Happiness is.......?
Children’s Social and Emotional Adjustment to Primary One in Singapore

Review by Linda Gan

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades numerous studies have enhanced our understanding of the academic, social and emotional adjustments children have to make during the critical period of transition from pre- to primary school. It is acknowledged by all involved that this transition has the potential to be traumatic and troubled or effective and enjoyable, depending on how well children adapt to their new learning environment and cope with the demands and expectations of their teachers and parents. Cross-cultural studies have further enlightened us on the different priorities given to academic and socio-emotional development at preschool to help young children cope with the more formal settings encountered at primary school. In evaluating preschool programmes in the United States and China, Zhang & Siegel (1994) for example found that social maturity was emphasized in the States, while the Chinese gave greater priority to academic adjustment. Likewise, in the highly competitive education system in Singapore, an increasing number of preschool centres are consciously shifting their focus to preparing children for the academic demands of primary school.

In the wake of such research a three year study investigating how preschool children cope with the academic, social and emotional demands of transition from kindergarten to the formal and competitive learning environment of primary one was initiated at the National Institute of Education in Singapore in 1997. This paper reports on the findings related to young
children's social and emotional adjustment to primary school, and considers the implications for teachers and schools in general.

REVIEW OF RESEARCH

During the past thirty years research has confirmed the crucial importance of enhancing children's social and emotional development. Hartup (1992) maintains that if children do not achieve minimal social competence around the time they start formal schooling at six they are at risk throughout life. Such social competence includes such characteristics as self-confidence, curiosity, humour, warmth, spontaneity, reliability, sense of right and wrong, morally responsible behaviour, self-discipline, friendliness, cooperation, problem-solving ability, adaptability and helpfulness (Black & Puckett 1996). Theorists are still divided on a concrete definition of social competence, particularly in terms of measuring it (Raver and Zigler, 1991). Guralnick (p. 4, 1990) proposes that social competence be considered as “the ability of young children to successfully and appropriately select and carry out their interpersonal goals” and suggests that social competence be framed within social tasks and situations (like making friends, and more specifically gaining access to a peer group) in order for researchers to systematically study how appropriately and effectively children resolve social interaction problems and achieve their goals.

The ability to empathise and take on the perspective of others is seen as an important prerequisite to building effective social relationships with others. Research in the past twenty years indicates that young children's role-taking abilities are considerably more sophisticated than was previously thought (Guralnick and Paul-Brown; 1984, Denham 1986) and that role-taking ability follows a true developmental sequence (Selman 1981). Selman's stages provide useful indicators regarding the characteristics of young children's developing friendships. He suggests that children:

- from 4-6 years old are at the egocentric or zero stage of role-taking. They are unable to distinguish their perspectives from those of others. They regard their friends simply as those who live nearby or who are playmates;

- between the ages of 6-8 are at the socio-informational stage one of role-taking. They come to realise that others will hold different perspectives but are still unable to reflect on theirs' and others' perspectives simultaneously. They recognise that their playmates will have different emotions and intentions, and friendship means 'doing nice things for each other';

adult adaptation. Children who are unpopular with their peers, and who are socially handicapped in forming close relationships with other children run the risk of suffering from poor mental health, as well as being impeded in their learning at school and later in their adult working lives. For this reason Katz and McClellan (1991) maintain that relationships should be included alongside the other "3 R's" of education in every child's life!

The ability to empathise and take on the perspective of others is seen as an important prerequisite to building effective social relationships with others. Research in the past twenty years indicates that young children's role-taking abilities are considerably more sophisticated than was previously thought (Guralnick and Paul-Brown; 1984, Denham 1986) and that role-taking ability follows a true developmental sequence (Selman 1981). Selman's stages provide useful indicators regarding the characteristics of young children's developing friendships. He suggests that children:

- from 4-6 years old are at the egocentric or zero stage of role-taking. They are unable to distinguish their perspectives from those of others. They regard their friends simply as those who live nearby or who are playmates;

- between the ages of 6-8 are at the socio-informational stage one of role-taking. They come to realise that others will hold different perspectives but are still unable to reflect on theirs' and others' perspectives simultaneously. They recognise that their playmates will have different emotions and intentions, and friendship means 'doing nice things for each other';
• from approximately 8 years of age, are at the self-reflective stage two of role-taking. They are developing the ability to reflect on their behaviour from another perspective and recognise that friendship involves reciprocity, sharing and mutual respect.

NIE STUDY

Method and Sample

A funded research project investigating the cognitive, social and emotional adjustments young children make in transition from kindergarten to primary one, was initiated in 1997 at the National Institute of Education, Singapore. 56 children from the total sample population, were interviewed about how they felt about their kindergarten and primary school, during November, 1997 and again, six months later in May, 1998. The sample was reduced at primary level to 50 as six children were unavailable for the follow up interview. The Faces Scale adapted from Anderson (1988) (see below) was used with the children involved to ascertain how happy they were with school in general, their teachers and friends, and at primary one about subject matter too. Each child was individually interviewed (by the same interviewer) and were prompted to give reasons to substantiate their rankings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>![Smiley Face]</td>
<td>![Neutral Face]</td>
<td>![Sad Face]</td>
<td>![Very Sad Face]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Very happy  
A little bit happy  
Not happy/not sad  
A little bit sad  
Very sad

These were the questions posed to Kindergarten children about their schools, teachers and friends:
• Point to the face that tells me how you feel about your school/teacher(s)/friends?
• Why does it/they make you feel this way?
• Why are they your friends? What do you do with them which makes you happy?

In addition to these questions, children at Primary One were also asked:
• How many new friends have you made at this school?
• What subject/lesson makes you feel most happy? Why?
• What subject/lesson makes you most unhappy? Why?
• Are you happy you came to this primary school? Why?
• Do you want to go back to your kindergarten or stay here? Why?
Findings

A frequency count was made of children’s ratings on the Faces Scale, in addition to a qualitative analysis of their responses.

1. Attitude to School

90% of the children said they were very happy in both learning environments, with only 10% of them at kindergarten and 6% at primary one saying they were not completely satisfied. In analysing the reasons for being happy at school there is a pronounced shift from children liking school at kindergarten, because “it’s where we learn and play”, to a greater awareness of the importance of interacting with and making more friends at primary school. For example, “I make a lot of new friends”; “I have so many friends now to play with”; “my new friends don’t fight me”.

Aesthetically pleasing environmental factors and improved facilities (especially the canteen!) also seem to play a prominent role in influencing children’s reasons about liking their new primary schools: “it’s big/new and clean”; “it’s very beautiful”; “it’s got gardens/trees/flowers and a pond”, “…and fishtanks in the classroom”; “it got teacher’s room and a toilet for girls”; “I like the library and I can buy from the bookstore and canteen”; “school sells hot and iced Milo”; “it’s got a field where I play at recess”. The reasons given by the two children who had reservations about their new primary school, were also related to the general environment: “the school’s a bit too noisy” said one boy and another: “some children throw food on the floor”.

Fourteen responses reflected academic considerations influencing children in liking/disliking school; “it got spelling”; “my school teach me a lot of fun things”; “I like the work here”; “I can learn new things”. Teachers were mentioned by only a few children as being the reason for being happy at school, and only a few children said they were happy being at the same school as their siblings. Two children mentioned increased responsibility being the main motivating factor for enjoying their new primary schools, with one noting the drawbacks involved: “I’m a monitor but I get unhappy sometimes because the class is difficult to handle”!

2. Attitude to Teachers

If ratings are combined for ‘very happy and a little bit happy’ a greater percentage of the children said they were happier with their kindergarten teachers (94%) than with their primary one teachers (78%), and 2% revealed they were very unhappy with their primary teachers. The majority reason given by children at both pre-and primary levels for liking their class teachers was because they helped them ‘learn’. Examples given at kindergarten included mainly positive comments like: “they make me do work so I’ll be clever in primary one” and “she gives us a lot of work to give our brain more energy to think”, with the exception of a few negative comments like: “she never give me learn things so don’t like”. At primary one children tended to emphasise the variety of subjects teachers taught them: “she teach me very many things/ a lot of subjects” and “she play PE with me and bring me to the music room and sing songs, and do number too”.

Liking teachers because they were ‘kind’ or ‘good’ was the next most popular reason overall (with kind generally being equated to being good!) For example: “she’s a good teacher…she’s kind”. At kindergarten
children tended to define teacher’s ‘concrete’ acts of kindness as they personally affected them, for example: “she put medicine on my mosquito bite” and “she warn me of bad things”, whereas at primary level, they became more concerned with verbal support from their teachers and the bonuses afforded them in terms of time, which affected the whole class. For example: “she talk to us nicely. She explain to us when we don’t know”; “she’s nice because if you’re wrong she’ll tell us and she helps us”; “she takes care of us whenever we are sick”; “because she lets us go recess very early”; “if we want to go to the toilet he lets us”.

The reasons given at primary one for being unhappy focused mainly on the nature of pupil-teacher interaction, and the fluctuating moods of teachers: “sometime she angry... she not happy” Some children also seem concerned about teachers talking “noisily” to them, or scolding or even beating them. For example: “she teaches me and reads storybooks to me and plays games with me, but scolds us”; “sometimes she’s very angry and I’m scared. She take the ruler and beat my friends so I’m scared”. Only one child mentioned liking her teacher because she was humorous: “she tells stories and always makes us laugh”. (Further examples of teachers’ communicative styles, given in support of liking/disliking Chinese will be discussed later).

3. Attitude to Friends

Children responded with equal enthusiasm about being happy with their friends both at kindergarten and primary school, with a rating of 96%. 2% of the children said they were not so happy with their peer relationships at primary school and 2% revealed they were unhappy. The reasons given by children as to why their friends made them happy fell into three broad categories: sharing activities, material gain, and traits and physical appearance. When interviewed at primary one, the children did not appear to be any more discerning about why they befriended certain children. ‘Sharing activities’ was the majority reason they gave for being happy with their friends at both kindergarten and primary school. ‘Play’ was the most popular activity, followed by learning, talking and eating together – (the latter seeming to assume more importance at primary school). For example: “they play with me and we read together in class/eat together”; “we play catching at recess and they draw with me”; “every day he bring me to the field and play the monkey bar”; “we read stories together”.

In terms of material benefit, sharing or buying tangible items and offering moral support featured quite prominently in children’s reasons for liking their friends. For example: “when I forgot to bring my pencil they lend me”; “I don’t have book she let me have”; “they always give me sticker and buy things for me”; “she’s my partner and she helps me and waits for me”; “they help me with what I don’t know... they all teach me”; “he holds my hand every day”. Awareness of the reciprocal nature of friendship also crept into a few of the children’s reasons. For example: “I share my things with them and they give things to me” and “they bring biscuits and sweets for me to eat and we share”.

Physical appearance and personality traits were mentioned by only a minority of children at pre- or primary level. Friends were described variously as ‘handsome’, ‘beautiful’, ‘kind’, ‘clever’, ‘quiet’ and
‘funny’. For example: “they’re good in their studies”; “they do things very quietly” and “they’re special to me, because they make me laugh”. The child who was not completely happy in his relationships with his new peers attributed this to his efforts to ‘be a monitor’: “sometimes they make me angry because they don’t like me to be bossy and for me to collect the books”. The girl who admitted she was very unhappy confessed she had made no new friends and that others “won’t friend me”.

4. Attitude to Subject Learning at Primary One

The children were also asked what subject ‘made them most happy’ at primary one, and to comment on the subject they least liked. 31% of the children voted Maths and English respectively as their favourite subject, followed by Physical Education (16%), then Chinese (14%) and Music and Art (8%). Ability and achievement appeared to be the main reasons given for liking or disliking subjects, especially Maths and English. For example: “It’s so easy for me to do maths”; “I can count”; “I do very nice”; “I don’t like Maths because I can’t do a lot of problem sums: “English is easy for me to do”; “I like English because I’m good in my tests”; “English is very hard to me to do”. One achievement-oriented boy even mentioned art in relation to his grades, remarking “I don’t like art because I don’t get A for Art”.

Where P.E. was concerned, exercise featured as the most popular reason for favouring this subject: “because can do exercise and play games”; plus the healthy benefits of keeping active: “P.E. makes me strong”; and the added variety of “learning gymnastics” and “learning sports”. Half of the children who opted for Chinese as their favourite subject, cited their teacher as being the most influential reason for them liking or disliking the subject, with positive comments narrowly outweighing the negative ones. For example: “Chinese teacher never scold me”; “I like Chinese best because our teacher make us funny and tell ghost stories”; “I like Chinese but the teacher is fierce”; “I don’t like Chinese because the teacher is very bad...he scolds people”; “.....the Chinese teacher talk and talk and talk and we all a little bit time to do our work”. One exception to this was one girl who said she liked Chinese “because can stay in same room. No need to walk everywhere!”

DISCUSSION

The findings of this local study suggest that all the children with the exception of a few, have positively adjusted to the social and emotional demands of primary one. Generally impressed by their new and larger surroundings, the children seem to have risen to the challenge of ‘acting more grown up’. However, the disciplinary actions by some of the primary school teachers obviously worried some children, who expressed concern at the verbal and occasional physical abuse which they witnessed in the classroom.

Friends come to not only assume a more important role in the child’s life, but can also become a pivotal factor in influencing the child’s attitude to school. For the majority of children interviewed for the local study, ‘having’ friends was of paramount importance in contributing to their happiness at pre-and primary school, and helping them make a successful transition from the more play-oriented environment of the preschool to the more
formal atmosphere of the primary school. The reasons given by the children for choosing their friends at both kindergarten and primary school tended to be the same. The nature of all the children’s friendships fall into Selman’s “socio-informational stage one” of role-taking (1981). Children who shared activities, who were ‘givers’, ‘helpers’ or were ‘kind’ and ‘nice’ were considered friends. None of the children used the term ‘best friend’, which suggests a dubious stability in these friendships which other research has shown shifts to suit the demands of specific situations and contexts (Rholes and Ruble 1984).

When asked if they would like to return to their kindergartens only two boys said they would, with one of the boys noting that “all the shouting in the school upset him”. Some of the children were obviously insulted by the suggestion of going back to their kindergartens as they considered themselves “too grown up”..... “I must still be five years old if I go back to kindergarten” said one and another “kindergarten is too young for me”.

CONCLUSION

In informal follow-up interviews with some of the primary teachers it emerged that very few were sensitive to the problems some of their children were facing in making friends at school. The teacher of the little girl who sadly said that she was unhappy at primary school because “no one would friend her” for example, saw no reason to worry about this, and explained that the girl seemed academically well-adjusted and as far as she was concerned “that was what was important......”. Hopefully this negative comment does not exemplify the attitude held by the majority of teachers, that the social skills involved in ‘making friends’ require ‘no teaching’ and are not important enough to warrant intervention on their part.

It is acknowledged by those interested in this field that further studies researching friendship patterns in young children are needed, so that teachers can take the necessary steps to stimulate good social relations in children during their formative years. Such action might make all the difference to helping young children make a happy adjustment to not just the learning situation at primary school, but to the ‘rhythm’ of its social life too.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS

The findings of this local study suggest that a more proactive approach at both ‘macro’ and ‘micro’ levels of school is needed in order to promote interpersonal and social harmony at primary one, and to afford young children continuity across the different social environments of the pre- and primary school. This would involve sustained communication and collaboration amongst teachers, at both kindergarten and primary levels, pupils and their immediate and older peers, teachers and parents. The following are suggestions for further consideration:
1. **Kindergartens and primary school teachers need to make a concerted effort to familiarise children with their new social setting prior to entry to primary one.**

A specially appointed Primary Transition Coordinator could effectively organise and conduct induction visits and programmes for both kindergarten staff, children and their parents in order to achieve this, and also be responsible for establishing an intensive information drive for parents about the school in general, with particular focus on social integration. Such cooperation between parents and the school would advance both groups’ goals of ensuring children’s educational success.

2. **Experienced teachers need to be deployed to deal with the ‘new’ recruits in primary one**

At the classroom level it is universally recognised that the teacher plays a central role in creating a conducive environment in which children can develop a sense of emotional security, and personal, social and moral well-being. Recent research conducted by Van de Oord and Rispens (1999) reveals that higher levels of social adjustment are to be found in classes taught by more experienced teachers, who are sensitive to, and can accommodate young children’s needs, in addition to organising learning in their classrooms, which facilitates peer interaction.

3. **Greater peer interaction should be encouraged in class to facilitate the development of children’s social and collaborative skills.**

Through the use of cooperative learning techniques, and simulated role-play situations children can be guided in developing strategies for making friends. The existing preponderance of paper and pencil activities in primary classrooms generated by formal curriculum materials, severely limits children’s opportunities to verbally and physically interact with one another, and curtails the amount of time teachers have at their disposal for helping children establish positive peer relationships.

4. **More time needs to be created for children to play and talk in a more relaxed setting away from the confines of teachers and the classroom.**

Children need time to make new acquaintances. Recess time, particularly during primary one, could be extended to facilitate children’s tasks to develop the strategies they will need to ‘make friends’, or alternatively a special weekly slot could be allocated for children’s ‘contact time’ at primary school!
5. Mature/senior primary pupils could be recruited to help primary one/new children 'bridge' friendships with their peers

Simulated sessions in school could be organised for these senior pupils to help them perform the role of 'friendship brokers, or mentors'. In addition they could also be gainfully employed to help initiate their younger charges into the rules and routines of the school.
REFERENCES


