‘You Need to Know How to Play Safe’: children’s experiences of starting school

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ABSTRACT Children have long been ‘objects of inquiry’, that is, research has been ‘done’ on children. Research into starting school is but one example, where children have been observed, tested and assessed at various points, as a means of evaluating their adjustment to the school environment. The Starting School Research Project aims to record and report the realities of life for children as they start school through their engagement in the research process. It aims to find out from them, what starting school is like for children and, based on this, how what is done within transition programs can be improved. This aim recognises children as experts on their own lives, and acknowledges that adults often have a limited understanding of children’s lives and experiences. This article highlights children’s expertise about their own experiences and expectations as they start school. It draws upon children’s conversations, drawings, and photographs to describe their understandings and experiences.

Introduction

Background

The Starting School Research Project at the University of Western Sydney, Australia has been investigating young children’s transition to school over several years. One of its major findings has been that young children’s perspectives, experiences and expectations about starting school varied considerably from those of adults involved in the same transition (Perry et al, 1998). As we explored these issues it became increasingly evident that the voices of young children in research generally were not well respected or acknowledged. In the area of starting school, there are few reports of the experience from children’s perspectives (exceptions include Brostrom, 1995; Christensen, 1998; Dockett & Perry, 1999a; Griebel & Niesel, 2000; Peters, 2000; Clyde, 2001; Podmore et al, 2002). Part of the underlying philosophy of the Starting School Research Project has been that effective transitions to school involve all stakeholders, including and particularly the children. To this end, this article focuses on reporting the voices of children, not as research subjects, but as contributors to the research process.

Why Include Children’s Voices in Research?

Children have long been ‘objects of inquiry’, that is, research has been ‘done’ on children. Research into starting school is but one example, where children have been observed, tested and assessed at various points, as a means of evaluating their adjustment to the school environment (e.g. Harradine & Clifford, 1996; Margetts, 1997). 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. 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).
The Starting School Research Project relies a great deal on talking with children and seeking information from them about the contexts in which they find themselves as they start school. As well, we employ approaches to interviews which are appropriate for young children and encourage children to share their experiences in a range of ways, such as drawing, storytelling and reflecting. We can analyse many aspects of a child’s life, but unless we actually interact with children we cannot have any real idea of what life is like for them. Research needs to be situated in context – we do not experience life as a child and we do not inhabit exactly the same context as children. We need to explore – with their help – the experiences they have.

**Issues in Researching with Children**

A range of issues is encountered when considering research with children. On the one hand, there is a sense in which adults and children are different. In the words of Graue & Walsh (1998):

> Finding out about children is exceptionally difficult – intellectually, physically, and emotionally. Physical, social, cognitive and political distances between the adult and the child make their relationship very different from the relationships among adults. In doing research with children, one never becomes a child. One remains a very definite and readily identifiable ‘other’. (p. xiv)

There is no doubt that there are generational and power differences within many research situations involving children (Hatch, 1995; Parkinson, 2001). One possible strategy for both recognising these differences and seeking to empower children in these situations is to engage in research conversations with children, rather than structured or formal interviews (Mayall, 2000). Such conversations ‘hand over the agenda to children, so that they can control the pace and direction of the conversation, raising and exploring topics’ (Mayall, 2000, p. 133) of relevance and interest to them. Such conversations, when conducted within small social groups, have the potential to encourage children to discuss things that matter to them. This does not eliminate issues of power and control, but it can help children feel more in control of the situation. Other strategies to facilitate children’s engagement in conversations include encouraging children to draw as they converse, interviewing children in familiar and casual settings, and engaging in conversations as children play (Parkinson, 2001).

It is possible to argue that all interactions between researchers and ‘subjects’ have similar power distinctions. We do not necessarily adopt different tools in our work with children: for example, we conduct informal interviews and/or conversations with children as well as adults. Rather, we have a general assumption that in different contexts and with different people involved, some research approaches will be more appropriate than others. In this way, we do not start out by assuming that children are less capable or competent than adults, especially when it involves talking about themselves and their own experiences.

This approach does not suggest that there are no theoretical, practical or ethical issues to be considered when exploring the experiences of children. Indeed, Woodhead & Faulkner (2000) caution us that ‘respect for children’s status as social actors does not diminish adult responsibilities’ (p. 31) and Keddie (2000) reminds us of the tension between ‘research intention and ... researcher responsibilities’ (p. 72). The approach does, however, emphasise that ‘what is important is that the particular methods chosen ... should be appropriate for the people involved in the study, its social and cultural context and the kinds of research questions that have been posed’ (Christensen & James, 2000, p. 2).

**An Ecological Model of Transition**

Underpinning the Starting School Research Project is an ecological model of transition, which draws on the work of Bronfenbrenner (see, for example, Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) and others (Pianta et al, 1999) in describing ways in which children influence the contexts in which they live and the ways in which those contexts also impact on experiences. The model views children as competent, interpretive social participants in a range of contexts. When participating in research contexts, children are interpreting and influencing the interactions that occur, as well as being influenced by the actions and interactions of others. In our research, as in that reported by others.
Applying an ecological model to children’s transition to school facilitates a focus on the interactions among and between microsystems (such as the family, school and prior-to-school setting) and recognises the importance within these of expectations, perceptions and experiences. It also recognises that such interactions can be negative, as well as positive. When microsystems come together, Bronfenbrenner described a mesosystem (Fabian & Dunlop, 2002). “The interrelationships fostered in such mesosystems are dynamic and changing ... classroom relationships, curriculum and pedagogy are influenced by the environment and in turn influence it” (Dunlop, 2003, p. 69).

Communities of Practice

The principles underlying the ecological view of starting school are not dissimilar to some of those underpinning the theoretical model of communities of practice. Wenger’s (1998) model of communities of practice emphasises the processes whereby ‘people continually produce meanings of practices through negotiating with each other and the world, rather than receive them and hold them in their minds’ (Fasoli, 2003, p. 39) as they interact within and seek to identify with, particular groups of people. In both approaches, context is critical to recognising the interactions and understandings that develop, as is the concept of social interaction.

Drawing on the concept of situated learning and knowing (Lave & Wenger, 1991), ‘knowing is viewed as the practices of a community and the abilities of individuals to participate in those practices; learning is the strengthening of those practices and participatory abilities’ (Even & Tirosh, 2002, p. 232). Understanding children’s transition to school, using this framework, involves understanding the practices of schools and school communities, and considering children’s awareness of and abilities to engage with these practices. Sharing information about the practices of schools and the expectations of school communities is one way of confirming the existence or importance of some practices, as well as assisting others to engage in these practices and, hence, to become members of communities of practice. Utilising Wenger’s (1998) concept of brokerage, Middleton et al (2002) describe a ‘form of mediation between novices in one community, and knowledgeable practitioners in another ... mediat[ing] an entrée by interested parties into a new configuration of practices and norms’ (p. 428). Brokerage in this sense provides a bridge between communities. In the case of children’s transition to school, we are interested in ways of brokering connections between members of different communities of practice – in this case, school communities and prior-to-school communities.

Schools exist both as communities of practice and a site for multiple communities of practice. For example, each classroom is a community of practice, with its own meaning and practices, different from other classrooms, yet located with other classrooms in the broader school community of practice. Wenger (1998) argues that an individual’s sense of identity within a particular community of practice is influenced by engaging in certain experiences, as well as the response of those communities to those experiences. Robbins (2003) reminds us that, in trying to understand children and children’s lives:

- it is important to consider the contexts in which children are developing, the socioculturally relevant activities within those contexts, the participation with, guidance and support of others, and how this changes through involvement in activities and prepares children for future involvement in similar experiences. (p. 26)

Changing participation in communities of practices has been described by Rogoff (2003) and Lave & Wenger (1991) as central to the notion of children’s learning and development. Children belong to many communities, including the school and classroom. Participation in school and classroom activities facilitates children’s adoption of practices acceptable within those communities, and their sense of belonging to those communities. Interactions within the school community help children to learn about existing practices and to renegotiate these practices. In this study, we used informal interviews and photographs to engage children in discussions about their perceptions of life at school.
Children’s Experiences of Starting School

Children and Photographic Records

Photographs have been recognised as making a valuable contribution to research (Prosser & Schwartz, 1998). In one of the few studies of young children using photographs to record their impressions of school, photographs have been described as ‘giving pupils the chance to research into the “inner world” of school life without a lot of verbal argumentation’ (Schratz & Steiner-Löffler, 1998, p. 235). Schratz & Steiner-Löffler (1998) argue that experiences are constituted by multiple realities, and that taking photographs enables the focus to be directed to elements that would often remain in the background. Rearranging elements in this way can promote viewing from various perspectives, and highlight different views about experiences and practices in organisations such as schools. Schratz & Steiner-Löffler (1998) offer the following example:

For them [children taking photographs] the staff room is not, as it is for teachers, the only retreat to their professional community, but ‘this is the place where boring lessons come from’. (p. 246)

An important element of the study reported by Schratz & Steiner-Löffler (1998) was that children, not adults, took the photographs. The children involved were described as in the second form at a Viennese primary school. In their collaborations with younger children (aged under five years), Clark & Moss (2001) also used photographs, taken by children, to record and reflect upon the lived experiences of children in early childhood settings. Their ‘mosaic approach’ incorporates a range of participatory and reflexive approaches to engaging children and adults in interactions about life in early childhood settings. Photographs of what is important to children, and what older children think might be important for younger children, have been used to guide conversations about experiences and practices within a particular community.

Part of the strength of using photographs to record experiences is their openness to interpretation. The same feature is one of the limitations of relying on photographs only, as data. Photographs can contribute to making visible the invisible (Schratz & Walker, 1995) as they reflect a range of non-verbal elements in a particular context (Fasoli, 2003). However, they can also be manipulated and selective, just as much as other data, and on their own, tell an incomplete story. Fasoli (2003) cautions that a photograph ‘is not simply a copy of “reality” or an unproblematic representation ... photographs have to be seen as social constructions, that is, as artefacts of the contexts in which they were constructed’ (p. 36). Understanding the context in which the photograph was taken is an important part of understanding the photograph itself. Background information, such as who was involved in taking the photograph, when and with whom, and the conversations that occurred around the photograph taking, all contribute to this context. As well, the relationships between those involved in taking the photograph, the reason and purpose of the experience, and the explanation of why the photographs were taken provide information that assists in the interpretation of the photographic data (Fasoli, 2003).

The Project

The overarching aim of the Starting School Research Project is to enhance the transition to school experience for all concerned. In many instances, adults have had input into transition programs, and have developed approaches which reflect their experiences, expectations and perceptions. Many fewer programs have sought input from children. Our aims are to listen to children’s views and perspectives on starting school, to respect their experiences, and to seek ways to represent those which emphasise the children’s agendas. In a general sense, this information contributes to our understanding of the importance of transition and what matters to those experiencing the move to school. It provides us with valuable insights into the experiences and suggests ways in which transition programs can be improved. In a specific sense, it empowers individual children, within the context of their classroom and their school.

Method

Staff, parents and children from four schools were invited to participate in the project. Staff at these schools expressed interest in the project and, when consulted, families and children agreed to become involved. School 1 is a large, inner-city (Sydney) public school with a high level of cultural
and linguistic diversity. School 2 is also an inner-city public school in a relatively prosperous suburb of Adelaide (South Australia). School 3 is a Catholic school, located in a country city in mid-western New South Wales (NSW). It draws students from a wide range of cultural backgrounds. School 4 is a public school, located in a country town in north-western NSW. Students are drawn from the town as well as rural communities and some Indigenous communities.

While the implementation of the project varied in each context, the essence remained the same: seeking children’s input about what new Kindergarten [1] children need to know, or know about as they contemplate starting school. In all four sites, the primary means of recording children’s input were a digital camera, operated by the children, and audio tape. In some instances, video recording was also used. The study was conducted towards the end of the school year – in October and November – when children had been at school for almost a full school year.

Differences in the implementation of the project included the involvement of different researchers (for example, one site involved a classroom teacher with her own class, while in other sites at least one researcher conducted the project). For the initial implementation, one researcher guided the children in the operation of the digital camera, while the other videotaped the interaction. In addition, one of the children in the group held a small tape recorder to make sure the comments about the photograph, what it should encompass and why, were recorded. While this may seem an unnecessary level of technology, it indicates a commitment to accurately recording what mattered to children as well as to ascertaining a range of information about the context of the photograph being taken. Not all of the technology was used during subsequent implementations, where one researcher was involved. It is also worth noting that at times, the children seemed more expert in their acceptance and handling of the technology than the adults.

The methodology consisted of classroom discussion, taking photographs, comments about photographs, making classroom books and pre-school visits/orientation.

Classroom Discussion

In each case, a group of children was invited to discuss what was important as they started school. The initial questions were: What did you need to know about when you started school? and There are some children who are going to start school soon. What is important for them to know about this school?

In each school, discussions were held in the Kindergarten classrooms. After an initial whole-class discussion that introduced the project and the tasks involved, children had additional opportunities to discuss – with each other and with researchers – the project and what they wanted to do in the smaller photo-taking groups. In three schools, these initial discussions involved the researchers as well as classroom teachers. In the fourth school, where the project was undertaken by the classroom teacher, she led these discussions.

Initial discussions with children occurred before the photo-taking sessions – sometimes several days before, sometimes the day before, depending on the context. In each situation, children had a chance to think about the project, and to consider whether or not they wished to be involved. The initial discussions were recorded and children invited to recall their initial ideas and impressions as the project progressed.

Taking Photographs

After some class discussion, small groups of children (2-3 children) continued the conversation and were invited to walk around the school to take photographs of things that were important to them. A researcher (sometimes two) accompanied the children. In at least one case, a teachers’ aide also accompanied the group. Children were introduced to the digital camera, video camera and/or tape recorder. The role of the adults was to accompany the children, and to provide ‘technical’ support, if necessary. The children directed the photographs to be taken and provided the reasons for taking that particular photo. Because of the number of children (and parents) who agreed to be involved, and the memory capacity of the camera, children were encouraged to take only two photographs each. They had the opportunity to check and/or retake these until they were satisfied with the result. Children’s comments as they planned, took and reviewed photos were recorded. When the
photos were printed, the comments from children were also printed and reviewed by children in relation to the photos.

Group formation varied in each context. In some schools, friendship groups were used; in others teacher-identified groups were used. The ratio of adults to children varied from 1:3 (where the classroom teacher conducted the project) to 1:1 (where two researchers were accompanied by a teachers' aide). The differences reflect different contexts. For example, teachers in the school in which the teachers' aide was involved were both interested in the project and acutely aware of child protection issues.

The use of a digital camera was very important to the project. On one hand, using a high-quality camera indicated to children that we were genuinely interested in their perspectives and willing to utilise resources to encourage this. The message we wanted to convey was that we respected children's expertise and that we trusted them to use 'good' equipment. We did not want to use 'any old equipment because they were only children'. Secondly, the digital camera allowed instant review of the photographs taken. There were several 'accidental shots', where fingers obscured the photo, or the subject was not in the photo as intended. The digital camera allowed these to be deleted and new photographs taken.

In two schools, video footage was used to capture the experience of children taking photos. Analysis of this indicates that children took the task of taking photos very seriously and were concerned about the quality of the photos taken, as well as the content. For example, photos that were not focused, or that were not aligned as the taker had intended, were deleted.

Comments about Photographs

As noted above, there were several opportunities for children to discuss the photographs they wanted to take, those they actually took, and then to comment on the importance – or otherwise – of these. Children's comments were recorded during the initial discussion, during the photo-taking sessions and in any review of the photos. When children considered the photographs they had taken, their comments were also recalled so that these too could be reviewed. These comments formed the text that accompanied the photos on class books.

Making Classroom Books

The research team printed the photographs and collated the text from children. On return visits to the school, the children who took the photos checked the text. The review of text generally occurred as part of class discussions, and resulted in several changes to the text. The photos were also uploaded onto the class computer, for access by the children.

The photos and text were combined into a book. One copy was retained by the school and the other by the researchers. Where possible, the book was the subject of a further class discussion with a researcher.

Return visits were timed to fit into the schedule for each school. Typically, these were 1-2 weeks after the photo-taking session. In one school, there were several return visits and many opportunities for children to discuss both the photographs and the text they wished to include in the classroom books. In other schools there was one major return visit to discuss the book and then a follow-up with the delivery of the book itself.

Pre-school Visits/Orientation

Again, where possible, some of the children who had been involved in taking photos participated in a small group session with children who were about to start school. In one school, this involved visiting the local pre-school; in another it meant a small group interaction during an orientation visit.
Results

The tangible results of the project are four books, containing the photographs and the text from each of the project sites. They range in size from 36 pages (18 photos) to 70 pages (35 photos), depending on the number of children involved. Sometimes several children contributed to the text – for example, where two children took photos of the same thing, they may have selected the photo to be included and both contributed to the text. Other times, the small groups who toured the school to take photographs collaborated on the photos and text – for example, if one child took a photo of the toilets, the next child chose a different object to photograph. In most situations, there was a group discussion to negotiate the final photographs and text to be included in the class book.

Each of the books is specific to the school and community context in which it was constructed. For example, children from the Catholic school were keen to include a photograph of the church, as it is an important part of their school experience as well as their community life. Children at the school located in country NSW photographed the bus stop for the same reason: it is an important part of their school experience. The children have accessed these books often – just as they accessed the photos which had been uploaded onto classroom computers. The books have become important reading material in the classes, both for shared-book and individual experiences. As well, they have become resources that can be shared with parents and teachers as new groups of children start school.

There were other, less obvious results, including an increasing respect within the school communities, and among families, for children’s competence. In all cases, children were competent in the ways in which they accessed the available technology and in their ability to share matters of importance with others.

In many ways, the photographs and their captions speak for themselves. Nevertheless, there are some issues that can be drawn from consideration of the four sets of data. The photographs and the accompanying text have been analysed in terms of the categories previously established by the Starting School Research Project (Perry et al, 2000) and outlined in Table I.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>Ideas, facts or concepts that need to be known in order to start school, such as knowing numbers and letters, name and telephone number.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjustment</td>
<td>Issues of social adjustment to the school context, for example, knowing how to interact with a large group of children, or responding appropriately to the teacher.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skills</td>
<td>Discrete actions, such as tying shoelaces, holding pencils appropriately and toileting independently.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disposition</td>
<td>Attitudes to school, and feelings about school and learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rules</td>
<td>The expectations of behaviour and action that are expressed as rules.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>Physical attributes or characteristics as children start school, such as their age and general health.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family issues</td>
<td>Issues about family interactions with school, family life to support school, as well as changes to family life brought about by children starting school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational environment</td>
<td>Issues about what happens at school, and the nature of the school environment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table I. Response categories (Perry et al, 2000).

These categories were established in pilot studies undertaken by the project team, utilising the principles of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin 1990). The categories identified in the pilot studies were supported by confirmatory factor analysis (Meredith et al, 1999).

Table II indicates the categories covered by photographs and comments, as well as the frequency of these. In this analysis, we have chosen to focus on the combined message of the photos and text; that is, to not consider each as a separate entity. This is in keeping with the cautions reported earlier about using photographs in research, where multiple interpretations and responses are possible (Fasoli, 2003). We have chosen to accept the explanatory comments accompanying each photograph as an expression of the children’s perspectives, and to treat the combined photo and text as the unit of analysis.
Children’s Experiences of Starting School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Photo: children’s work on classroom door</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Comment: Kindy’s need to know where to go and how to make it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjustment</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Photo: Class teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Comment: Miss D and her bell are important because it means you have to be quiet and pack up and stuff.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skills</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disposition</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Photo: Playground equipment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Comment: The playground is important because that’s where you play and make friends.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rules</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>Photo: Out-of-bounds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Comment: Kinders need to know about out-of-bounds. You are not allowed to go there, so it is called out-of-bounds. You are not allowed to play with the big kids.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Photo: Sick bay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Comment: Kinders need to know about sick bay because you were hurt somewhere in your body, in case you have fallen on logs at school and if you get a headache, you might have hit your head.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family issues</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational environment</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Photo: Italian room</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Comment: The Italian room … on Thursdays we go to Italian. You learn Italian and to speak all of it. Sometimes there is dances and sometimes you play Italian games.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table II. Categories and frequencies of photographs and comments.

Discussion

These results represent the categories of things that mattered to children in their first year of school across the four sites. 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 the people, experiences and expectations around them.

The photographs and the accompanying text reflect the routines, practices, symbols and conventions of specific schools. While we can recognise common elements across contexts, each book reflects a particular way of being in a specific school context. The focus on what happens at school is to be expected if, as Wenger (1998) notes, ‘in an institutional context, it is difficult to act without justifying your actions in the discourse of the institution’ (p. 11).

The class books indicate that what matters varies in different contexts. Children in each school commented on some similar, as well as some different, aspects of school life. In a rural context, catching a bus was important, as was knowing where out-of-bounds started. In other schools, children indicated that specific parts of the school were important to know, such as the canteen, sick bay and office. While it is tempting to discuss the results in terms of similarities only, the differences indicate that contexts play a major role in determining children’s foci.

As in the study reported by Schratz & Steiner-Löffler (1998), the photos taken by children deal with a range of ‘taboo places’, such as the toilets, out-of-bounds areas, staff rooms and sick bays. These are often places with limited teacher supervision (often because children are not supposed to be there), and hence are attractive places to photograph: ‘besides, it might be exciting to test how the teacher will react’ (Schratz & Steiner-Löffler, 1998, p. 241), suggesting that there is a constant testing of boundaries as practices and expectations within a community of practice are negotiated and renegotiated.
As in previous reports from the Starting School Research Project (Dockett & Perry, 1999a, b; Perry, et al, 2000), the children in this project spoke often about the rules they needed to know in order to manage the school environment. They knew a great many rules and indicated that anyone starting school needed to become familiar with these. It is worth noting that only comments that were explicitly stated as rules are included in the ‘Rules’ category. Hence, comments such as Don’t run in the classroom and You’re not allowed in the staff room doors have been coded as rules. Other comments such as You have to read and You hang your bag on your hook have been coded as educational environment, rather than rules. This is a fine distinction and results in a conservative estimate of the rules emphasis.

While several children took photographs of and commented about their friends, this was not an overwhelming focus. This is in contrast to conversational data from these and other children, where friends were noted as a very important part of school life (Dockett & Perry, 1999a). There are several possible explanations for the lack of photographs of friends. Firstly, children were taking photos around the school in small groups, often having been allocated to these groups by their teachers, hence they may not have been with their friends. Secondly, while children and researchers generally were welcome to take photographs of any area of the school, several classroom photographs were taken when the class was not present. In some cases, this was to avoid including children for whom parental permission authorising involvement in the project had not been received, or children who indicated that they did not wish to be involved. Thirdly, in at least two of the schools, children demonstrated a fascination with being able to go out of the classroom. Researchers indicated some difficulty in getting children to go back to class, with a range of creative reasons being given by the children for retaking photos, or checking another area, just in case the new children needed to know about it. This fascination was evident in relation to ‘out-of-bounds’ areas, with researchers noting that they needed a great deal of creativity to avoid being in out-of-bounds areas themselves, and after the photographs had been taken, to encourage children to return to their classrooms.

Despite their fascination with outdoor areas, much of what the children felt was important to share with others about to start school related to the everyday functioning of the classroom. Where this related to the routines and functioning of the classroom, it has been coded as adjustment. Where it related to the educational nature of school, it has been coded as educational environment. As indicated in Table II, there was a considerable focus on what actually happens in the classroom, in an educational sense. Photographs and comments referred to displays of children’s work – so that other children will know how to make it, with the explanation that they (the new children) would be making one next year and they would probably want to know what they look like; photographs of the actual classroom – so that they will know where it is; the teacher’s chair – that’s where they sit down and listen to stories; features of the classroom, such as the computer, play area and merit charts; and activities that occur in classrooms – you go to Italian and you get to be classroom manager.

Other areas of particular interest for children were the school surroundings, playgrounds, toilet and bubbler [2] areas (Figure 1) and specific function areas such as the play equipment, library, canteen and sick bay (Figures 2 and 3). Many of the comments indicated that it was important to know where these areas were and what occurred in them. Several areas of the playground were delineated as ‘big kids’ areas, with attendant comments that if the little kids go out there, they are not allowed, they might get bullied, and when you are a big kid they will know where it is. On a more positive note, some children indicated that it was important to know where the big kids’ area was because our buddies are there. References to ‘big kids’, safety issues and playing outside were all coded as physical issues. In addition, this category included reference to the size of school and the buildings, and references to the number of people at school – in several senses children indicated that they experienced the school as ‘big’.
Children’s Experiences of Starting School

Figure 1. These are the bubblers. In case you need to go for a drink of water. You should not play with the water and waste it.

Figure 2. This is the library. You can borrow some books at the library and go to see what books you want to borrow but you can’t keep them. You have to take care of them and don’t rip them.

Figure 3. The big plant is important for Kindys in case they run into it and the tree seat – you could sit on it.

Toilets featured in photographs and comments from each school. Children’s use of toilets was coded under physical issues. Most children pointed out the different areas for girls and boys, and were keen to see the photographs taken in the ‘other’ toilets. Two books included photographs of the inside of toilet blocks (urinals and cubicles) as well as photos of the outside of the buildings and comments about the importance of using toilets appropriately. Bubblers too, were something that the current children thought the new children would need to know about.
Special areas of the school, such as the library and canteen were also highlighted, along with the things that occurred in each location. For example, it was important to know that you could borrow books from the library, but also important to know about the Magic Eye, *because the books go across it and it knows you have the book until you bring it back*. The canteen was a place to get lunch, but *only if your Mum gives you money*.

The sick bay was important for where it was located, but also for why and how you went there: *If you are hurt that’s where you have to go and You go to the teacher and then they take you. You go up to them and you tell them everything and you maybe take a friend with you up to the office. In case you might get lost and that.* Other features of school life that were important included the plants and grass – for both environmental reasons (Figure 3): *[the trees] help us breathe and make us feel as if we are alive and safety reasons: in case you run into it.*

As important as these individual comments are, they illustrate a broader importance that relates to the perceived competence of young children and their ability to know what is going on around them and to communicate this to others. In each instance, it was clear that these children knew a great deal about themselves and their school, had had a great many experiences and were more than capable of sharing these, especially when asked and when provided with the time, opportunity and purpose to consider and reflect upon these. They were demonstrating their membership of the community of practice that was their school. The purpose of sharing information with children who were soon to start school was important for the children involved: *they could understand and relate to this and were happy to share their perspectives as experienced schoolchildren*. Clearly, these children were comfortable with the sense that ‘people learn to belong in these communities by participating in their practices. More established members play a key role in helping newcomers to learn the practices that count in the community’ (Fasoli, 2003, p. 39).

One consequence of this project has been the opportunities provided for children and teachers to talk about issues that often have not been discussed before; issues such as: *why are there rules relating to specific areas of school? Who decides the rules? What happens if you don’t agree with the rules? have been open to question and discussion*. The use of photographs has contributed greatly to these discussions.

Fasoli (2003) describes photographs as ‘rich resources’ that ‘slow down activity and provide a static and visible “moment” available for repeated reflection and multiple readings’ (p. 43). This has been evident in the conversations with children – individually and in groups – as children decide on the text to accompany the photographs.

**Some Reflections on Methodology**

In some ways, the use of a digital camera can be seen as liberating, and in others as limiting.[3] The immediacy of the photograph and the ability to retake any photos that were deemed inappropriate needs to be contrasted with the potentially limiting use of the camera. *For example, it could be argued that the photographs taken by the children were the ‘most important that could be photographed’ rather than the ‘most important’ for children*. In one instance, this could seem to be the case, where children were asked to check any people appearing in photos. Where children and/or parents had not given consent to be involved in the project, and appeared in photos, those photos were deleted. One result is that relatively few of the photographs contain other people. In general, school staff did not place restrictions on the locations that could be visited by the children, or on what could be photographed. There was no sense that either the classroom teacher or the principal had to ‘approve’ any photograph or location.

The actual grouping of children raises some issues. For example, it is likely that children in friendship groups and children in teacher-selected groups were different in their interactions and approaches. It is also likely that children who participated in groups with a teachers’ aide may have responded differently to the task than those involved only with researchers. Each of these reflects differences in context and in expectation and experience. In other words, they reflect differences in the communities of practice.

The opportunity for children to review the photographs and text, and to make changes, has been an important element of the project. Reporting on one photo essay site in this project,
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Simpson (2003) noted that the chance for children to review the photographs and to reflect on the text that was initially constructed to go with the photos resulted in children wanting to change the text, usually to add more reference to rules. Simpson (2003) notes that ‘different children recalled different things about each photo and group discussion seemed to encourage students to generate shared meanings’ (p. 101). One example involves the photograph of an elevator in the school (Figure 4). The original rationale offered for taking this photo was: *This is the elevator. You can get downstairs in this when you press the button, but only teachers are allowed to use it.* During discussion, the children offered the following additional comments:

- People who keep falling over all the time and they can’t walk properly [can use it].
- Only the big people are allowed to use it.
- Big kids are allowed to use it.
- Especially for people with sore legs.
- People who can’t walk so well.

The final text to accompany the photograph was subject to considerable negotiation, with the result being: ‘*This is the elevator. You can get downstairs in this when you press the button, but only teachers, people who don’t walk so well, or people who can’t walk, are allowed to use it*’ (Simpson, 2003, p. 105).

![Figure 4. This is the elevator.](image)

**Conclusion**

The children who participated in this project demonstrated their competence in many ways: technological competence as they managed the equipment with relative ease; social and interpersonal competence as they negotiated what photographs to take and the text to accompany these; and competence within the community of practice that existed within their school context. The children very quickly learned how to use the digital camera, and became adept at offering advice to each other, as well as praise when others *took a really good one!* They engaged in discussions – both when the researchers were present and at other times – about the photographs and they had a very clear understanding of what was expected in their school, and in their classroom. The purpose of the project was clear to them and it seemed to make sense that they would share their expertise about school with children who were soon to start school.

The visual images themselves provided a powerful overview of what these children regarded as important to share with children about to start school. Sontag (1979) regards photographs as a means of capturing a particular world-view – not just an image in space, but also the relationships between the photographer and the photographed. In other words, she regards photographs as conveying emotion and relationships. In this sense, photographs are more than a record of what is seen: they ‘are not adjuncts to print, but carry heavy cultural traffic on their own account’ (Walker, 1993, p. 91). In the context of the project reported here, photographs have been used to connect the physical context of the school with the conventions, expectations and rules of school. They, and the accompanying text, provide a window onto a particular community of practice.
The photographs taken by the children reflect an awareness of the school context that is different from that of adults. A tour of the school by a principal or teacher would probably not encompass some of the areas and explanations offered by the children. For example, it is unlikely that such a tour would include the elevator, garbage bins, trees, and sick bays that featured in children’s photographs. Using approaches to research that value children’s participation means that some of the directions of the research are unknown at the outset. Trusting children is imperative for such an approach to be effective.

Clark & Moss (2001) highlight the value and importance of children’s participation in research. They also identify some challenges in listening to what children have to say. It is often difficult for adults to see situations and contexts from the perspectives of children. However, the very task of involving children in research implies that something positive for the children must come from that participation. Clark & Moss (2001, p. 57) ask, ‘How can we use the insights gained from children’s perspectives? Can these be used to benefit the children?’ Listening to what children have to say can complicate pedagogy as different views and perspectives need to be considered (Gallas, 1995). At the same time, it can add richness to interactions and to curriculum, where children and adults are respected as important participants.

However, as Clark & Moss (2001) note, there are also some pitfalls of listening. They ask, ‘Do we respect young children’s privacy?’ as we devise and use creative ways to consult children. We are reminded that listening is not a right and that children may wish to remain silent, or choose not to participate in such consultation. This cannot be taken to mean that they are not capable or competent. Clark & Moss (2001) also suggest that ‘there is the risk that listening to children about their lives becomes part of the regulatory agenda, used to control children’ (p. 61) or there is ‘more regulatory control of those with responsibility for children’ (p. 62). The more positive alternative is that greater awareness of children’s perspectives could result in greater support for these to become priorities, in this case in schools and classrooms.

The Starting School Research Project is committed to listening to the voices of children, and actually hearing what they say, as we seek to develop effective transition-to-school programs. We are interested in what matters to children, in their perspectives and in ways we can enhance school experiences by responding to children’s concerns, issues and delights. In pursuing this agenda, we need to remember that children do not exist in isolation. They are part of a range of contexts, and are influenced by and influence the social and physical aspects of those contexts. Children exist within a web of meaningful social relationships; what is important to them and what they know derives largely from the interactions within these relationships. In creating opportunities for children to be active participants in the Starting School Research Project we are committed to listening to children’s voices, learning about what matters for them and making changes that reflect and respond to their concerns and understandings.

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Notes

[1] In NSW, Kindergarten is the first year of formal school. Children can enter school in NSW at the beginning of the school year (February), provided they turn five by 31 July that same year. Children must start school by age six. The first year of formal school is referred to as Reception in South Australia. There are several intakes of new children across the Reception year, with children starting
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school close to their fifth birthday. In this article, Kindergarten is used as a generic term for the first year of school.

[2] Bubblers are known in other parts of the world as water fountains.

[3] We thank an anonymous reviewer for highlighting this perspective.

References


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