LISTENING TO CHILDREN’S EXPERIENCE OF STARTING SCHOOL IN AN AREA OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC DISADVANTAGE

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Abstract
Friendships are important to children as they start school, particularly for children living in an area of socio-economic disadvantage. Socio-economic disadvantage is commonly linked to poor developmental outcomes and may affect children’s readiness to start school. As a result, children in low socio-economic areas are less likely to have a positive school transition. This poor start to school can have a negative impact on children’s long term schooling experience and future outcomes. Using data collected in multiple ways from children in the first year of school in an area of socio-economic disadvantage, attention is drawn to children’s emphasis on friendships and the valuable support they provided during the transition to school. This article highlights how the provision of adequate support helps children to build the high order social skills and competence necessary to establish and maintain friendships, prior to and during the transition to school. This experience enhances enjoyment and engagement in the school environment, improving children’s long-term educational outcomes.

Introduction
Starting school is recognised as a life transition and milestone for young children (Dockett & Perry, 2001; 2004; Farrar, Goldfeld, & Moore, 2006; Yeo & Clarke, 2007). As children undertake the transition from a flexible home or early years setting to the structure of formal school they encounter a period of change and adjustment, accompanied with new experiences, opportunities and challenges (Bond & Maley, 2007). How children experience and manage this transition can impact on their progress through the schooling system and their life after school.

Several factors impact on children’s readiness to start school and their successful transition to the first year of school. Children’s early experiences and relationships build a foundation for their subsequent learning and social interactions (Centre for Community Child Health, 2008a; Education Futures Team, 2008). When these previous experiences are stimulating, nurturing and responsive they facilitate young children’s readiness to embrace the social and learning opportunities offered as they start school (Centre for Community Child Health, 2008a). Children from low socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to experience these positive early experiences and have an increased chance of entering school with poorer developmental outcomes that affect their readiness to learn and to effectively interact with adults and peers (Centre for Community Child Health, 2008a; Dockett, Perry, Campbell, Hard, Kearney, & Taffe, 2007; Farrar, et al., 2006). Thus, children from areas of socio-economic disadvantage may require additional support to ensure they have a positive and successful transition to school.

Every child starts school with different ideas, emotions, knowledge and expectations about this transition, informed by their unique backgrounds and experiences prior to school. Children from low socio-economic backgrounds are at risk of having a negative perception of school, resulting in a difficult transition and early disengagement from the school setting (Australian Government, 2009). Acknowledging children’s individual perceptions and concerns of starting school enhances the development of effective transition support practices (Dockett & Perry, 2007). Taking into account children’s perspectives about school also respects children’s rights, and increases children’s inclusion and empowerment in the school setting (Moss & Petrie, 2004). Increasing children’s sense of inclusion at school and providing relevant support during the transition is particularly important for children in areas of socio-economic disadvantage.
Recent recognition of the importance of a positive start to school and the negative impact low socio-economic status can have on children’s early development has prompted Australian government interest in children’s transition to school (Australian Government, 2009). As a result, research on children’s transition to school in Australia has increased. Despite the inclusion of children in prior research, there is a necessity to delve further into children’s perspectives of the school transition to gain a deeper understanding of a child’s experience of starting school. Furthermore, areas of socio-economic disadvantage in Australia have not been a high priority of previous research. This research utilised open, unstructured, child directed research techniques with minimal influence from an adult’s perspective, to gain an understanding of children’s experiences of starting school in a low socio-economic area.

Contemporary research demonstrates that children are capable of developing friendships much earlier than previously thought. A friendship is a shared relationship, constituted by mutual reciprocity, affection and commitment, developed through joint engagement with others in a specific setting (Bagwell, 2004; Corsaro, Molinari, Hadley, & Sugioka, 2003; Hartup, 1996). When provided with the opportunity for regular social contact, children are capable of forming close relationships with other children at a very young age (Dunn, 2004). Research has shown that pairs of children as young as two years of age provide support and comfort for each other when stressed, convey shared happiness, and are unhappy when they are apart (Dunn, 2004). Evidence of caring, supportive behaviour and shared pretend play between young children over a long period of time demonstrates their ability to establish affectionate, stable, and reciprocal relationships (Dunn, 2004; Erwin, 1998).

Starting school is associated with increased opportunities and challenges for children to socially interact and build relationships with others (Dockett & Perry, 2006; Dunn, 2004; Fabian, 2000; Margetts, 2006). The social nature of the school environment has prompted recent research on children’s experiences of friendship and the role of these relationships in the early years of school. Researchers in New Zealand (Peters, 2003), Italy (Corsaro et al., 2003; Tomada, Schneider, Domini, Greenman, & Fonzi, 2005), United Kingdom (Dunn, Cutting, & Fisher, 2002) and the United States of America (Ladd & Kochenderfer, 1996; Ladd, Kochenderfer, & Coleman, 1996) have engaged children, parents and teachers in research to develop a better understanding of children’s friendships during school. These studies provide insight into the impact friendships have on children’s early development and adjustment to the new school environment.

Friendships also impact on children’s transition and adjustment to the school environment. Children’s social and academic adjustment at school is facilitated by the presence of positive friendships during the first year of school (Dunn et al., 2002; Ladd et al., 1996; Tomada et al., 2005). Undertaking the school transition with friends or making friends early in the process enhances children’s enjoyment, competence and achievement, sense of peer support and positive perception of school (Dunn et al., 2002; Pellegrini & Blatchford, 2000; Peters, 2003). Children’s friendships also play a key supportive role during the transition to school (Peters, 2003). Having a close friend throughout this period can buffer the stress associated with the school transition (Dunn, 2004; Pellegrini & Blatchford, 2000). The emotional support and security offered from children’s friendships is particularly beneficial for children experiencing other additional stressors as they start school (Tomada et al., 2005). Thus, new and old friendships can have a positive impact on children’s transition to school.

Prior research on children’s school transition in Australia has been based in areas of varied geographic and socio-economic status, and included participants with different abilities, family composition and cultural backgrounds to represent the diversity of Australian society (Dockett & Perry, 2004; Potter & Briggs, 2003). These studies provide insight into children’s transition to school in different areas of Australia. However, previous research has not specifically focused on children’s transition to school in low socio-economic areas. This
limitation of prior research presents an opportunity for researchers in Australia to further examine children’s experiences of starting school in areas of socio-economic disadvantage.

The Research

The research was undertaken with a cohort of eight children from a Year One class in a metropolitan school in Logan, South-East Queensland, Australia in a recognised area of socio-economic disadvantage according to Socio Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008). In Queensland Australia, Year One is the first year of compulsory schooling. The children attend school full time five days each week. Prior to this year some children attend non-compulsory Prep classes in school settings. At the end of the school year there are transition programs between the Prep class and Year One classes in an effort to help children adjust to the formal schooling context.

Interpretive phenomenology was used to explore the research question: what are children’s lived experiences of starting Year One of school in an area of socio-economic disadvantage. A combination of drawing and conversation was used in the project to elicit a more complete view of children’s perspectives of their early schooling experiences. The researcher spent several mornings in the children’s classroom assisting with their literacy activities to gain their trust and develop a relationship in which they felt comfortable to share their ideas and perspectives - a technique reported by Brooker (2001) and Greene and Hill (2005). Interviews (see list of question prompts in Appendix One), mind maps, children’s drawings and the researcher’s reflective journal were used to gather data for the research. Using a variety of methods to collect data ensured a more effective and in-depth exploration of children’s experiences of starting school in a low socio-economic area.

In the study, individual children were engaged in several unstructured, child-directed conversational interviews to effectively examine their understanding and experience of starting school. This type of interview, based on indirect discussion are less threatening for children than structured questioning, and children’s communicative competence is enhanced as they control the content and direction of the conversation (Brooker, 2001; Christensen, 2004). Several key prompts were used by the researcher to encourage the children to consider: how they felt about starting school and what made them feel that way; expectations, assumptions and concerns they had about Year One prior to starting school; and their likes and dislikes about school.

Mind maps were created during the interviews to facilitate the data collection process (see Appendix 2). Creating mind maps encourages a deeper level of cognitive processing, improving an individual’s memory recall and understanding (Farrand, Hussain, & Hennessey, 2002; Littret, 1999). Mind maps also provide a fast and efficient way to record, organize and present information and ideas, making patterns in research data easily identifiable (Millen, Schriefer, Ledher, & Dray, 1997). This technique facilitated the co-construction of meaning between the researcher and child, thereby representing a valuable research tool for understanding and privileging a child’s perspective of the transition to school in this region.

Children’s drawings provided another data source for this study. Children are able to share conscious and unconscious thoughts and feelings through drawings before they can express them verbally (Harrison, Clarke, & Ungerer, 2007). Engaging participants in a drawing activity reduced their eye contact with the researcher which helps them feel more comfortable to share their ideas, and provides children with a greater sense of control over the research process (Dockett & Perry, 2007). These various forms of data collection gave children the opportunity to share their perspectives and experiences of starting school with minimal influence from an adults’ perspective. Furthermore, the researcher was able to combine prior
understanding and pre-suppositions with new knowledge of children’s perspectives to develop an interpretation of a child’s experience.

A reflective journal was also kept by the researcher throughout the study to uncover the researcher’s own interpretations, experiences and assumptions. The use of a reflective journal also allowed the researcher to reflect on her values and beliefs about social disadvantage and how it impacts on children’s school transition, as she engaged in the children’s classroom and gained insight into the children’s perspectives of starting school.

**Children’s friendships**

Children in the research cohort described several aspects of their transition to Year One; however, one key theme that featured predominantly in all participants’ accounts was friendship. In particular, children referred to starting school with friends, making new friends, concerns about not having friends, and having friends throughout the school year. Each of these themes will be discussed in turn including examples from the children’s data.

**Starting Year One with Friends**

Children who made the transition to Year One with friends from pre-school experiences were optimistic about starting school.

> I was happy. I played with my friends...friends that I met in prep.

> Happy...I sit next to Mike...He is my friend from prep two.

The concept of starting the year with friends was also represented in the children’s illustrations. Children drew a picture of themselves with several of their friends in the school grounds on their first day of school. In both pictures all the figures of children were smiling (see Appendix 3), suggesting that starting Year One with friends was a positive experience for these children.

A positive perception of school provides an advantage for children attending school in a low socio-economic area. Children who have a positive attitude towards school are more competent in their ability to succeed, increasing their motivation and enthusiasm to engage in the school environment and their sense of connectedness to school (Hauser-Cram, Durand & Warfield, 2007; Valeski & Stipek, 2001). This enhances a child’s opportunity to ‘learn and profit from their education experiences’ (Ladd & Kochenderfer, 1996, p.325). Increased excitement and interest in attending school can disrupt the intergenerational cycle of disadvantage that children are at risk of continuing in low socio-economic areas (Australian Government, 2009). Starting school with friends appeared to increase the children’s positive experience and perception of school, thereby supporting their engagement and achievement in the school environment.

The presence of pre-established friendships reduced children’s anxiety about starting school. Several children who recalled being anxious about starting school indicated that they overcame these concerns by interacting with their old friends, for example: *I played with friends from prep...it made it not as scary.* Pre-existing friendships provide children with familiarity and continuity between a previous setting and the new school environment (Fabian, 2000). The stability, emotional support and security gained from continuing friendships at school buffers the stress associated with this transition and helps children engage in school (Bulkeley & Fabian, 2006; Dunn, 2004; Pellegrini & Blatchford, 2000). Reducing the strangeness of the school environment also makes children more comfortable, confident, and eager to engage with classroom activities and explore the learning
opportunities offered (Fabian, 2000; Ladd & Kochenderfer, 1996; Pellegrini & Blatchford, 2000). Children’s concerns about commencing in a new place in Year One were eased as they sought out their old friends in the school setting, increasing their comfort and competence in the new environment.

**Making New Friends**

Entering Year One without friends means that children may face a greater challenge of meeting unfamiliar children and making friends in the new environment. One child in the study attended the Prep Year at a different school and thus entered Year One without any pre-established friendships. This child’s illustrations both featured the classroom with numerous desks, and his discussion focused on his opportunity to choose a seat on the first day, which he did with the intention to finding a friend: *There was a boy, and we started making friends.* The ability to make friends easily and successfully is developed and produced by context, rather than relying only on children’s individual skills and personality (Peters, 2003). The structure of the classroom environment had a significant impact on the children’s ability to make friends as they started Year One.

Other children also provided insight into how they made new friends as they started school.

> They just comed over and said I want to be your friend.

> Then I just played with a boy that I didn’t know.

Opportunities to engage in joint activity with peers at school provides a foundation for developing friendships (Corsaro, Molinari, Hadley & Sugioka, 2003). These friendships are generally formed around similar characteristics and interests, thus engaging freely in conversations and play at school allows children to discover their similarities and differences to others (Dunn, 2004; Hartup, 1996). The children’s ability to make friends at school was enhanced through the provision of time and space to engage in open social interactions with other children in the playground and classroom.

The process of making new friends eased children’s concerns about school, including children who had pre-existing friendships when starting Year One. One child indicated that making new friends alleviated her anxiety about school: *Started to make friends.* Another child expressed the anxiety he shared with his friends on the first day of school: *Me and my friends were pretty nervous.* This child went on to reveal that he reduced these nerves by interacting with other children that he did not already know. The friendship building process helps children settle into school by giving them a sense of belonging and inclusion in the new environment, and providing a companion with whom they can share positive experiences and concerns (Broström, 2000; Peters, 2003). New friendships with peers also increase children’s self-esteem and confidence, and play a key supportive role at school (Dunn, 2004; Margetts, 2006). Thus, making new friends, regardless of the presence of pre-existing friendships, was a significant experience for these children starting Year One in a low socio-economic area, just as it is for other children.

The arrangement of desks in the classrooms contributed to the circumstances for making friends. The structure and organisation of schools can have a significant impact on children’s friendships, facilitating or disrupting their access to new and old friends (Corsaro et al., 2003). The arrangement of the school desks encouraged children to build new friendships with other children. Children’s ability to make choices about their desks and the positioning of these desks were seen as a priority by children as they established and maintained friendships.
Concerns about Not Having Friends

The absence of friendships emerged as one of the children’s key concerns about starting school. The following examples demonstrate how the children were feeling on their first day of school and the reasons they attributed to those emotions:

*I was nervous...worried about having no friends.*

*Really really scary...there was lots of big kids that I didn’t really know.*

*...pretty nervous...when I first came into the classroom I didn’t know anybody.*

The social nature of the school environment creates new opportunities and challenges for children to develop and maintain relationships with others (Dockett & Perry, 2006; Dunn, 2004; Margetts, 2006). As a result, children are faced with the chance of experiencing rejection and loneliness (Dunn, 2004). Cullingford (1991) proposed that ‘a school’s virtues derive from the pleasures of friendships; its terrors from loneliness and isolation’ (cited in Peters, 2003, p.46). This statement encapsulates a common fear experienced by children starting school- a fear of being alone in the new environment (Peters, 2003). Children’s anxiety about being alone at school and meeting new children are frequent concerns that accompany the new social opportunities associated with starting school.

Children expressed their concerns about being alone even though they started school with pre-existing friendships. One child in particular named the friends she started school with: *Only Anne, Kate and Bel….Only three (friends).* This child identified that she started school with several friends, though seemed uncertain that having three friends was enough. Another child who also started the year with pre-established friends described her thoughts about Year One when in the Preparatory Year: *It might be scary and I might not have any friends.* Having pre-established friendships did not reduce the children’s concerns about having enough friends and knowing other children prior to their school entry.

Children’s concerns about starting school may be linked to a lack of knowledge about school and what it involves. One child implied that her expectations of Year One were not entirely accurate: *I met some children but not many.* This child’s experience of starting school appeared different to her prior anticipation of the event. Discontinuities between children’s understanding and expectations of school and what it is actually like can have a negative impact on their schooling experience, creating uncertainty, disappointment, and unnecessary concern (Broström, 2000). Parents and children also gain valuable information about the school through reciprocal interaction and connection to school educators prior to starting school (Broström, 2000). Insufficient cooperation and communication between the children’s home and school settings may have contributed to the children’s uncertainty and anxiety about what to expect at school.

Having Friends during Year One

Whether or not they made the transition to Year One with friends, all of the children referred positively to having friends during Year One. Early friendships provide opportunities for children to experience companionship as they spend time together engaging in enjoyable interactions and joint activities (Howes, 1996). Children associate the companionship they receive through their interactions with friends during the first year of school to their favourite thing about Year One. The pleasure gained from interacting with friends at school was also revealed in the children’s conversations. *Playing with friends* came up frequently as a favourite school time activity. The pleasure and companionship associated with having friends increases children’s motivation to attend and engage in the school environment during their first year of school (Peters, 2003). Children’s ongoing achievement is facilitated by the
skills, behaviour and attitudes developed through good attendance and engagement at school (Centre for Community Child Health, 2008b). Having friends throughout Year One enhances children’s enjoyment and involvement in school as they participate in a range of activities with their friends, contributing to their positive and successful schooling experience.

The close nature of children’s friendships at school was evident from the comments children made about their friends. Several children used the term ‘best friend’ to describe one of their friends at school while completing their illustrations. Children as young as four years of age identify children with whom they have a particularly close relationship as their best friend (Erwin, 1998). Having a best friend makes children less lonely at school than children without a best friend, regardless of their overall acceptance by peers (Asher, Parker, & Walker, 1996). The emphasis placed on having a best friend illustrates the close, affectionate nature of the children’s friendships, and may reduce their feelings of isolation and loneliness in the school environment.

Being liked by peers supports children’s positive developmental outcomes in the early schooling years (Hartup, 1996). Intimate, affectionate and supportive friendships help children feel confident, secure, valued and cared about in the school environment (Bulkeley & Fabian, 2006; Dunn, 2004). This sense of security and inclusion at school facilitates the development of children’s positive sense of self, which enhances children’s emotional well-being (Bulkeley & Fabian, 2006). Emotional well-being is integral to children’s ability to build and maintain positive relationships and interactions, and empowers them to engage in learning opportunities in the school setting (Bulkeley & Fabian, 2006). Children gain valuable support and assurance from being liked by peers and developing close, intimate friendships at school.

Children who referred to having numerous friends at school also had the longest interviews, and displayed interest in their friends’ experience in the research process. Friendships give children the opportunity to practice and enhance their social, emotional, communication and language skills through their engagement in conversations, cooperative and pretend play, conflict, and the sharing of feelings and experiences (Dunn, Cutting & Fisher, 2002; Margetts, 2006; Newcomb & Bagwell, 1996). These interpersonal interactions provide an important context for children’s social and emotional development, allowing them to learn more about themselves and how to effectively communicate and interact with others (Bagwell, 2004; Dunn, et al., 2002; Newcomb & Bagwell, 1996). They have higher social confidence, self-esteem and cooperation skills than children without friends (Bukowski, Newcomb, & Hartup, 1996; Hartup, 1996). Having numerous friends at school enhanced the children’s communication skills and increased their concern and understanding of others experiences and perspectives.

Implications

A variety of strategies is currently used to support children as they start school in low socio-economic areas. Children in the area of this research had the opportunity to become familiar with the Year One environment and their Year One teacher prior to starting school. However, the critical theme reported to the researcher was concerns that children had for friendships. Friendships were not a priority in the transition programs implemented by the school.

Findings of the Starting School Research Project facilitated the development of ten key guidelines for effective transition to school programs, which have been well accepted in Australia (Dockett & Perry, 2001; 2007; Farrar, et al., 2006). Two of these guidelines refer to the importance of building positive relationships, and promoting communication and connections between the various stakeholders involved in the school transition (Dockett &
Although children’s friendships are included within these particular guidelines, the language used portrays an adult-based perspective of the transition to school and fails to promote the importance of friendships to children as they start school. Thus, an alternative version of the guidelines proposed by Dockett and Perry (2007) that explicitly emphasises the importance of children’s friendships during the school transition would privilege children’s perspectives of this experience, and clearly identify what really matters to children as they start school in areas of socio-economic disadvantage.

Children’s frequent references to new and old friends in relation to the school transition provides evidence of the increased social opportunities and challenges young children are exposed to as they start school. Moving away from the secure home environment necessitates a significant developmental task for young children—‘the ability to engage in positive interactions with peers and develop satisfying peer relationships’ (Rolfe, 2004, p.127). Achieving this task requires good social and emotional development and well-being, a factor increasingly recognised as integral to children’s adjustment to school (Bulkeley & Fabian, 2006; Dockett, et al., 2007; Margetts, 2006). This social and emotional development is facilitated by high quality learning experiences and caring, responsive relationships with others in the early years of life (Centre for Community Child Health, 2008a). Children from areas of socio-economic disadvantage may have less access to these stimulating early learning opportunities and are more likely to have limited language skills and poorer social and emotional outcomes as they start school (Australian Government, 2009; Centre for Community Child Health, 2008a; Dockett, et al., 2007; Farrar, et al., 2006). The findings of this study reinforce the importance of supporting children’s developing social skills and emotional well-being prior to starting school, particularly for children starting school in areas of socio-economic disadvantage.

Addressing children’s concerns about being alone in the school environment and not being able to establish or maintain friendships at school is necessary to promote their positive transition to school. Open, reciprocal communication between children, parents, pre-school and school practitioners facilitates informative discussions about school and assists children to develop accurate expectations and understanding of the school transition (Broström, 2000; Centre for Community Child Health, 2008b). Increasing the opportunities for children to share their feelings, thoughts and concerns about starting school with other peers and adults would help reassure children and reduce their anxiety about the transition to school. Parents, pre-school carers and school teachers may also find it beneficial to discuss the concept of friendships at school with children prior to their transition, and reassure children that their friendships where possible will be honoured and further facilitated.

This study reveals children’s focus on friendships in relation to starting school, and the positive consequences of these close relationships for children during the school transition. These findings suggest that schools should consider the advantage associated with assisting children to develop friendships throughout the Preparatory Year and Year One of school, and wherever possible allowing children’s friendship groups to remain together when placed in new classes for Year One. The structure and organisation of schools can have a significant impact on children’s friendships, facilitating or disrupting their access to new and old friends (Corsaro et al., 2003). The organisation of classroom activities can also initiate the friendship building process and provide the space for children to meet others (Corsaro et al., 2003). The arrangement of the school desks—single desks clustered into large tables and open-ended activities within the classroom encourages children to build new friendships. Greater interaction, connection and communication between children’s families and educators can also help promote the continuity of children’s friendships inside and outside of the school environment.
Conclusion

This study examined children’s experiences of starting school in areas of socio-economic disadvantage. The findings raise awareness of the potential significance of children’s friendships during the transition to school in. Effectively supporting children during this transition requires acknowledgement of the importance of friendship to children. Furthermore, the factors that affect children’s ability to build and maintain positive friendships with peers should be considered. These factors include children’s social and emotional development, the school environment, and adequate communication and continuity between and among early years settings, schools and families. Promoting recognition for children’s early friendships and enhancing their development prior to and during the school transition will contribute to children’s positive start to school.

References


Peters, S. (2003). "I didn't expect that I would get tons of friends ... more each day": children's experiences of friendship during the transition to school', Early Years, 23(1), 45-53.


APPENDIX 1: INTERVIEW PROMPTS

Key prompts used by the research to facilitate the children’s discussion during interviews included:

- What was it like starting school?
- How did you feel on your first day?
- What made you feel that way about starting school?
- What helped you when you started school?
- Did you attend the Preparatory Year?
- Where did you attend the Preparatory Year?
- When you were in the Preparatory Year what did you think you’d be doing in Year One?
- When you were in the Preparatory Year what did you think Year One would be like?
- When you were in the Preparatory Year how did you feel about coming to Year One?
- Was the Preparatory Year different to Year One? If so, how was it different?
- Did you have any concerns about starting school?
- Do you have any siblings?
- What would you tell your siblings about starting school?
- What did you do on your first day of school?
- What do you like about Year One now?

APPENDIX 2: MIND MAP
APPENDIX 3: CHILDREN’S ILLUSTRATION OF THE FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL

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