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“In Kindy You Don’t Get Taught”: Continuity and Change as Children Start School

Abstract Over the last decade, there has been increasing awareness of the importance of engaging young children in research about their experiences and considering ways in which children’s experiences, expectations and perceptions influence both their interactions and those of others. This has resulted from recognition of young children as active citizens, with rights to be consulted about matters that affect them and from the principles underpinning the sociology of childhood, which emphasizes children’s capabilities and agency. This paper explores young Australian children’s perceptions of school and learning, as expressed through drawings and conversations about school. Data from children in preschools and the early years of school highlight children’s expectations and experiences of school, including the importance of play, friendships, children’s dispositions, and academic expectations of school and teachers. Drawing on previous research that notes the long term importance of children’s attitudes and approaches, as well as their sense of belonging and identity, at the start of school, this paper has implications for adults engaging with children as they make the transition to school.

Keywords children’s perspectives, transition, learning, Australia

Introduction

Listening to Young Children

Over recent years, there has been increasing attention to the importance of

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accessing and responding to children's perspectives on issues and events that are relevant for them. This trend has been influenced by several agendas, notably perceptions of children as capable and competent (James & Prout, 1997), and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), which recognizes children's right to be consulted and heard on matters that affect them. Within these shifts, a number of researchers and educators both in Australia and overseas have sought the views of young children on their everyday lives and events, including their perspectives on early childhood services and the transition to school (Clark & Moss, 2001; Dockett & Perry, 2007a; Einarsdóttir, 2005).

Underpinning these approaches to listening to children's voices has been the philosophy that children are valued as people, as citizens, right now, as well as for the contributions they may well make in the future. In this way, the early childhood period is regarded as not merely a preparation for later childhood and adulthood. Rather, it is a time when all citizens, including children, have rights and obligations, including rights to be consulted on matters that affect them, and obligations to listen to and respect the rights of others. This view (Clark & Moss, 2001; Lansdown, 2005) regards children as:

- experts in their own lives;
- skillful communicators who utilize a range of strategies to share this expertise;
- active agents, who influence the world around them, as well as being influenced by it; and
- meaning makers, constantly seeking to understand and make sense of the people, places and events in their lives.

Research that recognizes children's rights and expertise promotes their active participation. The opportunities for, and the nature of, participation afforded children within research reflect the rights of children to have their views taken seriously (rights discourse) and respect for children's competence and agency (sociology of childhood discourse). However, participation is itself a contested term, encompassing a broad range of activities as well as multiple rationales (Evans & Spicer, 2008; Hoffman-Ekstein et al., 2008). Participation can range from consulting children to children initiating and directing the research (Clark, McQuail, & Moss, 2003; Hart, 1997). The nature of participation is influenced by the research questions and approaches, as well as the intent and rationale for the research.

Transition to School

The transition to school is an important time in the lives of children, families, educators and communities (Dunlop & Fabian, 2007). In defining transition, we

draw on Rogoff's (2003) broad conceptualization of transitions across the life course as times when individuals "change their roles in their community's structure" (p. 150). Transitions, according to this view, are characterized by "individuals' involvements in ongoing activity" (Rogoff, 1996, p. 273), rather than change in the individuals only. This view reflects both individual and community influences on children's changing participation in activities. Educational transitions, such as the transition to school, involve changes for a wide range of people. The children become school students and the parents become parents of a school student. These changes bring associated changes in relationships, roles, and identities. In this paper, transition to school is characterized as a process, beginning before children start school when families start to make decisions and seek information about school and extending beyond the actual start of school until children and families feel comfortable at school (Dockett & Perry, 2007a).

Starting school is a time when children encounter new environments, new people and new expectations. One of the features of the transition to school is the range of discontinuities encountered as children move from prior-to-school environments to school. Not only does the physical environment change, but also the social context and, often, the philosophical approaches to teaching and learning differ across the different contexts (Fabian, 2002). While many children respond positively to these differences, others experience difficulty as they seek to manage the many changes. In addition to discontinuities in environments and expectations, children also experience changes in the nature and amount of support. Pianta (2004, November) has noted that at the same time as academic demands increase, the social environment children encounter at school is often more complex than they have experienced previously; there is less parental involvement in day-to-day activities; and there is less time for individual attention as the teacher manages a large group of children. Children often recognize that school will be different from their previous experiences (Dockett & Perry, 2007b). Rather than seeing this as problematic, they may regard the differences as markers of their changed status and identity, commenting for example, on how only "big kids" can go to school. While noting that children seem to seek some levels of discontinuity between prior-to-school settings and school, recognizing that such differences reflect on their new status as a "school student," it is suggested that high levels of discontinuity may make the transition to school challenging for children (Bernard van Leer Foundation, 2007, May).

Pedagogically and politically, there is increasing emphasis on issues of continuity between prior-to-school settings and school. For example, in Australia recent moves towards a national school curriculum and the implementation of the national Early Years Learning Framework (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009) have promoted calls for improved transition practices across the sectors and

increased levels of continuity. Continuity can be achieved in many ways. In some discussions, there is a focus on prior-to-school settings becoming more like school. Such suggestions, often referred to as pushing-down curriculum, are strongly resisted by early childhood educators who regard their pedagogy as much more child-centered than that of schools (Peters, 2000, August-September). Other definitions of continuity focus on matching curriculum and approaches across contexts (Wood & Bennett, 1999) and on promoting continuity in children's learning. An essential component of these latter approaches is familiarity with the contexts within which children move. While it is important for adults to be familiar with both prior-to-school and school contexts, it is also important for children to build familiarity in order that they have some notions of what school will be like, what to expect at school, how they will be expected to engage with school and how this differs from prior-to-school settings.

Recognizing the importance of the contexts children encounter and the ways in which both the contexts and the people within them influence children's transition to school, draws on the principles of ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Ecological frameworks for understanding transition to school emphasize the importance of a network of relationships and interconnections—between people, institutions and contexts—and the ways in which these change and develop over time (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). From this, transition to school is understood as a complex series of actions and interactions over time as children, and all others involved, adopt new roles, status and identities within the context of school. Integral to this process are the expectations all participants bring with them.

The social nature of transitions is highlighted by Corsaro and Molinari (2008), who note that “transitions are always collectively produced and shared with significant others” (p. 252). Using the theoretical framework of interpretive reproduction, Corsaro and his colleagues have emphasized the role of priming events as children “by their very participation, attend prospectively to ongoing or anticipated changes in their lives” (Corsaro, Molinari, & Rosier, 2002, p. 323). This view notes the dynamic nature of the contexts in which children engage, arguing that children's membership of particular cultural contexts influences their actions, just as the contexts themselves are influenced by participants.

Engagement in a range of priming events is described as serving to familiarize children with experiences they are likely to have in the future (in this case, at school). Priming events are “collective routine activities” (Corsaro & Molinari, 2008, p. 252) that could occur within the informal experiences of family and community as children approach school, or in more formal transition to school programs. Priming events provide opportunities for children to engage in practical, social activities related to their prospective experiences.

Children's Views of Transition to School

Children's views of school have been explored in a number of studies in recent years (Broström, 1995, September; Clarke & Sharpe, 2003; Corsaro & Molinari, 2005, 2008; Dockett & Perry, 2003, 2005; Einarsdóttir, 2003, 2010; Griebel & Niesel, 2003; Perry & Dockett, 2005; Peters, 2003). In general, children report a sense of "growing up" as they make the start to school, reflecting a change in identity as they become school students. At the same time, they report feeling anxious and a little worried about what might happen at school, especially about the teacher and what he/she will be like (Dockett & Perry, 2007a). Children expect school to be different from home or prior-to-school settings, whilst also expecting there to be some levels of familiarity (Di Santo & Berman, 2011). They are particularly concerned about having friends at school and worried if they feel that they may not have friends. Children expect to learn a great deal at school, and to forfeit some of the opportunities they had for play in prior-to-school settings (Corsaro & Molinari, 2005). Indeed play is identified by children as one of the factors that is common across prior-to-school and school environments, although opportunities for play and the resources for play are expected to differ (Dockett & Perry, 2007a). Research about starting school has consistently identified a number of differences in the ways in which children and adults interpret the context of school (Dockett & Perry, 2005, 2007a). Children's perspectives remind us that living the experience of starting school is different from planning, implementing or reporting this process.

The importance of considering children's perspectives on the transition to school is twofold. On one hand, the increasing recognition of children's rights to contribute to discussions and decisions about matters that affect them, derived from the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), and recognition of their competence as participants and social actors (Christensen & James, 2008; Greene & Hill, 2005) underpins strategies to actively seek, listen and respond to children's perspectives. On the other hand, there is evidence that children's feelings about school predict engagement and educational outcomes (Hauser-Cram, Durand, & Warfield, 2007). Sammons et al. (2008) report that children's enjoyment of school decreases over time and that this is linked to academic self-image, which is in turn likely to impact upon educational achievement and outcomes.

Children's sense of belonging, acceptance and adjustment at school underpins engagement and is linked to educational success. Children quickly construct their school identity (Griebel & Niesel, 2003), based on a range of factors, including perceived competence and engagement. Many factors influence children's identities as they start school, including their own understandings of their identity, and the value they place on this (Dockett, Mason, & Perry, 2006; NSW

Aboriginal Education Consultative Group/NSW Department of Education and Training, 2004). Children's identity and sense of belonging are also linked to their experiences and expectations of school.

Early Years and Curriculum Continuity for Learning Project

This paper explores the perceptions of young Australian children about school and early learning. Data is drawn from a large, state-wide project which investigated the role and place of the first year of school. In particular, the project explored the coherence and continuity of learning environments as children made the transition from prior-to-school settings to school. Within this project, children's views about school, what it was like and what it could be like, particularly in relation to their prior-to-school experiences, were sought and considered alongside the perspectives of parents and teachers.

This project was undertaken in the state of South Australia which is the fourth largest Australian state in area, with approximately 8% of Australia's population. The majority of people reside in or near the capital city, Adelaide (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). The school calendar in South Australia is organized around four terms, with school beginning in late January and finishing in December each year. At the time of the project, children in South Australia started school by entering a Reception (first year of school) class, usually at the beginning of the term after they turned five years old. In addition to these four commencement opportunities each year, some schools also had mid-term intakes. All children in South Australia had access to the equivalent of two days per week of preschool education (called Kindergarten or Kindy) for the year before they entered Reception.

Reception was introduced as the first year of school in South Australia in 1981, with the intention of providing children with a transitional learning context as they moved from prior-to-school learning to the more formal approaches of the compulsory years of schooling. Anecdotal evidence from teachers and parents in recent years indicated that the Reception year had become increasingly structured and academically focused, reflecting push-down academic curriculum, rather than the play-based transition year that had been originally intended. The state-wide project, entitled "Early Years and Curriculum Continuity for Learning," provided opportunities to explore experiences of Reception among children, parents and educators and to examine issues of curriculum, organization and continuity in relation to prior-to-school settings and the later years of school.

Procedure

This project was implemented across the years 2007–2009, with a specific focus

on reviewing and reconceptualizing Reception to promote learning continuity for children as they moved from prior-to-school to school settings. In order to achieve this aim, the authors were engaged to review national and international research around the first year of school, and to prepare a situational analysis of existing practice in South Australia. The latter was achieved by conducting a series of intensive case studies in six geographical locations across the state. Each case study involved consultations with educators, parents and children in prior-to-school and school settings focused on what currently happened, or should happen, in the first year of school.

This paper reports the views of children from preschool (Kindergarten or Kindy) and the first year of school (Reception) about what they thought school would be like (Kindergarten), and what they liked/didn't like about school (Reception). Data reported in this paper were contributed by 40 children across six sites. The research questions guiding interactions with children were:

- What are children's experiences and expectations about continuity from Kindergarten to Reception?
- What is it that children like or do not like about their Reception experiences?

The six sites were chosen on the basis of geographical, cultural and socio-economic diversity, as well as the diversity of educational services offered within each location. Each site consisted of a school and at least one prior-to-school setting. In some instances, these services were co-located; in others they were located considerable distances apart. While the project did not aim to identify a representative sample, the site selection was determined in order to reflect the diverse communities across South Australia and the diversity of service provision.

Most of the schools and prior-to-school settings in the six sites indicated that they implemented some form of transition to school program. While the purposes, timing and duration of the programs varied, they usually involved opportunities for Kindy children to visit schools and participate in school and classroom activities, as well as engaging in a range of "school-like" activities within the prior-to-school setting. Typically, these activities involved reading and responding to stories, experiences with writing and with number. Most of the transition programs were organized by schools, although in some instances, prior-to-school settings and schools collaborated to develop and implement transition programs. Key features of all transition programs were familiarization with the school environment and promoting school as a positive and fun place to be. When children made visits to school, they often participated in tours of the school and engaged in activities that were play-based and similar to the experiences of their prior-to-school settings.

Data were generated through conversations between children and researchers.

A snowballing sampling technique was employed. In the first instance, sites were identified by the South Australian Department of Education and Children's Services. In each site, educators at schools and prior-to-school settings were invited to participate in the project. Those who agreed were asked to discuss the project with their parent body and to identify a small group of parent participants. The parents, in turn, were asked to discuss the project with their children and to indicate whether or not they and/or their children were willing to participate. In this way, parental consent was obtained prior to engaging with children. In addition, children were offered opportunities to indicate their willingness to be involved by providing assent (Dockett & Perry, 2011).

Forty children attending Kindergarten ($n = 13$) or enrolled in the first years of school ($n = 27$) participated in the project. Interactions with children occurred in their school or Kindergarten setting. Data (drawings and/or conversations) were constructed as children engaged with researchers. Conversations were initiated by asking general questions, such as "What do you think school will be like?" (Kindy children) and "Is Reception the same as Kindy?" Children were then invited to share the experiences of school and, if they so chose, to record these in drawings. To prompt these conversations, Reception children were provided with a large piece of paper, with the words "At school I like ..." and "I don't like ..." written across the top. While many of the children responded to these prompts, others chose not to. With the permission of participants, interactions were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis. Also with permission, drawings were photographed, with children retaining the originals.

Data reported in this paper consist of 34 drawings (and accompanying conversations). In total, 46 drawings were generated by the children. However, only 34 of these satisfied the criteria of being related to the topic of school and included both drawing and related conversation. Examples of excluded drawings were ones children labelled as houses or flowers, and where there was no indication in either drawing or conversation that children were connecting these items to school. These data reflect the perspectives of these children as they considered their experiences of Kindergarten and/or Reception. In this sense, they should be considered indicative, rather than representative, of children's perspectives as they began their school education.

The unit of data considered for analysis consisted of a drawing and any accompanying conversation. Considering both the drawing and related conversation reflects a focus on the process of drawing, rather than the product only, and the meaning making that occurs as children make marks on paper and discuss them. In this way, the drawing and the conversation are not considered to be separate entities. Rather, both are regarded as elements of the meaning making process (Anning & Ring, 2004; Cox, 2005; Einarsdóttir, Dockett, & Perry, 2009). Including both elements within each unit of data focuses attention to children's

intended meaning, rather than the product itself. Indeed, without the commentary it is quite possible for adults to interpret drawings in ways other than those intended by the child (Einarsdóttir et al., 2009).

This approach regards drawings and the conversations that surround them as a communicative activity incorporating both verbal and non-verbal skills (Dockett & Perry, 2005). As children draw, think out loud, change, add to and erase parts of their drawings, they demonstrate their understandings of different social and cultural contexts. McNiff (as cited in Weber & Mitchell, 1995, p. 35) argues that drawing is “not a process of imitating or copying the physical world, but rather of synthesizing life experiences.” The conversations of children as they draw can provide an avenue for children to share their understandings of their experiences. The accompanying narrative for drawings has been described as an anchor that fixes the meaning in much the same way as captions serve as interpretations of photographs (Barthes, 1977). Together, the drawings and conversations create a powerful, multi-faceted representation (Kress, 1997) where children’s interpretation is paramount.

Analysis and Results

Conventional content analysis was used to identify and describe themes and patterns across children’s expectations, experiences and perceptions of school. This form of analysis avoids using pre-existing codes and categories of data. Rather, these emerge from close reading and re-reading of the data. An advantage of this approach is that “the knowledge generated (...) is based on participants’ unique perspectives and grounded in the actual data” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1280).

One of the challenges associated with conventional content analysis can be that attention is focused on the specific words used by children (or elements of the drawings) and that less attention is paid to the context in which both narratives and drawings were constructed. To guard against this, the researchers who engaged with the children in each of the different geographic locations were involved in the analysis and were encouraged to add contextual information to facilitate the credible interpretation of data. For example, researchers discussed the transcripts of conversations, and the drawings and narratives, in a form of debriefing, where they provided contextual background, including information about the setting and what was happening at the time when the data were constructed.

Children’s drawings were matched to the accompanying transcripts to ensure that these were considered as one unit. Close reading of the texts, as well as

cross-referencing to the drawings and any scribed comments or written information from children, led to the identification of key ideas or concepts. Labels for these codes emerged as researchers became immersed in the data. Codes were then sorted into categories that reflected links between the different codes. For example, some of the data referred to specific activities such as skipping, using hula hoops, playing on swings and climbing. Each of these was initially identified as a code, and then sorted into a category of play. As whole comments were coded, rather than specific words, some comments could be coded in more than one way. For example, where a comment referred to liking to play with a friend, both the focus on play and friends was coded. The categories and examples of associated codes are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1 Codes and Categories

Example	Codes	Category
“That’s a big swing, that’s a big slippery slide and that’s a seesaw at school.” “Guess what, there’s a flying fox at the little children’s playground at the front.” “I really like skipping at school.”	Playing on the swings Climbing Playing Playground Playing on the slide Soccer Skipping	Play/playing
“I don’t like Japanese because it’s boring.” “Reading makes me happy.”	Drawing Reading Writing Japanese	School work
“I am excited about starting school.” “I was scared.”	Positive feelings Negative feelings	Disposition
“I’m drawing the person I like to play with. This is Ethan.” “I’m going to play with my friend.”	Friends	Friends
“At Kindy you don’t get taught.” “Sometimes in Reception we play.”	Kindy Reception Comparison	Continuity
“I like Miss F. She lets us do fun things.” “We have two good teachers.”	Teacher	Teacher
“I like free time.” “My best time is recess.”	Recess Lunch Free time	School organization
“I don’t like the sandpit. I get sand in my shoes.” “I like the flowers ... on the outside of the school.”	Sandpit Garden	School environment
“I like everything at school.” “I hate going home.”	Everything Going home	Everything Going home

The frequency and source of each category is noted in Table 2.

Table 2 Frequency (number of mentions) and Source (number of children making comments) per Category

Category	Like		Dislike	
	Frequency	Source	Frequency	Source
Play/playing	23	17	7	7
Schoolwork	11	11	6	6
Dispositions	10	7	1	1
Friends	6	6	4	4
Continuity	5	5		
Teacher	4	3		
School organization	4	3		
School environment	3	2	1	1
Everything	2	2		
Going home			1	1
Totals	68		20	

Children’s Likes and Dislikes about School

Play and Playing

Seventeen children (50%) mentioned play as a positive part of school life. Specific parts of the playground also featured in several drawings and comments as something children liked about school (Fig. 1). Several children identified aspects of play or playground as both likes and dislikes at school. For example, the conversation accompanying Fig. 1 reported liking the slippery dip, but not the sandpit.

Fig. 1 “At school I like slippery dip slide. I don’t like sandpit. I get sand in my shoes sometimes.”

In Fig. 2, one child distinguished between a familiar and an unfamiliar play activity, noting that they liked the familiar activity. In this and several other drawings, there was a sense that at school, children were expected to engage in activities that were unfamiliar and that may not be comfortable for them. Examples of unfamiliar activities mentioned by children included soccer, hula hooping, jumping and climbing and using tin-can stilts. In each case, the justification for the expressed dislike was the children not being used to the activity or the activity being hard to master. While children indicated a dislike for these activities, there was no sense that they would not participate in experiences involving the unfamiliar equipment.

Fig. 2 “At school I like playing tennis. I don’t like playing football because I’m not used to it.”

For children in one school, the opportunity to spend time with the playgroup operated by parents once a week at the school and involving preschool children was described as “heaps of fun” because “you get to play.” This contrasted to other times at school where there was much less focus on play.

Chloe: On Wednesdays we’re allowed to come over with the little kids.

...

Researcher: And what do you do when you come over here?

Chloe: We just play.

Liam: Play, play and play.

Nathan: Play, play, play, play, play.

Sam: Get to ride scooters.

Chloe: But we have to watch out for the little babies ...

Liam: Yeah, it’s heaps of fun.

Particular playground equipment featured often in children’s comments and

drawings about what they liked at school. In one school, the slide and seesaw were very popular. In one children's center, children were excited about going to school and playing on the flying fox that was located in the playground. In another school, one boy commented on how much fun he had rolling down the grass-covered hill. Overall, the playground was one of the most salient school features identified. Children who had not yet started school expected to play in the playground and to use equipment that was regarded as novel and exciting. Children at school also described the playground as an important part of school, but there also seemed a level of acceptance that opportunities for play in the playground were generally limited to break times: recess and lunch.

The underlying importance of play was also noted in comments about school organization. For example, Ellie described what happened at school in terms of opportunities for play: "... when you get here, you could play and then when it's been lunchtime, you could play and then when it's been recess you can play. And then you go home."

Another child clearly identified her favorite times at school (Fig. 3). While she noted that she liked Japanese, she also listed recess, lunch, and free time as things she liked at school.

Fig. 3 "At school I like recess and lunch. I like Japanese. I like free time. I hate going home."

Schoolwork

Aspects of academic work were both liked and disliked by children. Several children commented that they did not like work that they found tiring, such as reading, which was noted to be "hard work," requiring a lot of effort, and writing which was described by several children as difficult because their hands "got tired." In one school, writing was seen as more enjoyable when it involved the whiteboard (Fig. 4).

Fig. 4 “At school I like drawing a picture on the whiteboard and she likes the butterflies in the bushes at school. I don’t like reading books because I get tired of doing it. I don’t like being bored because I have nothing to do.”

Three children mentioned being bored with school work. Two of these attended the same school and commented about their study of Japanese. One boy’s view of Japanese was that “it’s boring. Because you don’t do anything, you just learn names and the ABC, numbers and stuff.”

On some occasions, play was identified as something children liked, while the academic “work” aspect was disliked (Fig. 5).

Fig. 5 “At school I like ladder and slide. I don’t like reading.”

Children’s comments indicate a distinction between play and work at school. Play was regarded as a fun experience which, at school, tended to occur outside in the playground and at break times. As in previous studies, children who had not yet started school expected to play at school and noted play as one of the most anticipated aspects of school (Einarsdóttir, 2010; University of Cambridge Faculty of Education, 2007, November). In contrast to previous studies (Clarke

& Sharpe, 2003; Corsaro & Molinari, 2000), children indicated that they did not expect the school focus on work to preclude play from school. Possible explanations for these differences include the different cultural contexts—Clarke and Sharpe reported research in Singapore, and Corsaro and Molinari reported research from Italy—as well as the nature of priming experiences incorporated into transition to school programs. These activities were often play-based and could establish the expectation that all school experiences would be similar. Children already at school reported their dislike of unfamiliar and difficult tasks. However, they did expect different activities and experiences at school; at the same time, they expected to continue to have opportunities for play.

Dispositions

Of the children who invoked dispositions ($n = 8$, 24%), most ($n = 7$, 21%) reported positive dispositions, either about their school experiences or about their expectations of school. For example, Andrew described his excitement about starting school, linking this with his excitement at turning five. For Andrew, becoming older was a sign of getting bigger and growing up. He commented, “I’m excited about going to school ... because then I’m going to have my first year. I turn five ... I’m going to go to school. I’m going to be five too.”

The connection with age was strong for these children as they commenced school the term after their fifth birthday. Four of the preschool children made comments similar to that of Janine, who explained “When it’s my birthday I go to school.” These children indicated that the changes associated with starting school were often about changes to them—as they got bigger—rather than changes they expected to encounter in the environment.

Overall, the children indicated positive dispositions relating to school, saying that they “liked school,” had “fun at school,” and were “excited about going to school.” For some, the excitement was tinged with some concern:

Researcher:	What was it like coming along at the start of school?
Sarah:	Great ... and awesome.
Tyrone:	I was a little scared.
Researcher:	What were you scared about?
Sarah:	I don’t really know.

Dispositions were also associated with friends, being with friends, or making friends made a difference to children’s feelings about being at school. Not knowing anyone, or not knowing their names, left children feeling scared and anxious:

- Researcher: When you first came to school, how did you feel about it?
- Blair: I can remember, I can remember some of it ...
It was like I felt really good and made heaps of friends and Tyrone was the first person I met in [school].
- Interviewer: So is Tyrone your friend?
- Blair: Best friend. When I first came to school I never want my Mum to leave, so I always cried when Mum went. And I keep on running up to her. But now I don't ... Because I didn't know anybody's names.

These results echo previous research, which has noted that children often experience mixed emotions as they start school. Typically, these encompass excitement as children look forward to going to school and being big, coupled with some anxiety about what will happen at school, who they will meet, and the friends they will have (Clarke & Sharpe, 2003; Dockett & Perry, 2007a; Einarsdóttir, 2003). Dispositions about school are also linked to children's expectations for and perceptions of, the teacher (Broström, 1995, September; Clarke & Sharpe, 2003).

Friends

As in previous studies (Di Santo & Berman, 2011; Dockett & Perry, 2007a; Einarsdóttir, 2003, 2010), the presence or absence of friends was important in children's transition to school. Ten (29%) of the children who participated in the study referred to friends. Of these, six noted the positive aspects of being with friends. The remaining four children expressed concern that their friends were sometimes engaged in fighting at school. In the positive references to friends, some children mentioned the buddies who had spent time with them at recess and lunch time, and others described going to school with a friend, knowing someone already at school, or making friends as important aspects of their feeling a sense of belonging at school (Fig. 6). Siblings were also noted as important, both in helping children know what to do and where to go, and as a companion in the playground.

- Researcher: Is Ethan [child's friend] going to be at your school?
- Alice: No, but I am.
- Researcher: Do you think there'll be other friends of yours at your school?
- Alice: I think I'm going to choose one.
- Researcher: How will you choose your friend?
- Alice: Well let me choose one and you will see ...
It will be a girl. Mum says "my mate."

Fig. 6 “A picture of school with all my friends”

While all of the children who mentioned friends noted their importance and how they liked to be with their friends, four children drew or commented on friends fighting at school and their dislike of this. The representations of fighting all involved children in physical contact (see Fig. 7). There was no comment in the conversations with children that they had personally been engaged in fighting at school, and no comments from parents or teachers that this had been the case. Nevertheless, it was clear that fighting was something they were concerned about.

Fig. 7 “I don’t like it when they’re fighting.”

Teacher

Three (9%) children mentioned their teacher when describing what they liked about school. It was clear that the teacher contributed greatly to positive experiences of school (Fig. 8). While there was recognition of their role in teaching and learning, the overriding sentiment was that good teachers provided fun activities and opportunities for play.

- Researcher: Do you think you have a good teacher?
 Children: Yeah!
 Researcher: Why is she so good?
 Sophie: Because she gives us fun sheets to do.
 Tyrone: She actually is ...
 Blair: She is good.
 Sophie: She gives us fun sheets.
 Tyrone: She plays games and she plays fun games and fun sheets and everything.
 Blair: We can even play games inside and that. Like hide and seek.
 Sophie: You get free time.
 Researcher: Does she teach you anything?
 Sophie: Yeah.
 Blair: Maths.
 Sophie: Spelling.

Fig. 8 “At school I like Miss (...) Japanese is boring because it’s not fun.”

The nature of the teacher-child relationship has been identified as critical to children’s school engagement and success (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). The focus on friends and the teacher reiterate the social nature of the transition to school (Corsaro & Molinari, 2008). Participating with others—both children and teachers—signifies that children are part of a group, engaged in a range of cultural practices. As children start school, their engagement with peers and the teacher identifies them as school students and members of a particular class. The nature of the interactions within this group is linked strongly with children’s

perceptions of the nature of school; where children report having friends and a positive relationship with their teacher, school is regarded as a positive place to be.

Continuity

Children who had already started Reception were clear about the differences between the environments and expectation of Kindergarten and Reception. Their thoughts were evident in some small group conversations among Reception children.

- Researcher: Is Reception the same as Kindy?
 Sarah: Sort of.
 Clare: Sometimes.
 Blair: Sort of. In Kindy you don't get taught, you just like ...
 Clare: Make things.
 Blair: Yeah, I can remember making ...
 Clare: I remember making a Spiderman.
 Blair: And you got to make stuff with boxes and stuff.

Despite the differences, children who had experienced Reception reported positive experiences.

- Tyrone: Reception [is] really good.
 Researcher: Why is it really good?
 Clare: Because there is fun things to do in Reception.
 Sarah: We get to do lots of coloring in instead of doing like, more harder stuff and getting harder and that.
 Tyrone: And it's really easy.
 Clare: And ... we would just play.
 Researcher: So is being in Reception about playing?
 Clare: Sometimes.
 Sarah: There's some sheets.
 Blair: Sometimes ... you get to do some more kind of, like heaps of colouring in.
 Clare: Sometimes when he finished his work ... in Reception, he gets to have some free time.

Several children who had not yet started Reception expected that there would be little difference between Kindergarten and Reception. For example, they noted that they would have things to play with in Reception that would be much the same as the things they played with at Kindergarten. These similarities extended

to both indoor and outdoor equipment.

Braiden (Fig. 9) had seen the slippery dip when he visited the school. He expected that much of his time at school would be spent on the slippery dip. He commented as he drew: “Everything. At school I like everything. Slippery dip ... But I didn’t know how to spell everything ... I’ve got a slippery dip and a ladder and ... helicopter and they turn that around and then that goes around.”

Fig. 9 “Braiden’s slippery dip”

Several Kindergarten children were familiar with school, often because their siblings attended school, or, like Geoff, they walked past the school regularly. Many had also participated in transition programs, including visits to the school. Despite this, there remained a sense that several children expected school to have physical resources that were similar to the resources they encountered at preschool (Fig. 10).

Fig. 10 “Geoff’s school”

Geoff: I’m going to draw a school.
But I need a big space.

Researcher: What have we got here Geoff?
 Geoff: Sand pit, rocks, sand pit, rocks and a lunch table. School.
 I go past it every time I come to Kindy.
 [points to items he has drawn]
 It's a rock, that's a rock, that's a table and that's a school and that's a sandpit.

Griebel and Niesel (2002) have reported similar results, with children expecting similarity across prior-to-school and school settings. Some of this may be attributed to the nature of transition programs, with their focus on play-based activities at school and efforts by teachers to promote the familiarity of many aspects of the school environment.

School Environment

A small number of children ($n = 3$, 9%), commented on the school environment. As comments about the playground had been coded in as part of the play and playing category, data attributed to this category reflected comments about the aesthetics of the school. For example, Gabby drew a building and flowers, commenting, "I like the flowers ... on the outside of the school."

Other

Two children indicated that they liked everything about school and one reported that she "hate[d] going home." These could be construed as gatekeeping comments, with children indicating that they did not want to report specific details, or that they were not really engaged with the task. However, the drawings that accompanied these comments did indicate involvement in the activity and resulted in these data being coded (see Fig. 3).

Discussion

Play pervaded children's comments and drawings. Children who had not yet started school expected to be able to play at school. They also expected to engage in a range of different experiences at school (Clarke & Sharpe, 2003; Dockett & Perry, 2007a). Where children had visited schools, or were familiar with school environments, one of the most salient features was the school playground and the opportunities for play. Several children seemed to expect that they would have the same levels of choice about play at school that they had in their kindergarten setting, including multiple opportunities to play. In many ways, it is

understandable that expectations about future experiences are based on current experiences. Indeed, it has been concluded that children's theories of school are generated well before school starts, influenced by a number of factors, including their experiences of preschool and popular culture (Di Santo & Berman, 2011; Dockett, Perry, & Whitton, 2010). In addition, children's peer culture and their participation in priming events influence their experiences of, and expectation for, the transition to school (Corsaro & Molinari, 2008).

Most of the children participating in the study had engaged in transition programs and the priming activities embedded within these. Children's comments and their expectations suggest that these activities tend to focus on similarities between prior-to-school and school contexts, emphasizing for example, the play-based activities children may encounter at school. While it is important to consider elements that support continuity between the contexts, once children are at school they are clear that there are considerable differences between Kindergarten and Reception. Children's comments suggest positive anticipation around some of the expected changes afforded by starting school. Much of the anticipation related to changes in themselves, such as getting bigger. Overall, the children expected to experience both continuity and change, as they started school.

Children who had already started school noted that they still had opportunities to play, but that these were often limited to recess, lunch and free play times. They distinguished between academic activities and play, with an overall preference for play, but without strong aversions to academic tasks. Children reported a number of activities that they did not like at school—including academic tasks as well as unfamiliar physical activities—but also seemed to be resigned to engaging in these activities. They identified friends as important at school; anxiety was related to not knowing other children or not having friends at school. Several children also identified concerns about friends fighting at school. Positive dispositions were associated with having a sense of belonging at school; this largely related to the presence of friends and teachers who were perceived to promote fun in their classrooms. Similarly, the school environment was regarded positively when it afforded opportunities for play.

These results are consistent with other studies that have explored children's expectations of school and noted the focus on play (Corsaro & Molinari, 2005; Di Santo & Berman, 2011; Einarsdóttir, 2010; White & Sharp, 2007). They also echo previous research results noting the sense of "growing up" that accompanies the start of school (Clarke & Sharpe, 2003; Dockett & Perry, 2003), and some of the mixed feelings associated with this move (Broström, 1995, September) and not knowing exactly what will happen at school (Einarsdóttir, 2003). The results differ from those reported in other studies as there was no

mention by children of the rules of school and the need to know and obey these (Corsaro & Molinari, 2000; Dockett & Perry, 2003, 2007a).

Ecological frameworks for transition to school emphasize interactions between people, institutions and contexts, as participants adopt new roles, status and identities. Expectations shape experiences and contribute to not only what happens as children start school, but also the meaning ascribed to these events by all involved. For example, children who start school expecting to play and be with their friends may well be disconcerted if this does not happen. This in turn, could influence their dispositions towards school and their engagement in school. As a result of this and other research (Dockett & Perry, 2007b) we do not subscribe to the view that children need to know all about school before they start, or that they are not capable of managing change. Rather, we suggest the need for all involved in transition to school to acknowledge the expectations of children, realizing that these may well be different from those of the adults involved. In keeping with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, we also argue that children have the right to be consulted about their expectations as they start school. This is particularly important in the light of evidence that children's initial impressions of school influence their later engagement (Hauser-Cram et al., 2007).

Often the discussions about continuity between preschool and school are guided by adult conceptions of continuity and what this might look like. As a result, there are discussions about curriculum continuity, continuity in the transfer of records from one setting to another and continuity of pedagogy. There is much less consideration of what children seek in terms of continuity and how this can promote engagement in education over time. There is also less discussion of the importance of change as it accompanies continuity. The children in this study expected discontinuity—in terms of their own changes—but did seek continuity of relationships (friends) and pedagogy (play). They did expect to meet new and different challenges at school and, when they did meet new activities such as football or reading, embraced them even though these activities were described as hard to master.

The results reported in this paper reaffirm the importance of play and friendship to children as they start school. However, the children who participated in the research did not make explicit mention of the rules of school, as has been the case in many other studies of children's perspectives of school (Di Santo & Berman, 2011; Dockett & Perry, 2007a; Einarsdóttir, 2005). We suggest that this is largely due to the nature of the task. Children were asked about their expectations of continuity between preschool and school, and about what they did or did not like about school. These questions seemed to direct children away from consideration of rules towards specific activities or

experiences. More open questions may well have led to the generation of different data.

Despite this, we strongly support the use of research methods that promote opportunities for children to draw and talk about matters of interest for them. Not only does this approach provide some choices for children, it can also contribute to the creation of a familiar, comfortable context in which to engage with children (Einarsdóttir et al., 2009; Punch, 2002). It is also a context in which children can demonstrate their competence in multiple ways, rather than there being one right way to complete the task. As well as in their drawing and conversations, some children demonstrated their competence and confidence by exerting some control over the research agenda. For example, several children ignored the prompt text provided on the drawing paper, choosing instead to draw and comment on what mattered to them, rather than what mattered to the researchers. In choosing the prompt text, we had offered a task that was based on the dichotomy of like and dislike. For several children it was a false dichotomy, as the same experience was liked as well as disliked. In essence, these children blurred the edges of the distinction researchers had made, suggesting that they are both aware of, and capable of responding to, complexity.

Conclusion

The research questions guiding this study sought children's experiences and expectations about continuity as they moved from Kindergarten to Reception as well as indications of their likes and dislikes as they experienced the first year of school. The framing of these questions emphasizes the importance of children building a sense of belonging and connection with school and the recognition that children's feeling about school impacts upon educational engagement and outcomes.

Starting school is an important time for all involved. Children build a range of expectations about what school will be like, how they will fit in and what will happen there. Often these expectations are drawn from their preschool experiences. When provided with a range of opportunities, children are competent in sharing these expectations. Adults who are committed to listening and responding to children's perspectives are well placed to include these in discussions about starting school, confident that children have both the right to be engaged in such discussions and the competence to contribute in meaningful ways. Children's insights have much to contribute to the development of transition programs, priming events and other supports that facilitate a positive start to school, and the potential to inform discussions about the nature and role of the first year of school.

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