

“As I got to learn it got fun”: Children’s reflections on their first year at school.

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Abstract

There has been a great deal of recent interest in children’s voices in research about starting school. This paper describes one strategy used by the Starting School Research Project to engage children as research partners in discussions about starting school.

Children from three Kindergarten (first year of school) classes were asked to reflect on how they had changed over their first year of school by thinking about what they were like when they started school, and comparing that to what they were like at the end of the school year. They were encouraged to draw representations of themselves at each of these times and to add a brief comment. The data on which this paper is based consists of the reflective drawings and comments from 52 children. Analysis of these indicate that children have a clear view of themselves within the context of school and distinct notions of the ways in which they have changed. Much of their focus is directed towards dispositions—such as having friends and how they feel about school—and to their increasing school-based knowledge. Implications for practice are drawn from the children’s perspectives of their first year at school.

Background

Over several years, the Starting School Research Project has investigated the perceptions, experiences and expectations of all involved as children start school. One of the major findings of the project has been that young children’s views about the transition to school, their expectations of what school will be like and their perceptions of themselves as well as others involved in the process, vary considerably from those of adults (Dockett & Perry, 2004). Despite this, there are many fewer reports of children’s experiences in transition than there are adult interpretations of transition experiences and effects.

The Starting School Research Project has retained a commitment to including children as active participants in research about the transition to school and has sought to develop a range of appropriate methodologies for researching with children, rather than conducting research on children (Dockett & Perry, 2003). This paper reports an innovative approach to seeking children’s input into judgements about the first year of school. Utilising drawings and annotated comments, children have been invited to reflect on how they think they have changed over their first year at school. The Starting School Research Project aims to record and report the realities of life for children as they start school. We want to know what the experience is like for children and, based on this, how we can improve what is done within transition programs and experiences. This aim recognises children as experts on their own lives (Langsted, 1994), and acknowledges that adults often have a limited understanding of children’s lives and experiences (Clark & Moss, 2001).

Introduction

The methodologies used in the Starting School Research Project reflect efforts to reposition children's voices at the centre of the research. Underpinning these efforts are views of children as competent, capable, and as experts on their own lives (Clark & Moss, 2001; James, Jenks & Prout, 1998). Further, such views of children recognise that children's experiences and perspectives are important areas for study (Barker & Weller, 2003).

Children's views of starting school

Children's experiences in the transition to school have been reported in a number of studies. Most children report being eager to start school and the associated sense of 'growing up' that accompanies this (Clarke & Sharpe, 2003; Dockett & Perry, 2003). At the same time, some children report feeling anxious, especially about the teacher (Brostrom, 1998) and what happens at school (Einarsdóttir, 2003). Children expect there to be rules at school (Corsaro & Molinari, 2000) and they expect to obey these (Dockett & Perry, 2003).

Dockett and Perry (2003) report that the strong focus from children on rules, possibly as a means of adjusting to the school environment, is matched by their feelings about school. Just as important as rules for children starting school, is the presence of friends or the chance to make friends. Overall, children's positive feelings about school are related to friends and friendships. Negative feelings about school relate to children's reports of not knowing anyone, not having any friends, or having no one to play with.

Children's drawings

Several researchers have developed a range of innovative approaches to engaging children in research, including the use of photographs (Fasoli, 2003; Prosser & Schwartz, 1998), conversations with children (Mayall, 2000) and children's drawings (Punch, 2002). These approaches are characterised by listening to children's agendas, addressing issues relevant to children, utilising children's preferred methods of communication, and mutuality in interactions between children and researchers (Barker & Weller, 2003).

Engaging children in research through drawing is an approach that has been used over many years and in many different ways. There is a large body of research analysing the aesthetic and compositional aspects of children's drawings, often aligning these with developmental sequences or diagnosis of particular difficulties (for example, Cox, 1992). Rather than focusing on the elements of children's drawings, more recent research has considered drawing as a means to encourage children to communicate effectively, without heavy reliance on verbal and literacy skills (Young & Barrett, 2001), and as a means of helping children to "make their thinking visible to others" (Robertson, 2000, p. 161).

One of the advantages of drawing is that children can exert high levels of control over their participation in the activity. Children can express as little or as much as they wish, in ways of their choosing, through drawing. Drawing is a task that can be added to, or changed as the process continues. It does not require a rapid response: it can be thought about and drawings can develop as the drawer chooses. The activity of drawing is usually one that is familiar to children. It remains a commonly available activity in many prior-to-school settings, as well as at home. In school, drawing often accompanies the task of writing, either as a precursor to forming actual text, or as a complement to already recorded text.

This study expands the approaches used by the Starting School Research Project to include the voices of children as a central feature of research concerning the transition to school. It introduces the methodology of collecting data using children's drawings and accompanying

comments. This methodology complements other approaches already utilised with the project, such as research conversations with children and photographs (Dockett & Perry, 2003; Dockett & Simpson, 2003). The overall aims of the project remain focused on improving the transition experiences by taking account of what matters to those involved. Central to this is the recognition of what is important to children and ways of ensuring that transition programs and experiences reflect this.

Method

Children from three schools in New South Wales participated in this study. School A was located in a rural city with a population of approximately 20 000. Children attending the school represented a range of cultural backgrounds. School B was in a country town with a population of approximately 3500. A large number of Aboriginal families live in or near the town and their children attend the local school. School C is located in a country town of approximately 5000 people. Children attending the school live either in the town, or in the farming community located around the town.

The Starting School Research Project had an ongoing relationship with the children, families and schools in each location. Over several visits to each school, members of the project team had spoken with children, families and teachers, visited prior-to-school as well as the school settings, and been involved with the local community.

Towards the end of the school year, children who had started Kindergarten (in New South Wales, the first year of formal school is called Kindergarten) that year were invited to participate in a drawing activity. After an initial group discussion about school, each child was given a large sheet of paper (at least an A3 sheet of art paper) and asked to think about what school had been like for them at the beginning of the year, and what it was like for them now. The paper was folded in half and the following prompts were written in:

When I started school I	Now I
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Figure 1. Format of the drawing task.

The activity was undertaken with the class group, on the basis that this was less confrontational for individual children. Depending on the class group, and what was familiar and expected in the classroom, the class teacher either scribed children's comments, or children wrote their own comments, calling on the teacher's help as necessary. Twenty-two children from School A, 12 children from School B and 18 children from School C completed the drawing activity. Their drawings, with accompanying comments, form the data for this paper.

Results

Children's drawings and comments suggest the areas that were important for them, in their contexts. They are not claimed to be representative of all sites or children. Rather, they indicate that young children are competent social actors, aware of their context and their ability to influence as well as to be influenced by that context. They demonstrate children's sense of belonging to the community of practice that is their school (Wenger, 1998), as well as the meanings they have constructed through negotiations, interactions and relationships with those at school. The children are actively making sense of themselves within the contexts of the people, experiences and expectations around them.

These results represent the reflections of children about how they have changed during their first year at school. For some children, perceived changes occurred in a specific area; for others the changes were more general. For example, 39 children described their feelings about school at the beginning of the school year. Twenty of these same children also described their feelings at the end of the school year: *When I started school I missed my brother Tom. Now I don't cry as much, but I still miss him.* Other children described feelings at the beginning of the year, and then identified other elements as characteristic of themselves at the end of the year: *When I started school I felt sad. Now I can run very fast.*

Several layers of analysis are possible when considering children's drawings. This paper does not seek to comment on the aesthetic qualities of the drawings, or to use the drawings as indicators of children's development. The first layer of analysis resulted from the decision to regard comments and drawings as one unit—an important element in ensuring that the interpretation of the drawing rested with the children, rather than the researcher. This analysis considered the match between drawings and comments. While it was sometimes difficult to discern the actual content of the drawings alone (that is, without the comments), there were no instances of drawings that could not be interpreted through the comments, or comments that could not be interpreted through the drawing. For example, in several instances, comments about feeling sad when starting school were accompanied by glum faces (such as lips in an inverted U, as in Figure 2) or a single child drawn on their own. In contrast, comments about their current situation, such as *now I am happy* or *now I have friends* were accompanied by smiling faces and groups of children.

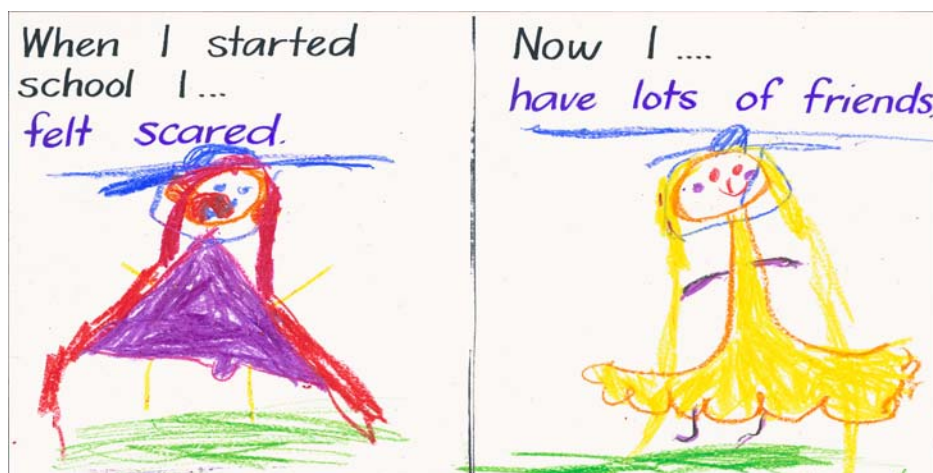


Figure 2. When I started school I felt scared. Now I have lots of friends.

Once assured of the match between drawings and comments, it was possible to code the data using the categories established through the Starting School Research Project. These categories are:

<i>Knowledge</i>	Ideas, facts or concepts that needed to be known.
<i>Adjustment</i>	Aspects of adjusting to the school environment, either socially or organisationally .
<i>Skill</i>	Observable actions.
<i>Disposition</i>	Children's attitudes towards, or feelings about, school or learning
<i>Rules</i>	Fitting in with the school and school expectations.
<i>Physical</i>	Physical attributes, needs, characteristics of children.
<i>Family issues</i>	Issues related to family functioning or involvement with the school.
<i>Educational environment</i>	What happens at school, including curriculum and the nature of the school environment. (Perry, Dockett, & Howard 2000).

These categories were established through a series of studies based on extensive interviews and/or questionnaires with children, parents and educators and validated through confirmatory factor analysis (Dockett & Perry, 2004). They have been used in many aspects of the Starting School Research Project, as well as internationally.

Table 1 indicates that children were quite capable of thinking back to the start of their first year of school. They seemed to have clear recollections and were happy to share these in both verbal and visual form. Over the three schools, the category of disposition was mentioned by more children than any other category. This was followed by the categories of knowledge and educational environment, skills, physical and family issues. There was no mention of the category of rules and the category of adjustment was mentioned only once.

	<i>Start school year</i>				<i>End school year</i>			
	School A	School B	School C	Totals	School A	School B	School C	Totals
<i>Knowledge</i>	0	8	1	9	4	11	6	21
<i>Skills</i>	1	1	0	2	2	5	0	7
<i>Disposition</i>	16	8	15	39	13	1	9	22
<i>Adjustment</i>	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
<i>Rules</i>	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<i>Physical</i>	0	0	1	1	5	1	1	7
<i>Family</i>	2	1	1	4	1	0	0	1
<i>Educational environment</i>	3	0	10	13	0	0	6	6
<i>Other</i>	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0

Table 1. Coding of drawings and comments

Discussion

These results are both consistent with, and different from, other results that have sought children's perspectives on the transition to school. The focus on dispositions, particularly on friends and feelings of anxiety about starting school are consistent with reports from Australia (Dockett & Perry, 2004), as well as Singapore (Clarke & Sharpe, 2003) and the United Kingdom (Dunlop & Fabian, 2003). One aspect that is strikingly different is the lack of

attention to rules. Previous studies have emphasised children's knowledge of the rules of school and their adamant view that success at school related to knowing and obeying the rules (Clyde, 2001; Dockett & Perry, 1999; Dockett & Simpson, 2003).

It is likely that the nature of the task—focussing on children's reflections of how things had changed for them—was markedly different from previous tasks, and so tapped different understandings and issues. In previous studies children have been asked what they need to know in order to start school (for example, Dockett & Perry, 1999) and what they would tell someone who was about to start school (for example, Dockett & Simpson, 2003). In each of these situations, children have consistently listed a large number of rules and cited the importance of obeying these rules. Certainly at the start of school, children are intent on knowing the rules of school. It has been argued elsewhere that this may well be one way that children adjust to the school environment, as they become members of their particular community of practice (Wenger, 1998). By the end of their first year at school, the children in this study portrayed a positive picture of school, with no mention of rules. It may be that rules have become less important for these children as they have settled into the school community and developed a sense of belonging. The differences in results from different tasks suggests that it is important to engage with children using multiple methodologies, and asking different questions, if we are serious about seeking to understand their experiences, expectations and perceptions.

The children's drawings and comments reflect a particularly positive picture of school and their membership of the school community. There is a strong sense that these children, from quite diverse communities, feel that they have changed a great deal over their year at school, and that they have learned a great deal. Drawings and comments about starting school highlighted children's perceptions at the beginning of the school year. Of the 39 drawings and comments referring to the start of school coded as disposition, 24 referred to a negative disposition – *I was sad, I was scared; I was frightened, I wasn't happy. I was crying because I was upset* – and 15 referred to a positive disposition – *I was happy, I liked Miss B., I felt happy because I had a friend*. Thinking of themselves at the end of the school year, children reported no negative dispositions. Positive dispositions included *I am happy, I can be so happy, and I am not scared* (Figure 3).

Figure 3. When I started school I was crying because it was scary and I made new friends and that made me happy. Now I am happy because I am used to school.

Much of the positive nature of children's responses related to newly acquired skills and knowledge. In previous studies, children had indicated that some knowledge and skills were required in order to start school, and were very clear that they went to school in order to acquire knowledge and skills (Dockett & Perry, 2004). According to the children in this study, such intentions had been realised. Several children indicated that their negative feelings at the beginning of school related to their perceived lack of skills and/or knowledge: *I couldn't write stories and I was a little bit scared*, while others just listed the things they could not do, or felt they could not do properly: *I didn't know how to read a book, I couldn't write, I did silly writing and bad colouring*. At the end of their first year of school, these children seemed very comfortable with their new abilities, noting that *I can read and I have lots of friends, I can sing the ABC, I can write stories, I can read a whole book on my own, I can write my numbers*. None of the children listed things they could not do at the end of their first year of school. All 21 mentions of knowledge and 7 mentions of skills were about things the children could do or did know.

The drawings and comments suggest that these three groups of children had developed positive images of themselves as learners over their Kindergarten year. They recognised significant changes in their own abilities and understandings and mentioned these positively. This suggests that these children felt that they had had a positive start to school. However, the focus on school as a place for learning to read, write and work with numbers presents a very stereotypical view of school. It may be that these aspects were the most salient for young children, perhaps because they are regarded as so important by the adults in many communities, or perhaps because they represent significant differences in what these children know and can do. It seems that in a very short time, these children had learned 'to do' school. They have identified themselves as school students and adopted the role and position of learner within the class and school.

The importance of context was demonstrated in the drawings and comments. For example, children at School C referred to the educational environment more than children at the other schools. Most of these related to a change of teacher during the year. Comments such as *we had Mrs C and we have Mrs W now, I wasn't happy when I was in Mrs C's class, and I remember Mrs C*, suggest that this change had an impact on the children's views of school. This is important for educators to note, as it can be assumed that children who have just started school may not be affected in a major way by a change of teacher. These comments suggest otherwise.

When commenting on what school was like for them at the end of their school year, children at School A mentioned physical issues more often than the other children. These children mentioned newly acquired skills that they could use in the playground, such as *I can skip, I can run very fast, I can climb the Kindy tree without being scared*. Children at this school enjoyed a large and interesting school playground, which contained a range of spaces for children, including an area set aside for Kindergarten children with a bushy shrub the children were permitted to play in. For these children, the school playground was an important space and their ability to use it in a number of ways signified changes in their approach to school.

When children were asked to think about themselves starting school, several returned to the time of their orientation program. This had occurred over a year ago for many of the children, yet their recollections were strong. Three of the children from School A described the activities they had completed on their first orientation visit to school, and seemed to regard

that first visit as the start of school. Given that the orientation program had occurred over a year ago, it was evident that the program itself had been significant for the children involved. The indications from these children were that they regarded their orientation visit to school as the time at which they started school.

When considering themselves at the beginning of the school year, four children drew and made comments about family connections. Only one such reference was made in the end of year comments and drawings. Family comments and drawings included *When I started school, I was crying at school because my sister wouldn't play with me* and *When I started school I felt happy ... my brother was here*. One set of drawings and comments signifies a move away from the dependence on family to a growing independence (Figure 4).



Figure 4. When I started school I loved my Mum picking me up. Now I can catch the bus.

In all of the responses from children, across the three schools, only one response could not be coded as relevant. It was surprising that only one response could not be coded—suggesting that the drawing task was of interest and relevance for children and that they felt comfortable completing the task. While it is tempting to regard this as unproblematic, it is important to note that the task is a typical school-type task, and was undertaken in the context of school, with the involvement of the class teacher. It is possible that children did not feel that they had a choice in completing the task, and that the usual power relations of the classroom ensured children's conformity. Baker and Weller (2003) note that

Adults and existing power relations in institutions and spaces in which children spend their time have a ...[wide] impact upon research with children ...researchers must be aware of the context of the spaces in which the research is undertaken ... the popularity of particular methods may not simply be due to children's preferences, but also due to what is seen as 'legitimate forms of communication' within spaces in which children spend their time...(p. 51)

Clearly, the task of drawing and commenting, or writing and drawing, are typical literacy experiences within Kindergarten classrooms. The reflection task used in this study has the advantage of engaging the children in a familiar task, with familiar expectations. A disadvantage may well be the constraints—both implicit and explicit—that already operate within the classroom relating to literacy tasks, such as the importance of neat work or legible writing. While there is no guarantee that these constraints were overcome in this study, there had been regular interaction with the children and teachers involved in the task over the school year, and it has been established in these earlier discussions that there were no right answers to any of the tasks related to the project.

Implications for practice

Research

The importance of considering the context of research is one implication relating to research practice that can be drawn from this study. It reiterates the importance of researchers engaging in reflexive practice as a means of evaluating the impact of research, their own role as researchers and the research processes on children within particular contexts. In addition, researchers need to engage in reflexive discussions that encourage reflection on their assumptions as well as about their research methods and approaches.

Other implications for research practice include:

- the importance of using a range of methods to engage children in research. This study has utilised children's drawings, partly on the basis that children often choose to draw and seem to enjoy the act of drawing. However, it should not be assumed that all children like to draw, or indeed feel comfortable drawing. Some children may not regard themselves as 'good drawers' and not engage fully in the task. Even if children like to draw and regard themselves as competent drawers, they may not feel comfortable with researchers invading their personal space, or taking over an activity they enjoy without adult intervention (Punch, 2002). Utilising a range of research methods increased the likelihood of finding a task that will be of interest to most children.
- ensuring that the interpretation of data, such as drawings, is based on the children's perceptions, and not the researchers. Baker and Weller (2003, p. 50) note that "researchers' own interpretations are inaccurate adult sensibilities and preconceptions, which can silence or misrepresent the voices of children". In this study, the focus on children's comments together with their drawings, avoids the possibility of adults interpreting a drawing in ways other than was intended by the children. In a similar way, considering the drawings in relation to the comments provides clear connections between what has been drawn and what was said.
- recognising that there are some ways in which research with children differs from research with adults. This can be, but is not necessarily, related to the approach taken: "the challenge is to strike a balance between not patronizing children and recognizing their competencies, while maintaining their enjoyment of being involved with the research and facilitating their ability to communicate their view of the world" (Punch, 2002, p. 337).

Educational practice

In addition to some implications for research practice, the specific task of drawing and making comments has some educational implications for the consideration of transition to school programs and practices. When children were asked to think about themselves starting school, several returned to the time of their orientation program. This had occurred over a year ago for many of the children, yet their recollections were strong. Three of the children from School A described the activities they had completed on their first orientation visit to school, and seemed to regard that first visit as the start of school. This has some major implications for transition and orientation programs, in that the experiences children have on that orientation day set up their expectations of school. For example, if they are introduced to someone called "the Kindergarten teacher", then they will expect that teacher to be with them throughout Kindergarten—this person is not just **the** Kindergarten teacher, but **their**

Kindergarten teacher. The same situation holds for the location used for orientation – if children are taken to the Kindergarten classroom, then they expect to return there for their Kindergarten experience.

Changes to the classroom teacher are not only problematic at the beginning of the school year. As indicated by the children from School C, changing teachers mid-year can have a major impact on children and their interactions. For some children, the change in teacher was positive. One child reported *When I started school I wasn't happy when I was in Mrs C's class* and another that *Now I am happy because Mrs Ca is our teacher and Mrs W. I like these two teachers.*

Perhaps the major educational implication from this study is the importance of talking with children about what is happening to and for them as they progress through their first year of school. Often, the focus of parents and teachers is whether or not the child is 'ready' to enter Year 1, where there is a perception that the work gets harder. This focus loses sight of the significant changes occurring for children as they start school. They have a sense of themselves as a school student, as a learner in a place they designate as a learning community, and this positioning will influence their participation in and their persistence at, school tasks. Understanding children's perceptions of themselves and celebrating their feelings of progression are important ways that adults can concentrate on the importance of the here and now for children, rather than constantly trying to prepare children for the future.

Conclusion

Thiessen (1997) outlines three levels of engagement with research that acknowledges children's perspectives: knowing about children's perspectives; acting on behalf of children's perspectives; and working with children's perspectives. The research focus of this paper represents each of these three levels in practice. At the first level, it serves to focus on what can be learned from the perspectives of children. Clearly, much can be learned about their experiences of school and their sense of themselves within school, from actively seeking their perspectives. At the second level, representing children's perspectives can present significant challenges for researchers. It is imperative that any representations of children's views are authentic representations, rather than those of researchers. Thirdly, it is important to constantly seek ways to include the perspectives of children in decisions that impact on them and to use children's perspectives to inform and improve educational practice.

The findings of this study complement other findings of the Starting School Research Project and represent an ongoing effort to listen to and respond to the voices of children in the transition to school.

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