

“Teachers should explain what they mean”: What new children need to know about starting school

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Summary of paper presented at the EECERA 16th Annual Conference
Reykjavik, Iceland, 30 August – 2 September 2006

Abstract

This paper reports the perspectives of 54 children in the first year of schooling in Australia, about what new entrant children need to know as they start school and the information, experiences and resources schools should provide for children starting school. Small focus group interviews, during which children responded verbally and also drew pictures of their memories of starting school were conducted to enable the ‘voices’ of children, who had actually experienced the transition to school, to be expressed and heard. Children were interviewed in 4 different schools. Each school had different links to preschools ranging from very close links to quite informal links, and one school was a private fee-paying school. Results of the verbal interviews indicated common issues for children around starting school such as social interactions and friends, school rules, school procedures, teachers and classrooms, and feelings. The ability of children to make links between what they think new entrant children need to know and what schools can do to assist new entrant children was very strong, even though children were not prompted to make these links. Children’s references to being hurt, particularly in the playground are of some concern and would benefit from deeper investigation. The perspectives expressed in this study can be used to inform understandings about transition to school and issues associated with children’s adjustment to school.

Starting school

The challenges and demands of starting school have been widely documented by researchers in many countries. There is general agreement that the success of this transition to school and adaptation to the new physical, social and academic contexts is mediated on many fronts including: child, family, school and community. From the perspectives of young children, starting school ‘... means learning and achievement’ (Niesel & Griebel, 2001, p. 8). It is a time when learning and education becomes formalised, when conformity to rules and expectations, and relationships with others become a measure of success. Children’s social and affective wellbeing and learning are important and can make the difference between a child progressing well or experiencing ongoing difficulties.

Social, affective and learning competencies are supported when children’s basic needs are met (Fabian, 2000). From Maslow’s perspective (1970) these needs would include physiological and safety needs, affective needs, recognition and esteem needs, and a sense of competence – of being able both socially and intellectually. I would argue that as children make the transition and initial adjustment to school, the meeting of these needs influences children’s identity as a school child and their learning. As suggested by Fernie (1988), these initial impressions can become the standard against which future school experiences are judged.

Becoming a school child involves interpreting information and constructing understandings about school and the role of students. This includes knowing about school and responding to and taking on the behaviours and expectations of the new environment. The variation in individual development and experiences of each child means that for some children, the new experiences encountered at school will provide minimal challenges and difficulties, while for others, the same experiences will provide heightened challenges and difficulties.

Children’s agency

Given the social nature of schooling, the ability to establish relationships and interact with others contributes strongly to children’s wellbeing and learning. These social and affective skills are related to cooperation, assertion and self control, and the ability to control one’s emotional responses. Interpersonal skills include the ability to listen to and follow instructions, to interact with others, join existing social groups, include others, be responsible for one’s own behaviour, respond appropriately to conflict and to control one’s feelings such as not hitting or hurting others, or not verbally abusing others (Margetts, 2004; 2005). Furthermore, skills related to literacy and numeracy are also important.

Conformity to rules and expectations and building ‘relationships with other children is a major challenge’ (Pollard, 1996 cited by Fabian, 2000, p.6). It is likely that the school playground in particular poses enormous social challenges to children due to their limited skills for negotiating and establishing relationships (Smith, 2003), and the limited adult supervision and support available. At preschool the adult child ratio remains constant whether the child is indoors or out-of-doors. At school this is not the case and there is little supervision for children in the playground. Success in the playground can build self-esteem and confidence while the opposite may be true for those who lack social autonomy (Weare, 2000). Smith (2003) devised a social skills program to assist children develop skills for negotiating the demands of the playground. This included learning about being friends, dealing with unfriendly behaviour and aggressive behaviour, fighting or quarrelling, sharing, turn taking, being comforted, being lonely, stealing and telling a secret

Much of the current research about challenges facing children as they commence schooling has been obtained from parents, teachers and other adults. Few researchers (apart from Dockett & Perry, 1999a; Einarsdottir, 2003; Fabian, 2000; Niesel & Griebel, 2001; Peters, 2000; Skinner, Bryant, Coffman & Campbell, 1998) have sought the perspectives of children.

Children's perceptions of being successful at school appear to be influenced by their knowledge of and adherence to school rules. It is likely that children use rules (expectations) to monitor their own behaviour and 'goodness' (Skinner et al., 1998) and Dockett and Perry's (1999a) interviews with children suggest that knowing school rules appears to give new entrant children a level of familiarity, comfort and predictability.

The importance of children contributing to the processes that affect them and the inclusion of their perspectives in research about early childhood issues is being recognised (Dunlop, 2002; Rayner, 1991). As children participate in school life they start to contribute to, and to adopt, the 'culture' of that context (Fabian, 2000). The reality of the child's view may differ from that of adults (Heinzel, 2000, cited in Griebel & Niesel, 2000). Further differentiation of experiences and perspectives occurs through the individuality of personality and experience that each child brings to their impressions and interactions within the school. This view recognises the agency of children as co-constructors of their sociocultural environments. By listening to and analysing the 'voices' of children who have been directly involved in the transition to school process, a third dimension is added to the voices of parents and teachers.

The work of Dockett and Perry (1999a) and their interviews with children has provided valuable information about children's experiences, expectations and perceptions of starting school and integrated these perspectives with those of teachers and parents. The work of these researchers in Australia can be complimented by finding out more about what new entrant children need to know and what schools can do to assist.

The Study

This project investigated the perspectives of children in the first year of schooling about what they believed new entrant children needed to know about starting school and what schools could do to help children starting school. Fifty-four children from three government primary schools and one private school who were in the first year of schooling (the year before Year 1) were interviewed after attending school for seven months. This time frame was chosen as it provided children with time to become familiar with different aspects and challenges of schooling and at the same time for memories of starting school to be relatively fresh. Two schools had preschools attached (a private and a government school) and schools comprised families from similar socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Schools, parents and children were informed about the project and consent invited from and granted by each party.

Small focus group interviews were conducted with children mostly in groups of three although there were two groups of two children and two groups of four children. The use of small focus groups has been used in previous research by Dockett and Perry (1999a), Einarsdottir (2003), Peters (2000), and Griebel and Niesel (2002) in relation to children's experiences or expectations of starting school. Interviewing children about starting school acknowledges their agency in their own schooling and enables their voices to be heard among the voices of teachers, parents and academics.

Interviews were audio recorded with school, parent and child permission. Children were asked simple questions: firstly – 'What do you think new children starting school need to know?' and then after each child in the focus group had an opportunity to respond to the first question, the final question, 'What can schools do to help children who are starting school?' was asked and all children in focus groups given opportunities to contribute ideas. These questions were chosen as it was believed that by depersonalising the questions and creating a situation where the children were empowered to give advice, children would be able to reflect their own experiences and interpretations of school in a non-threatening way. Rephrasing and probes were used if needed and while children's responses sometimes followed their own interests, responses were generally related to the question being asked. Wherever possible prompting for particular responses or asking leading questions was avoided as the aim of the project was to identify, not to influence, children's perspectives. Interviewing children about starting school acknowledges their agency in their own schooling and enables their voices to be heard among the voices of teachers, parents and academics.

Audio recordings of each focus group were transcribed and analysed independently by the two interviewers to identify emerging or repetitive types of responses. Responses generally related to

relationships and interactions with others, procedures, feelings about school, and academic skills. These were categorised into six main themes relating to knowledge about: peer relationships; school rules; general procedures; classrooms; academic skills; and feelings. A smaller category, ‘Other’ included items not in the main themes which related to the use of outdoor equipment and sports.

Results

Children’s responses to the question ‘What do you think new children starting school need to know’ resulted in 248 coded responses. Eighty-eight coded responses were received in response to the question, ‘What can schools do to help children who are starting school?’ Where an individual provided the same response more than once or referred to the same issue more than once, these were coded as only one response. Due to the strong relationship between children’s perspectives about what new children need to know and what schools can do to help even though children were not prompted to do this, responses to both questions are presented simultaneously for each key theme as shown in Table 1. Although rules were noted as something that new children needed to know, strategies for helping children with them were less frequently noted.

TABLE 1 Response Categories

Themes	What children need to know	How schools can help
	Number of responses	Number of responses
Peer Relationships	70	27
School Rules	36	5
General Procedures	26	23
Classrooms and Teachers	23	9
Feelings	14	6
Academic Skills	68	14
Other	11	4
TOTAL	248	88

Peer relationships

Responses that were categorised in relation to knowledge about peer relationships are presented in Table 2. Many of the responses about what new children need to know included those associated with prosocial skills such as establishing friendships, knowing children’s names, considering the feelings of others, sharing and taking turns. Two students also noted the importance of children being responsible for themselves - (they) *have to be responsible for themselves sometimes* - and knowing how to deal with bullying.

TABLE 2 Knowing about relationships and how schools can help

Knowledge related to peer relationships	n	%	Help with relationships	n	%
friendships, being a buddy	20	28.6	help to meet people, give a friend	3	11.1
having friends from preschool	4	5.7			
knowing names	5	7.1	tell everyone’s name, list names, name badges	2	7.4
being nice, not being mean, helping, including other	13	18.6	how to be nice, not be rude	2	7.4
not hurting, being gentle	15	21.4	not to hurt, how to behave	2	7.4
			what to do if someone hurts you	10	37.0
not bullying	6	8.6	how not to be bullies	1	3.7
sharing, taking turns	5	7.1			
being responsible for one self	1	1.4			
how to deal with bullying	1	1.4			
			help in the yard – teacher on duty	3	11.1
			have a buddy, a grade 1 child to help	4	14.8

Knowing that finding and making new friends is difficult and part of starting school was frequently noted:

Find difficult to make new friends.

They might not know if they’re going to meet new friends or not.

Being discerning was also noted

...know who to make friends with.

Further difficulties with friendship was noted rather poignantly by one child who said

You can’t have the same friends all the time.

And by another who commented that new children need to know that they will be mixing with unfamiliar children

Sit next to your friends which you don’t know.

Knowing children's names was important for some children, and this appeared to assist in the establishment and cementing of friendships

Knowing who all their school friends are...You need to know your school friends like if you're playing you won't call then different names you have to call them their right name.

Interactions with peers and knowing to be nice, not mean and to be helpful was frequently noted:

When some new kids come don't be mean to them.

Ahh, friends and be nice.

Knowing about the playground and about turn taking conventions was also noted

Don't go on the monkey bars too lots of times.....you have to wait your turn...you have to line up.

Hurting or being hurt permeated the discussions. New children need to

Learn not to hurt people.

Be gentle

Hurting and being hurt by others appeared to be a key issue in the playground and many of the responses about what schools could do to help new children starting school related to help with knowing how not to hurt and knowing what to do when you were hurt or experienced conflict. The help of teachers and principals was recommended by children, including teachers being on yard duty:

Teachers can help them if they get hurt.

If the principal takes care of the whole school no one will get hurt.

They could write what you did bad in the book. Once Mrs ... was out there...and someone kicked me in the nuts so I told the principal.

Being told or shown how to use the equipment safely was also noted

You have to show them how to do that so they don't get hurt.

During informal conversation at the end of one focus session when children were being asked to eat their lunch and hurry outside, the children asked if they could stay and talk. When probed about going outside they indicated that being in the playground was difficult because 'people fight and kids hurt'.

A range of ideas was given in relation to supporting friendships and interactions. It was suggested that schools could help by - *giving children friends.*

Having someone else to rely on during the start to school – whether for social or academic or other reasons was recommended. As noted previously this could be the teacher or principal, but it could also be an older more experienced child.

...a friend that has already been in prep...they could help, they could help you do things.

School Rules

Social institutions usually have a set of clearly articulated rules for protecting members of the group and setting standards for behaviour. Schools are no exception and as noted in Table 3, thirty-six responses related to knowing school rules, awareness of consequences, being good (not bad), and avoiding or not getting into trouble. Children often recited rules but as this was not the focus of the study, these separate listings of rules were not coded as separate responses.

Knowing and remembering the school rules was referred to often and difficulties doing this seemed to be accepted as a rite of passage. As in one discussion:

L: Yep, like Bradley he doesn't know a bit of the school rules.

E: I know cos he's new.

L: He's new.

E: Yeah, because he's a new boy.

Consequences of breaking rules or not 'being good' typically related to 'having to go to the office' or sitting in the 'thinking chair' as well as loss of privileges such as play.

And you miss out on play sometimes if you get one mark, sit out in the staff room.

I think if you be bad so many times then you'll go on the thinking chair.

The suggestions by children of ways that schools could help new entrant children in following rules and being good suggests that children may be confused about what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate behaviour, or that they are trying so hard to do the right thing that they want this recognised.

They could tell you if you do something bad.

TABLE 3 Knowing about school rules and how schools can help

Knowledge related to rules	n	%	Help with doing right thing	n	%
knowing the rules	17	47.2	instructions	1	20.0
consequences of breaking rules	7	19.4			
being good, not being bad	6	16.7	tell not to be naughty	1	20.0
avoiding trouble	5	13.9	tell if doing wrong thing, tell off	3	60.0
play safely	1	2.8			

General Procedures

Knowledge of the school and procedures for functioning within the school were referred to in 26 responses (see Table 4). These involved knowing what to do (actions), where to go (locations), and timing of routines.

Knowing about what to do

They need to know what they need to do.

Knowing about where to go

Like learning where everything is and getting used to it.....

When they go to school they don't know where the classrooms are. They need to know ...I was just a little prep and then I, I was bout to go into, up there because I thought that was still my classroom...but then I had to go in there because I was wrong, and then I...I was going with Thomas S and I just got my head muddled up.

Knowing about the time

...so they know what time it's going to be lunch.

...or when the music is going to go.

Knowing when to apply particular procedures can be confusing as illustrated by the following discussion between two girls (S and M) and the interviewer 'I'. There is also a suggestion that there is one way of doing things when teachers are around and one way when they are not:

S: ...when the first time when I had to go to the toilet at school, like I just went by myself because I didn't know if I ...had to tell the teacher.

I: ohh.

S: So that was hard and I think it was M who told me what to do.

I: ...are you meant to tell the teacher?

S: yeah.

M: if you're in class, but if you're at playtime you can go by yourself.

S: yeah...there's only teachers around in your classroom.

Another child noted perceptively

They...need to know how it works...and how it is going to be different things. An how it's going to start like.

TABLE 4 Knowing about school procedures and how schools can help

Knowledge related to school procedures	n	%	Help with procedures	n	%
Actions – what to do, asking for help, doing shoe laces, lining up with partner, responding to bells, doing show and tell	13	50.0	Actions – what to do, use the toilet	13	56.5
Locations – where to go, toilet	6	23.1	Locations – where to go, where things are	4	17.4
Time – for lunch, for music, for lining up	4	15.4	Time – when to get snack, lunch	2	8.7
How it works	2	7.7	tell what to do before school starts	2	8.7
How it is different	1	3.8			
			Know the games	1	4.3
			Sharing JSC roles – so we know what is happening	1	4.3

A number of suggestions about how schools could help referred to procedural issues:

Tell you what to do.

They might show you where you are not allowed to play.

They could show you where things are.

Being given information before school started was also noted as a way schools could help new children starting school. One child commented that the school could allow children to take turns being the Junior School Council representative. Whether this was from a desire to be acknowledged by being given an important role is not known, but the sentiment that JSC reps had privileged knowledge is clearly expressed. Thus sharing procedural matters appears to be important and empowering.

Classroom procedures

Another distinct set of knowledge related to classroom procedures (23) including information about the teacher, the classroom and how to behave in the classroom. However, relatively few ideas for how schools could help new children related to this theme. The items in Table 5 are self explanatory and very close to children's own words and do not need repeating as narrative.

TABLE 5 Knowing about classrooms and teachers and how schools can help

Knowledge related to classroom	n	%	Classroom/teacher help	n	%
about teacher, teacher's name	6	26.0	meet the teacher	1	11.1
what classroom is like	3	13.0			
listening to teacher, doing what teacher says	5	21.7			
being quiet	2	8.7			
asking permission	2	8.7			
sitting on mat, crossing legs	2	8.7			
hands up	1	4.3			
show and tell	1	4.3	teachers play games	1	11.1
			more time for play, for shows	2	22.2
			give rewards, compliments	5	55.6

Feelings and emotions

Fifteen responses related to feelings that new entrant children should know about, as identified in Table 6. Most frequently this involved 'not feeling scared'. The responses acknowledge that being scared is a valid feeling as children start school but that schools are really not scary.

Not to be scared ...Because it's not scarier when you start school. Because it's easy when you get in prep.

TABLE 6 Knowing about feelings and how schools can help

Knowledge related to feelings	n	%	Supporting feelings	n	%
not feeling scared	8	57.1			
not being shy	2	14.3			
feeling safe	2	14.3	look after, feel safe	2	33.3
taking risks	1	7.1			
enjoying school	1	7.1	do nice things, having a good time, help you feel happy	4	66.7

Ways that school could help included helping children 'feel good':

They could make sure that none of them are not sad and they're all happy.

Academic skills

Academic skills were referred to in 68 responses including those related to learning generally, and also to specific domains or learning areas. Most frequently, responses related to literacy (writing, knowledge of alphabet and phonics, reading), followed by maths and numeracy, drawing or doing art, and knowing how to learn or work.

They might not know how to do maths and literacy and journal writing like that

TABLE 7 Knowing about academic skills and learning and how schools can help

Knowledge related to academic skills	n	%	Help for academics/learning	n	%
writing, writing own name	24	35.3	practice writing before school starts	1	7.1
reading	15	22.1			
alphabet, letter sounds	6	8.9	how to sound letters, words, write	9	64.3
knowing words	3	4.4			
maths, numbers	10	14.7			
drawing, doing art	4	5.9			
knowing how to learn things, doing hard work	6	8.9	help them learn, give easier work	4	28.6

Suggestions on the ways that school could help children included those related to literacy and learning in general: *They could help you if you were stuck with something.*

Other

Eleven responses did not easily fit into the previously identified areas. Being older rather than younger appeared to be important and was noted twice. Issues related to the use of the monkey bars (7) and doing sport (2) were also noted including knowing how to use the monkey bars, sharing the monkey bars and taking turns. *Doing the monkey bars...cos they're hard.*

When asked how schools could help, responses included having soft fall under equipment, help if children get stuck on equipment, and more sports.

If someone's stuck somewhere like on top of the monkey bars they can get up but they can't get down the teachers can help them down.

Discussion

Concerns about rules or 'knowing what to do' were implicit in the questions and responses given by children when asked 'What do new children need to know about starting school?' Children's responses support the notion that social, affective and learning competencies are important for children as they start school. The children in this study referred to the importance of knowing about relationships and interactions with others, school rules, procedures and ways of doing things, feelings, and academic skills. References about being hurt, and difficulties in the playground are cause for concern and would benefit from further investigation.

As noted by Dockett and Perry (1999a, 1999b), procedural or task rules were important (particularly what Dockett and Perry (1999) refer to as Social Adjustment or organisational adjustment) such as how to line up or respond to bells, or where the toilet was located. Knowing the school rules and acceptable ways to behave gives children a frame of reference by which they can function independently and determine their own (and others'), moral actions. To assist with obeying the rules, knowledge of what 'gets you into trouble' or what 'being good' involves is also required. Similarly, knowing the procedural rules, how to do things – where to go, what to do and when to do it, also seems to be important for children. This knowledge appears to provide a sense of safety and emotional wellbeing.

Knowing about how to make friends and deal with interactions including pro-social skills and the ability to deal with bullying were noted frequently. This supports the findings of Dockett and Perry (1999a), Griebel and Neisel (2000) and Peters (2000) about the importance of friends and of social interactions.

Knowledge related to learning and the curriculum appeared to be important for children starting school. This included knowing how to learn including doing hard work as well as knowledge related to literacy and numeracy. The strong focus by children on the importance of knowing how to write and knowing the alphabet and letter sounds, along with suggestions that teachers could help them sounding letters and words, suggest that these skills are a challenge to new entrant children but may also be a means of measuring one's competence as a school child. It is likely that children are not being exposed to the alphabet and phonics during their preschool years and it is worth investigating the effects of the inclusion of these skills in preschool curriculum would benefit children starting school.

Frequent mention of not being hurt, or hurting, particularly in relation to the playground suggests that children's needs for physical and emotional safety are not being sufficiently met. This is further supported by the children's suggestions that schools need to help them know what to do when they are hurt, should provide teacher assistance in the playground, and teach children how not to hurt. This reflects the recommendation by Smith (2003) that children need to be supported in developing social and emotional skills for dealing with playground contexts. As well as social skills programs for children prior to schooling, Smith suggested that schools should review playground practices and lunchtime routines, increase playground supervision and teacher presence in the playground, and provide targeted support for shy or lonely children. There is a need for deeper investigations into these issues and the impact of increased presence of teachers in the playground for children's sense of wellbeing and competence.

As noted previously, the strong relationship between what children believed new children needed to know about starting school and suggestions about what schools could do to help new entrant children, provides evidence of the ability of children to provide authentic, rather than fanciful, suggestions for dealing with issues that affect new entrant children. Further evidence of the validity of children's perspectives was provided in the study by Ramey, Lanzi, Phillips & Ramey (1998) that noted a high relationship between teacher ratings of school adjustment and children's self-reports in the first three years of schooling. Children's agency in contributing to the development of school transition programs should be recognised.

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Acknowledgements

This project was funded through the University of Melbourne Early Researcher Grant Scheme. Thanks are given to Caroline Murphy for her assistance with interviewing children and transcribing the audio tapes.