, the formality of the school begins from the first day. There was no gradual transition. Needing to raise your hand to answer questions, to get permission to go to the toilet, to line up to come inside, were cited by many children confirming the views of Griebel and Niesel (1997) that children need to

adapt to new social rules that are acceptable to the school community.

The teaching style in primary schools was also different from preschool. The children's responses showed that the teachers were friendly and firm, but would scold children who were naughty. However, Pollard and Filer (1996) state that teachers do play a crucial role in helping children's developing sense of identity in a new educational context as adjustments occur. Where teachers assist in this manner children's identification with the school culture can be strengthened.

The favourite subject in this study was physical education or outdoor time, including recess time, again showing the need for physical activity. Children of 6 years of age still have a need for physical expression, to run about, to play games and to have fun! Childhood for them may end all too quickly if they are not able to make some choices and to enjoy some freedom to 'play' in the first year of primary school. Many researchers have written of the need to incorporate play in the early years' curriculum and that it does have positive benefits for children (Moyles 1994; Ebbeck and Waniganayake 2010). Children aged six in primary school should be viewed as being within the definition of early childhood education which, internationally, covers the age range of birth to 8 years.

There may be discontinuities between the child's prior experiences in preschool and primary school in Singapore as in other countries. Margetts (2003, p. 1) writes that critical discontinuities are often associated with new routines and procedures in school. There are also challenges for children in understanding the physical environment of buildings and playgrounds, differences in curricula, differences in teaching staff and their behaviours, social rules, attitudes and expectations and changes to the peer groups (Griebel and Niesel 1997).

Finding out how these discontinuities can be bridged is important. preschool and primary school teachers and parents may be able to minimize discontinuities by incorporating elements of the 'ready school' concepts as follows:

- Arranging visits to schools, close to school admission time. Even if these are schools that will not be attended by all children, there will be structural elements that are likely to be common to primary school. These elements include timetable arrangements where children play outside in a larger playground, and toilets and drinking fountains may be in locations outside of classrooms (Dockett and Perry 2005).
- Asking Primary 1 children to come to preschool and talk about their experiences when they first started school which will hopefully lessen some anxieties.

- Reading stories about "starting school" which focus on the process of a new shared adventure.
- Showing and discussing some videos of children in Primary 1 classrooms.
- Towards the end of the preschool period, introduce some of the routines in the preschool program which also occur at primary school. This could include news time, group discussion sessions with a bigger size group in order to prepare for the increased class size in Primary 1 schools.
- Increasing teacher collaboration between preschool, primary school and parents so that there can be a shared understanding of the needs of children so that the transition process can be more seamless as proposed in the 'ready school' concept (Margetts 2003).

Arranging seminars for parents is essential so that they can assist in preparing children for transition to Primary 1 as a partnership between parents and the school (Jindal-Snape 2010; Dockett and Perry 2009; Yeo and Clarke 2005). As well, explaining that children need to prepare for school, but likewise, ensuring schools are ready to accept children's diverse backgrounds, knowledge and experiences are activities that government authorities as well as individual schools should address.

Conclusion

Elements of the 'ready school' concept can be found in some schools in Singapore and it is shown that it does have positive benefits for children, teachers, and parents. However, the results of this small-scale research study highlight a need for further changes if children's adaptation into a school culture can be facilitated more positively and smoothly. The increased focus on two-way communication incorporated in the 'ready school' concept will assist in achieving positive transition experiences for children. Singapore is a very merit-oriented society and children are expected, by teachers and parents alike, to achieve and to work hard. The Confucian values of putting effort into schoolwork are prevalent. The millennia-long Confucian tradition of producing 'scholar mandarins' to achieve academic excellence through learning and acquiring knowledge is highly respected, and ingrained in Singapore's culture and custom (Little 2010, pp. 25–27).

Be that as it may, change is occurring and Government systems in Singapore are looking for ways to improve early childhood and primary education (Ebbeck and Chan 2011; Lee 2012). This study has provided evidence that some positive changes could occur if the 'ready school' concept is adopted more widely in Singapore. Government policy

makers, teachers and parents may welcome this change, as would children.

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