STARTING SCHOOL— a Singapore story told by children

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This paper offers the perspective of a group of Primary One children in Singapore on their transition from preschool to formal schooling. It examines their impressions of school expectations, adjustments in daily routine, and the best and worst aspects of school. Data obtained from a structured interview indicates that children regard school as a positive experience. Almost all had made new friends and enjoyed the larger school building and facilities. They held a very serious view of schooling, where learning held centre-stage and play took a back seat. They registered a positive view of themselves as learners. Many were concerned about school rules. Whereas the majority did not indicate anxieties about school, some expressed worries that pertained mostly to being reprimanded by teachers, the principal, and vice-principal. Implications for best practices in school transition are discussed.

Starting school is a major milestone for children. The transition from preschool to formal schooling involves not only surface shifts in daily routines but also deep emotional adjustments by both children and their parents. Schools have tended to neglect the ‘emotional side of transition’ (Dockett & Perry, 2003, p. 8). For many parents, entrusting the education of their children to unfamiliar adults is a significant step. Similarly, stepping into a strange, new environment can be overwhelming for young children. Children typically experience preschool as a cozy and caring setting with a high teacher–student ratio; however, at school they must share the teacher with a larger group of children, and adjust to larger buildings, a community of larger and older children, and a more regimented routine (Briggs & Potter, 1995). Hence it is important for educators to be proactive by giving due recognition to children’s views and feelings about this major transition. Primary One transition constitutes a ‘critical period’ (Entwisle & Alexander, 1989, p. 351) for children’s academic and social development, as their ability to meet the challenges at this early stage has serious and long-lasting effects on academic success. In effective transition, therefore, there is a need to determine the factors that matter to children as they begin school and negotiate the pathways of fitting in.

Much of the literature in school readiness has focused on the perspectives of teachers and parents (Harradine & Clifford, 1996; Knudsen-Lindauer & Harris, 1989; Lewit & Barker, 1995; Reaney, West & Denton, 2002). There have been relatively few attempts to investigate transition experiences from the perspective of children. In recent years, however, researchers in Europe, Australia (Clyde, 2001; Dockett & Perry, 1999; Einarsdóttir, 2003; Perry, Dockett & Howard, 2000; Potter & Briggs, 2003), and Asia (Clarke & Sharpe, 2003; Sharpe, 2002) have begun to give children a voice in their early school transition experience.

In the research studies that attended to children’s views about school, it was found that children as young as age five were able to provide cogent and comprehensible accounts of how they felt about school and specifically what they appreciated or did not appreciate about their initial entry into school. There was great clarity in their perception of the distinctions between kindergarten/child care and school. Regardless of where the studies were undertaken, the majority of the children in Primary One or first grade reported being happy in school. Most were concerned about various routes to survival, such as finding their way in the large school buildings and grounds, knowing the school rules, making friends, and pleasing teachers and parents.

There are some interesting comparisons between the school entry experiences of children schooled in Singapore and their counterparts in Europe and Australia. For children in Singapore, making new friends constitutes an important aspect of starting school, as it helps them to settle happily into the
Primary One classroom (Clarke & Sharpe, 2003; Sharpe, 2002). Similarly, for children starting school in Australia and Europe, having friends was cited as a feature that made for a positive school experience (Dockett & Perry, 1999; Potter & Briggs, 2003; Pramling & Williams-Granfeld, 1993). On the negative aspects of starting school, the Primary One children in Singapore were concerned that ‘some teachers are fierce/scold us/shout’ (Clarke & Sharpe, 2003, p. 21). Some felt unhappy and angry on account of harsh treatment by teachers; for example, being spoken to loudly and angrily, and being reprimanded when books were forgotten or when homework was not done (Sharpe, 2002). The concern about unpleasant encounters with teachers was echoed by some children in Australia who noted that one negative aspect of school was having teachers who yelled or screamed at children (Potter & Briggs, 2003).

The children in the school transition studies reviewed also reported a clear dichotomy between work and play in primary school (Clarke & Sharpe, 2003; Corsaro & Molinari, 2000; Eide & Winger, 1994; Einarsdottir, 2003; Sharpe, 2002). For example, Italian first grade children saw primary school as more work-focused than play-focused (Corsaro & Molinari, 2000). Primary One children in Singapore seemed to share the same perception. As one of the Primary One Singaporean children put it, ‘You could play more in K2, now we do work’ (Clarke & Sharpe, 2003, p. 21). Perhaps what set the Singaporean children apart from their counterparts in other countries was their highly school- and work-centred view of life, although they also enjoyed school (Sharpe, 2002). When asked about life outside of school, the young children in the Sharpe (2002) study mostly reported watching television, with the remainder of the time taken up by tuition. The Singaporean children’s serious view of school was reflected in their limited range of social experiences, concern with tests and examinations, and the need to please parents by earning high grades (Sharpe, 2002).

Children starting school in Europe and Australia appeared to be preoccupied with school rules (Corsaro & Molinari, 2000; Dockett & Perry, 1999; Eide & Winger, 1994; Einarsdottir, 2003; Perry et al., 2000). Australian children in the Starting School project, for example, were of the view that knowing and obeying the rules helped them to fit in, function well within the school, and keep out of trouble (Perry et al., 2000). Expressing the same sentiment, one preschool child in Iceland stated that, in school, children also ‘learn to behave well, and many rules and customs’ (Einarsdottir, 2003, p. 43). In the Singapore research studies on initial school entry there was no explicit mention of school rules as an issue of concern for the children starting school.

Research into the school transition process from the perspective of young children is still relatively sparse. Why is it important to listen to the voice of young children in the school transition process? First, there are indications that children enter Primary One with internalised stereotypical ideas about school based on information from older siblings, peers, parents, other adults and the media, and these expectations can be positive or negative (Clarke & Sharpe, 2003; Renwick, 1984). Unmet or negative expectations can create unnecessary anxiety for children. For example, in a Danish study (Broström, 2002), preschool children expected to encounter an authoritarian culture marked by a scolding teacher who commands children to sit still and be quiet. In other studies conducted in Singapore (Clarke & Sharpe, 2003), Italy (Corsaro & Molinari, 2000), and Sweden (Pramling & Williams-Granfeld, 1993), children seemed to think of school as a relatively joyless place where serious learning takes place and there is little or no play. It is not surprising, therefore, that some children start school feeling insecure and nervous.

Second, children are experts on their own lives, with unique stories to tell (Clark & Moss, 2001). No-one can claim to have a more valid account of how school appears to children than the children themselves. Even if the children’s concerns may seem trivial to some adults, they are nonetheless valid perceptions and ought to be treated with respect and taken seriously.

As the interview process in this study involves peer interviewing, some review of the research literature in this area is warranted. To the best of our knowledge, there are presently no research studies involving children as interviewers in the data-gathering process. In an insightful article describing children’s relational rationality when being interviewed by adult researchers, Aronsson and Hundeide (2002) indicated that young children tended to see the adult experimenter as an important other, whom one should try to please, and thus they may provide bizarre or novel responses. In a much earlier study by Aronsson (1978), bilingual children of Finnish origin offered different responses to the question ‘What is your best language?’, based on whether their interviewer was a native Swedish- or Finnish-speaking person. Children tended to align their responses with the adult interviewer’s language rather than to answer
questions honestly. In light of children’s inclination to respond in terms of their sociability, perhaps being interviewed by older peers rather than by adults would promote greater honesty. In addition, children from the same school are well placed to function as interviewers for young children because they share the same school culture. The schoolmates would be able to communicate in a mutually-understood language. The value of using peers as tutors has already been recognised, particularly in the area of reading (Beasley, 1997; Topping & Ehly, 1998). It is considered that using peers as interviewers could be equally beneficial.

This paper reports a pilot study that examines the factors contributing to effective transition from preschool to primary school in Singapore. To ease the transition of children into Primary One, the target primary school where this study was conducted organised an orientation program for the children and their parents, and also implemented a buddy support system for the Primary One children. The orientation took place in November, six weeks before the children were to start school. Parents attended a briefing where they were given information about the school rules and regulations, a broad outline of the curriculum and examination system, and the school programs. The children met their Primary One teachers, who talked about the school, the rules and routines, the need to wear the correct school uniform and have the required books, and what would happen at recess time and on the first day of school. The children drew a picture and wrote their names; children in some classes had stories read to them. The children also had a chance to visit their classrooms and tour the school. In the first week of school, each child was paired with a Primary Five buddy who would be his or her chaperone during recess time. The children were paired by home language as far as possible so that translation from English to home language could be provided when required.

The purpose of the present study is to listen to the voice of a large group of Primary One children as they make the initial entry into formal schooling. The study in Singapore seeks to examine the following questions: (a) How do Primary One children perceive school compared to preschool? (b) What are the best or worst things about school? (c) How do the Primary One children cope with the demands of the transition to Primary One? It is hoped that the insight we gained into their perspective of the transition experience would inform decision-making and planning by teachers and parents to help children settle happily into Primary One and to cope with the demands of school.

**Background**

Singapore is a small island state in South-East Asia where education is highly valued by its multi-racial populace. The highly competitive education system based on meritocracy rewards industry and achievement. Over the years since Singapore gained independence in 1965, the country’s education system has evolved from an initial concern with economic survival and nation-building to a very rigorous system committed to nurturing talent and, of late, encouraging a spirit of enterprise and innovation. In such a system, academic qualifications are highly valued, and the typical school-going child in Singapore is tested regularly with examinations at least twice a year from the age of seven when he or she starts school.

Preschool education in Singapore, established since the 1960s, ranges from full- and half-day childcare centres to two- to four-hour kindergarten programs for children aged two to six. Although preschool education is not mandatory, the majority of children below the age of seven attend some kind of preschool facility. For Singapore children, the first year of formal schooling is known as ‘Primary One’ and begins in the January of the year they turn seven.

Primary education has been made mandatory in Singapore only since January 2003. At the primary level, pupils complete six years of schooling: a four-year foundation stage from Primary One to Four, and a two-year orientation stage from Primary Five to Six. To maximise their potential, pupils are streamed according to their learning ability at the end of Primary Four. At the end of Primary Six, pupils sit for the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE), which assesses their ability for placement in a secondary school course that suits their learning pace and aptitude. Primary school children in Singapore attend school for five-and-a-half hours every day, either in the morning or afternoon session. The morning session begins at 7:30am and ends at 1pm; the afternoon session begins at 1pm and ends at 6:30pm.

**Method**

**Sample**

The sample consisted of 340 Primary One children (mean age of six years, eight months) who had just started school. In the first week of school each Primary One child had a Primary Five buddy (mean age of 10
years, eight months) who acted as his or her chaperone during recess time. Five months into Primary One, the children were each interviewed by their Primary Five buddies, who had previously been trained by the vice-principal and their class teachers. (The interview was originally scheduled to be conducted 10 weeks after school started, but was delayed as schools were closed because of the outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome.) All 340 Primary Five pupils received training as interviewers for this study. During the training, each of the Primary Five pupils was given a copy of the questionnaire to look at while the vice-principal briefed them on how to ask the questions and to record verbatim what their Primary One buddy said. They were instructed to use English but to translate into the buddy’s home language if needed. They were also instructed to ask the question again in the case of non-responses. The actual interviewing, which took place the next day in the school hall, lasted one-and-a-quarter hours. The vice-principal and the Primary One and Primary Five teachers were present throughout to assist and answer any queries.

The questionnaire used in the structured interview consisted of 48 short, open-ended questions. The questions focused on the children’s family demographics, preschool experience, prior visits to school, the first day of school, likes and dislikes about preschool and Primary One, daily routines in Primary One, leisure activities, and support outside school for schoolwork.

**Data analysis**

The responses to the open-ended questions were categorised by the two researchers individually and any disagreements were discussed until both agreed on the classification. The responses were then organised under main categories reflecting themes and issues raised by the children. Each category was further subdivided and typical comments were noted. For example, under question 11, ‘What do you like best about school?’, the children’s responses were categorised under learning/studying (e.g. ‘study, can learn more things’), friends (e.g. ‘many friends to play with’), teachers (e.g. ‘teachers are very nice’), buildings/facilities (e.g. ‘school is big and got many classrooms’), recess time (e.g. ‘can play and canteen’s got many things to eat’).

**Results**

Children were asked 48 short, open-ended questions but some did not respond to every question asked. The following provides examples of the children’s responses to key questions. The percentages cited are based on the total number of children who responded to the questions cited rather than on the total sample. Almost all the children reported having attended preschool, with 91 per cent (285 out of 314) saying that they liked their childcare centre or kindergarten. The reasons most frequently cited for liking preschool were play (60 out of 276, 22%) and friends (49 out of 276, 18%). Of the small number (29) who reported not liking preschool, four mentioned fierce teachers who ‘always scold’ and another four mentioned being bored. Sixty-five per cent (220) said they liked school better than preschool; 31 per cent (104) preferred preschool to school; four per cent (14) were unsure of their preference.

The Primary One children had clear views about how school was different from preschool in terms of the physical surroundings, adjustments in daily routine, and the new demands of school. Twenty-six per cent of the children (87 out of 331) were unsure of the difference between school and preschool, and four per cent (12 out of 331) said there was no difference. Of the 70 per cent (232) who reported differences between school and preschool, nearly half (110, 47%) mentioned the school building, facilities and people, and how much bigger they all seemed compared to preschool. One child noted that ‘school is a building, but kindergarten is below a flat’, a reference made to community kindergartens located at the void deck areas of public housing flats. Other responses included: ‘School is bigger than kindergarten and school has a basketball court’; ‘School has a big hall’; ‘School has big field’; ‘School has lots of pupils’; ‘People are bigger than childcare pupils’.

Mention was made of adjustments to school life. The children reported longer hours in school, e.g. ‘School ends at 5pm but kindergarten at 12pm’ (In actual fact, for children who attend school in the afternoon session, school ends at 6:30pm). They also reported having to forgo their nap time, e.g. ‘Now cannot sleep in the afternoon’, as childcare centres build regular nap times into the school day. Sixty per cent (209 out of 346) of the children said they pack their own school bags, reporting that their school bags were very heavy. They mentioned having to buy their own food at recess as compared to preschool where food was provided; e.g. ‘Kindergarten don’t need to buy food, but school need.’ Four per cent (14 children) noted that school is not a place for play, e.g. ‘Primary school cannot play toys but kindergarten can play toys.’
Another difference between school and preschool that made an impression on the children was the demands posed by school. Forty-seven per cent (142 out of 302) said teachers gave homework three times a week, whereas 32 per cent (98 out of 302) said they had homework everyday. The children noted an increase in the amount of work they were required to do, adding that the work was more difficult than in kindergarten. One child said, 'They gave us one page of alphabet (writing) in kindergarten, but in school they gave us three pages!' They noted that life in kindergarten was, by comparison, more relaxing; e.g. 'Kindergarten can watch TV, school cannot.'

When asked what they liked best about school, 40 per cent (118 out of 292) made reference to learning and specific subjects in the curriculum. Why was learning the best thing about school for some of the children? The typical responses were 'School can make me clever' and 'I like to study. [I] can become clever.' This suggested that the children at this very young age saw the value of becoming smart as an important outcome of school. Physical Exercise (PE) was most frequently mentioned as the favourite subject, e.g. 'PE is fun', 'PE has games', probably because it contained elements of play. The second aspect they liked best about school was the building and facilities, with 23 per cent of the children (68 out of 292) alluding to the beautiful school garden, computers in the lab, the air-conditioned library, a large field for play, and a canteen that offers a wide selection of food. Thirty per cent (38 out of 292) attributed the best of school to making new friends; another five per cent (15 out of 292) to teachers who were 'very friendly' or 'kind and polite.'

When asked about the worst thing about school, 50 per cent of the children who responded (154 out of 310) said they liked school and there was nothing they did not like. For the other half of the students, the modal category (38 out of 310, 12%) said the worst thing about school was certain subjects (e.g. English, Chinese, art and craft, music) and the main reason offered was not knowing how to do work related to the subject mentioned, e.g. 'I don't know how to read English.' Ten per cent (32 out of 310) mentioned getting scolded by fierce teachers. Another 10 per cent (32 out of 310) referred to the demands of school, which included homework, reading, writing, copying, and speaking up in class. Eleven per cent (35 out of 310) disliked certain places in school, such as smelly or dirty toilets, sitting in the hall or under the hot sun in the basketball court. Seven per cent (21 out of 310) mentioned being bullied by peers or friends who 'disturbed' them.

The majority of the pupils seemed to have settled quite happily into school. A vast majority (319 out of 336, 95%) had made at least one special friend in school in the short time of settling into Primary One. Ninety-two per cent of the children who responded (202 out of 328) indicated they were not scared of anything at school. For children who expressed some anxiety, the greatest worry (70 out of 101, 69%) was being scolded by teachers, the principal or the vice-principal. Other worries related to bullies (6 out of 101, 6%), insects (7 out of 101, 7%), ghosts (5 out of 101, 5%), and certain places in school (6 out of 101, 6%), such as the pond, toilets, the mango tree, and the yellow door.

Within the first few months in school, the Primary One children had developed an understanding of expectations for behaviour in the classroom and in school. They were able to articulate what they thought made their teachers angry. Inattentiveness (102 out of 341, 30%), misbehaving (60 out of 341, 18%), not completing homework (50 out of 341, 15%), and not bringing or forgetting to bring books to school (50 out of 341, 15%) were cited as behaviours that made teachers angry. The children's perspectives suggested that teachers were not very tolerant of behaviours that interfered with learning. Like their counterparts in Australia (Dockett & Perry, 1999; Perry et al., 2000), children in Singapore seemed concerned about rules. Ninety-seven per cent (140 out of 208) expressed their knowledge of school rules in terms of what they cannot do. The 'cannot do' list included: cannot litter, cannot run along the corridor, cannot talk loudly, cannot eat in class, cannot wear colourful shoes or socks (Singapore school children are expected to wear the standard school uniform). The 'to do' list expressed by 33 per cent of the children (68 out of 208) included: be neat and tidy at all times, keep quiet when teacher is talking, pack school bag every day, hand in homework on time, keep the school clean, take the pledge, and sing the national anthem.

It is heartening to note that the Primary One children appeared to have a positive sense of themselves as learners. Eighty-six per cent (289 out of 331) said they could read; 97 per cent (328 out of 338) said they could write; 60 per cent (200 out of 332) said they were good at maths; 72 per cent (243 out of 338) said they were good at drawing. This is despite their views that schoolwork in Primary One is much harder than in
preschool. When asked what they liked to do best when not in school, the main responses were: engaging in play (128 out of 348 children, 37%), which included indoor games, outdoor activities (e.g. cycling), and computer games; reading (68 out of 348 children, 20%); drawing (38 out of 348 children, 11%); and watching TV (35 out of 348 children, 10%). Ten per cent (35 out of 348 children) said they study (i.e. do homework, practice writing) when they were not in school.

Discussion

Overall, the Singaporean school children in this pilot study told a positive, albeit serious, story about their transition into the first year of school life. They had successfully made new friends and they felt competent about their academic ability. Though they seemed a little awed by the large school building and greater number of pupils than in preschool, they expressed delight in the beautiful school grounds and variety of facilities available to them.

The most salient finding is the Primary One children’s perception of school as a very serious place of learning, where learning held centre-stage and play took a back seat. This perspective of school echoed that in another study by Sharpe (2002), where the young children in Singapore shared a highly school- and work-centred view of life. It was significant that children in this transition study equated both the best and worst aspects of school with schoolwork. The best part of school was to learn and to do well in certain subjects: the worst part was not being able to do the work expected in specific subjects. Interestingly, according to the pupils’ observations, teachers too held a very serious view of school. By the children’s reports, their teachers seemed to get upset and scold the children when they failed to display behaviours that were expected to support learning, i.e. attention, promptness in completing homework, and bringing books to school. It appeared that children starting school in Singapore carry with them the weight not just of their school bags but also of the need to perform academically.

Although the majority did not express a fear of school, about 38 per cent (126 out of 328 children) reported various degrees of worry, the greatest being scolded by teachers, the principal, and the vice-principal. However, despite these sobering perspectives, the children reported a positive academic self-concept and felt they were competent in reading, writing and arithmetic. Unlike the Sharpe (2002) study where children were reticent about out-of-school activities, this group of Primary One children spoke of activities they enjoyed outside of school, which included playing a variety of indoor and outdoor games, reading, and watching television.

For preschool children in Australia and Europe, starting school involved getting to know the rules of the school and the classroom (Dockett & Perry, 1999; Eide & Winger, 1994; Einarsdottir, 2003; Perry et al., 2000). The same is true of the Singaporean children in this study. Sharing the experience of children in the Australian, Norwegian and Icelandic preschool systems, the children in Singapore mentioned the specific rules they had to observe as part and parcel of settling into school. The common rules that applied to children in Australia, Europe and Singapore included observing the routines, following the teacher’s directions, being good/not being naughty, and doing homework. School rules were taken for granted and children did not question them.

What are the implications for school practices? First, all schools in Singapore may wish to consider implementing a buddy support system for Primary One children. One of the proactive steps the primary school in this transition project had taken to help children settle quickly into Primary One was to introduce such a system. During the first week in school, the Primary Five buddies made sure that the Primary One pupils could find their way to the toilets and to the recess area. They showed their Primary One buddies how to queue, select and purchase food and drink, carry it to the table, eat, and return the dirty dishes to the collection area, and then where to line up to return to classes. The Primary Five buddies befriended the Primary One children and guided them, but refrained from doing things for them. The buddy support system successfully helped to cushion the children’s entry into Primary One, as none of the children reported significant difficulties in finding their bearings in school or managing recess time. Although the children were not asked a specific question about the buddy system, several of the children spoke positively about their buddies helping them during recess time. In response to Question 15 about the first day in school, example responses were ‘my buddy helped me to buy food’, ‘the buddy took us on a look around school during recess’, ‘the buddy took me to the canteen to buy food’.

Second, it would be important for schools in Singapore as well as in other countries to pay attention to the ‘emotional side of transition’ as noted in the Australian study by Dockett and Perry (2003). This would include ensuring that the children’s first encounter with teachers
in school is kind and supportive. Children should be spared the constant worry of being scolded in school. The quality of the relationship between children and teacher is crucial for the children’s wellbeing and school success (Pianta, 1999). Children respond more positively to the warm and caring personality of experienced teachers (Renwick, 1984). A caring teacher is cognizant of the anxiety experienced by children starting school. A kind word or a smile from a teacher would go a long way. There is a place for discipline in a Primary One classroom; however, teachers who scold contribute to a punitive environment that adds undue stress to an already stressful transition for many preschool children. When there is a need to address misbehaviour, an inductive approach to discipline would be more helpful for shaping behaviour. Induction is a rational form of discipline (Hoffman, 1988) that points out the effects of the child’s behaviour on others, either directly or indirectly by using statements such as ‘if you keep talking loudly while the teacher is teaching, the other children cannot pay attention to the lesson’. That way, children can better understand why certain behaviours are not appropriate in school. Induction, which includes suggestions for making amends, such as apologies or ways of compensating for the wrongs done to others, also helps in conscience formation (Hoffman, 1988). Children would feel more secure and learn more effectively when adults help them understand why certain behaviours are important in a social context.

Third, Singapore schools and society generally are accustomed to orderliness as a way of life, and this is partly made possible by making and keeping rules. Children in this transition study were concerned about obeying the school and classroom rules, and tended to speak of the rules in terms of what they were not permitted to do. The children’s focus on the negative phrasing of rules provided some clues as to how school and the classroom look to them. This is hardly surprising, since obeying rules and procedures was emphasised on Orientation Day. Although it is uncommon in primary (or elementary) schools in Singapore for students to participate in creating rules, teachers could encourage discussion of rules (Santrock, 2004). Emphasis should also be placed on stating rules positively, e.g. ‘walk in school’ rather than ‘don’t run’. The learning environment would be more pleasant if children understood why rules were important. Effective classroom teachers clearly present their rules to students and give explanations and examples of them. Teachers who set reasonable rules, provide understandable rationales for them, and

enforce them consistently usually find that the majority of the class will abide by them (Santrock, 2004).

Finally, schools in Singapore would need to emphasise the process and not just the products of learning. The children were clearly anxious about not being able to do the schoolwork. The huge burden of having to perform well academically would be greatly lessened if children were given room to make mistakes and to understand that learning from mistakes is part of the learning process. It would be crucial for teachers to let children know that it is all right not to know how to do certain things in school, it is all right not to get good grades all the time, and it is all right to ask questions when in doubt. Children should be assured that they could get help with tasks that seemed too hard for them to accomplish on their own. That way, they could entertain a new perspective of school as a place where serious learning takes place in a safe and supportive environment.

Some of the limitations of the study and suggestions for future research warrant comment. The questionnaire was long, making the task for the interviewers rather difficult. Although training was provided for the entire Primary Five cohort, the task of interviewing the Primary One children was a new experience for them. Even though they knew their buddies quite well, many reported that they found it difficult to maintain their buddies’ full cooperation. Informal feedback from some of the Primary Five interviewers indicated that they had resorted to offering candy as an incentive to encourage their buddies to continue responding. It was, therefore, unclear how these attempts to elicit cooperation had influenced the interview outcomes. Supporting the interview process of 340 pairs of children simultaneously was challenging for their teachers and it was difficult for them to ensure that all the interviewers were asking the questions or prompting for responses appropriately. These constraints limit the validity and reliability of the data.

In future research involving young students as interviewers, the questionnaire should be kept relatively short without compromising the quality of the data. There should be opportunities for the Primary Five buddies to practice interviewing their peers and to receive feedback from their teachers. In the second phase of this school transition project, focused group discussions and sampling of individual interviews were introduced in order to enhance the reliability and validity of the interview data.

Despite the limitations of the study, this paper extends previous research and contributes to the existing
literature on starting school and the transition process. To date, much of the research in this field has been written from the perspectives of teachers and parents, and very few studies have reflected an Asian perspective. The present study allows us to see what school actually looks like from the perspective of young children starting school in Singapore. To summarise, the Primary One children in this study generally settled well into school despite pressures of the academically-oriented education system. Starting school for Singaporean children involved knowing the rules and keeping up with schoolwork/homework. Recommendations were made for all schools in Singapore to implement a buddy support system for Primary One children, particularly during the first few weeks of school. Other recommendations include adopting a more inductive approach to discipline, stating rules positively, and creating a safe environment for learning.

Educators need to be sensitive to the physical, mental, and emotional adjustments preschool children have to make as they stand on the threshold of a new school experience. It may be that this serious story told by Primary One children in Singapore is not unique to countries in Asia alone. Regardless of which parts of the world they live in, children have the right to start school confident that they can learn and to do so joyfully.

References


