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‘If I play I won’t learn’: Children’s perceptions and experiences of transition and school readiness from Maternelle to Year 1

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Abstract

How children experience the major transition from pre-school to compulsory schooling influences their immediate and future success and wellbeing (O’Kane, 2016; Skouteris, Watson, and Lum 2012; Einarsdottir, 2011). This complex process of change and adaptation is impacted by school readiness policy drivers, which prioritise children’s performance and achievement. Pedagogic and curriculum progression shifts from play to work, with structured and adult-led activities. These factors contribute to the schoolification of early childhood education, and construct school readiness as an attribute of the child. This paper reports findings on how six children experienced transition and school readiness as they move from Maternelle to Year 1 in an International school in Belgium. Multimodal and multivocal methods of data collection were used to provide child participants with accessible ways of expressing their perspectives of the lived experience of transition. The children perceived the major transition being from play to work and understood that they were expected to be ready for this change. From a socio-cultural perspective, this paper argues that school readiness cannot be assessed at a specific point in time, but should instead be viewed as the lived experience of children that begins before, and continues well beyond the transition. Children are expected to adapt to multiple changes in curriculum and pedagogical practices, as well as changes in cultural, temporal and material contexts. It is recommended that critical questions about how school readiness is constructed should take account of children’s perspectives and experiences of transitions.

Keywords: early childhood education, transitions, school readiness, pedagogy, curriculum, children’s perspectives.

Introduction

Transitions are a feature of children's everyday lives, especially in contemporary societies where migration, displacement, work and family choices determine processes of change and adaptation. In countries where governments have invested in early childhood education (ECE) many children attend pre-school or kindergarten and experience transitions within and between settings. The major transition from pre-school to compulsory schooling takes place between the ages of 4-5/5-6/6-7 years old, depending on national or federal policies (OECD, 2020). Because this transition is considered important and influential for children's immediate and future success (Krakouer et al., 2017; OECD, 2020), the policy focus emphasises 'school readiness'. Accordingly, supra-national policy drivers construct discourses about school readiness and becoming a 'school ready' child that are interpreted in different ways at country-level (Kay, 2021). These discourses encompass pedagogy, curriculum content, goals or learning outcomes, and assessment, all of which impact on teachers' practices and children's experiences of transition from pre-school to compulsory education. The greater the degree of specification, the more likely it is that school readiness is linked to the schoolification of ECE (Brogaard Clausen, 2015; Kay, 2021; Robert-Holmes, 2014).

Transitions and school readiness are interlinked concepts in research and practice, with substantial evidence of an ongoing struggle to reconcile different and sometimes conflicting demands between phases. In order to understand these demands, attention has been paid to analysing school readiness discourses in ECE policies, structures and systems in, for example, England (Kay, 2021; Neaum, 2016), Australia (Rouse, Nicholas and Garner, 2020) and the USA (Smith and Glass, 2019). As Smith and Glass

(2019: 330) note, extensive research has been conducted on the concept of school readiness, factors that influence school readiness, and differences in school readiness levels among young children. In addition to the international literature on educators' and parents' perceptions (Munnick and Smith, 2019; Peters, 2010; Rouse, Nicholas and Garner, 2020; Smith and Glass, 2019; Yelland and Waghorn, 2020) how children experience the pre-school to school transition is an important focus for research, reflecting the different ages and contexts in which this transition takes place. From a socio-cultural perspective, Rogoff, Dahl and Callanan (2018) argue that attention is needed to the cultural paradigms of children's lived experiences, including how they learn to navigate across, and participate in the distinct cultural settings of their everyday lives.

In light of these arguments, this paper reports young children's (age 6-7) lived experiences of transition from a Maternelle setting to Year 1 of the Anglophone section of a large International School in a city in Belgium. The focus is on children's perspectives of the different pedagogical and curricular approaches, and how they navigated and adapted to new social, cultural and material contexts.

Transitions and school readiness – policies and practices

The contemporary focus on transitions and school readiness is intrinsically bound with policy constructs of performance and achievement because 'children who are lagging behind academically and behaviourally compared to their more prepared peers tend to stay behind for the remainder of their schooling (Krakouer et al., 2017: 40). Thus pre-school education is implicated in improving immediate and longer-term outcomes and life chances, especially for children considered to be disadvantaged or 'at risk'. Being a 'school-ready child' is a key policy driver and desirable outcome of the pre-school

phase, with ‘readiness’ being defined by the achievement of developmental levels, skills or learning goals. Smith and Glass (2019) identify developmental skills as social, behavioural, cognitive, and physical adeptness, along with children’s actual readiness as measured by math and reading assessments. Focusing on neoliberal influences on public ECE programmes in the USA, Brown (2015) extends the construct of readiness to encompass being ready for elementary school, for high stakes testing regimes, and for success in school and the workplace. Being a ‘school-ready child’ is, therefore, linked to achieving a successful transition.

Research has identified different factors that influence the transition from pre-school to compulsory schooling, such as relationships (Loizou, 2011 and Yeboah, 2002), pedagogical discontinuity (Britto, 2012; Brooker, 2008; Cassidy, 2005 and Fisher, 2009), the role of play (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019 and Fisher, 2021) and the context of rules and rewards (Deci, Koestner and Ryan 2001; Mansfield 2007; Wilders and Levy, 2020). In many countries with national ECE policies, transitions and school readiness involve technical practices and assessment arrangements that construct the ‘school-ready’ child. For example, in England, transition is framed as a linear process whereby progression in pedagogy and curriculum is understood as moving from play-based, child-led activities, to predominantly adult-led activities (Fisher, 2021). This understanding of progression reflects persistent tensions between systems and cultures in the pre-school phase, where ECE is positioned as a space of play, and compulsory education, where school is positioned as a space of work (Henderson et al., 2016). Even though play has been identified as a ‘metaphorical bridge’ (Nicholson, 2019), the pedagogic transition from play to work typically begins during the final year or months of pre-school so that children are ‘made ready’ for school by experiencing more formalised adult-led activities (Fisher, 2021; Wood, 2019). Based on a systematic

review of teachers' views of play-based learning, Bubikova-Moan et al., (2019) document concerns about achieving a balance between child-led and adult-led activities. Similarly, Fisher (2021) contrasts teachers' support for play-based learning beyond the pre-school phase, with the constraints and pressures of delivering the curriculum. Focusing on England, Kay (2021) links the policy emphasis on mathematics and literacy (reading, writing and phonics) with formal modes of curriculum delivery to ensure children are achieving the desired outcomes. On both sides of the pre-school to school transition, education is focused on normalising and socialising children in ways that conform to national and school-level policies on curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. These policies are embedded in the everyday routines, practices and classroom cultures that shape children's identities as they 'become' pupils.

The framing of transition as a linear process raises questions about how children experience pedagogical and curriculum continuity and discontinuity. This, in turn highlights the importance of attending to children's perceptions of their experiences. In a study of the transition from Early Years Foundation Stage (birth to five) to Key Stage 1 (5-7) in England, Howe (2016) used photographs, drawings and conversations to document children's experiences of transition. She noted that implicated in play-based learning was children's desire for self-direction and self-regulation, pursuing their own interests, and having some control over what they chose to do. Focusing on the same phases, Sanders et al., (2005) reported that the shift from a play-based to a formal curriculum was a significant challenge for children, particularly the loss of play-based learning. This shift has also been shown to induce transition-related anxiety in children (Di Santo and Berman, 2011; Loizou, 2011).

In summary, pedagogical discontinuity from pre-school to school has been attributed to a range of factors at policy and pre-school/school levels. These discontinuities lead to difficulties and variations in how children experience transitions. Whatever these discontinuities, the onus is placed on children to adapt to new contexts and conditions for learning. The next section describes the context for the research, the methodology and research methods.





Context of study and methods



This study was conducted with participants from the Anglophone Year 1 class within a large European school located in Brussels (Wilders, 2016). Before commencing Year 1 the children had typically spent 2 years (between the ages of 4 and 6) in the preceding Foundation Stage setting (Maternelle). The children made the transition from Maternelle to Year 1 in the same school, but in a different building. The Maternelle classes followed the European School ‘Early Childhood Curriculum’ (School Europa, 2011). This curriculum was specific to the European School System, and there was no standardised early childhood (Preschool) curriculum in, Belgium, the host country. The curriculum was designed to provide a harmonised experience for children in the Maternelle stage of the European School System. However, each language section worked closely with an educational advisor (Inspector) from their home country, which led to country-specific curriculum influences. Moreover, each language section within the European School System also had its own specific literacy (mother tongue) curriculum. The Anglophone section was, therefore, strongly influenced by curriculum guidance in England, such as Early Years Foundation Stage (Department for Education, 2012), and Letters and Sounds Guidance for phonics (Department of Education and Skills, 2007).

Wilders was employed as a teacher in this school, and had become concerned about the impact of transition to Year 1 on children within the pre-school setting, who were observed to experience a combination of pedagogical, social and environmental changes. Thus, Wilders took the opportunity to research children's perspectives and experiences of this transition. McLeod (2008) expresses concerns about the impact of power dynamics when authority figures such as teachers conduct research with their students. On this occasion, Author 1 found in agreement with Smale (2000) that the children trusted the intentions of a familiar adult and were therefore open and responsive. Furthermore, Wilders was able to use existing knowledge of children's interests to design engaging research activities.

The study was framed within an interpretivist paradigm, using a qualitative case-study approach, and multi-modal research methods in order to gain in-depth understanding of perspectives related to one instance (Denscombe, 2010), in this case the transition from Maternelle to Year 1. Multi-modal methods are appropriate for engaging children, portraying complex meanings from multiple perspectives, and respecting their competence in expressing their own interpretations (Wood, 2016). The methods of data collection (Table 1) were informed by an ethical commitment to supporting children to participate in the research in ways that were familiar, accessible and effective in enabling them to express their perspectives and lived experiences. For example, familiar and accessible activities such as drawing and small world play provide children with a visual on which to recall and describe experiences and associated feelings (White and Sharp, 2007). Moreover, these activities are less reliant on 'the written or spoken word' ensuring they are accessible to all participants (Clark and Moss, 2001:12). Table 1 details the research activities.

Table 1. Table of research activities.

<p>Interview</p>	<p>Semi-Structured interviews at the beginning and end of the study. Using Tom and Polly the Research puppets.</p>	
<p>Children's Drawings</p>	<p>Children drew pictures to represent their experiences of the two settings. They discussed their drawings with the researcher throughout the activity.</p>	
<p>Small World Activity</p>	<p>Children engaged with small world sets that resembled the two different settings. The researcher asked questions in response to their play.</p>	
<p>Children's Photographs</p>	<p>Children took photographs of the two different settings. Semi-structured interview were then conducted using the children's photographs as a stimulus for questions and discussion.</p>	

<p>Photograph and Feelings Interview</p>	<p>Semi-structured interview using the children’s photographs combined with feelings cards as a stimulus for questions and discussion.</p>	
<p>Guided Tour</p>	<p>The children took the research puppets Tom and Polly on a guided tour of the Year 1 setting.</p>	

The six participants were selected at random to represent the gender, ages and demographics of the classroom (Table 2). The oldest children in the class were 6 years and 8 months on transition to Year 1, and the youngest children were 5 years and 9 months.

Table 2. Table of child participants

Child’s name:	Age on commencement of study	Gender
Bobby	6 years 6 Months	Male
Leanne	6 Years 11 Months	Female
Katie	6 Years 3 Months	Female
Isabelle	6 Years 6 Months	Female
Sean	6 years 2 Months	Male
Jack	6 Years 11 Months	Male

Oral consent was sought from the child participants following an explanation about the project aims, and an introduction to the research puppets (Polly and Tom) and audio recorder. Consistent with Ebrahim (2010) a situated approach to ethics was adopted where ‘attention is paid to informed consent as an ongoing process in order to create spaces for information sharing, choice in participation, and dealing with the complexities of doing so’ (p. 291). Informed consent was sought from the child participants prior to each research activity, after an explanation of the activity. The children could choose not to consent to participate in a certain activity, or could withdraw from the project at any time. The study was conducted in term 4 (out of 6 terms). At this point in time the children had substantial experience of Year 1 but could still recall Maternelle experiences.

The first stage in the analysis was transcribing all audio recordings, with an initial manual coding, followed by organising responses into categories related to the research questions. Table 3 illustrates the categories that emerged from the coding process, in response to the research questions.

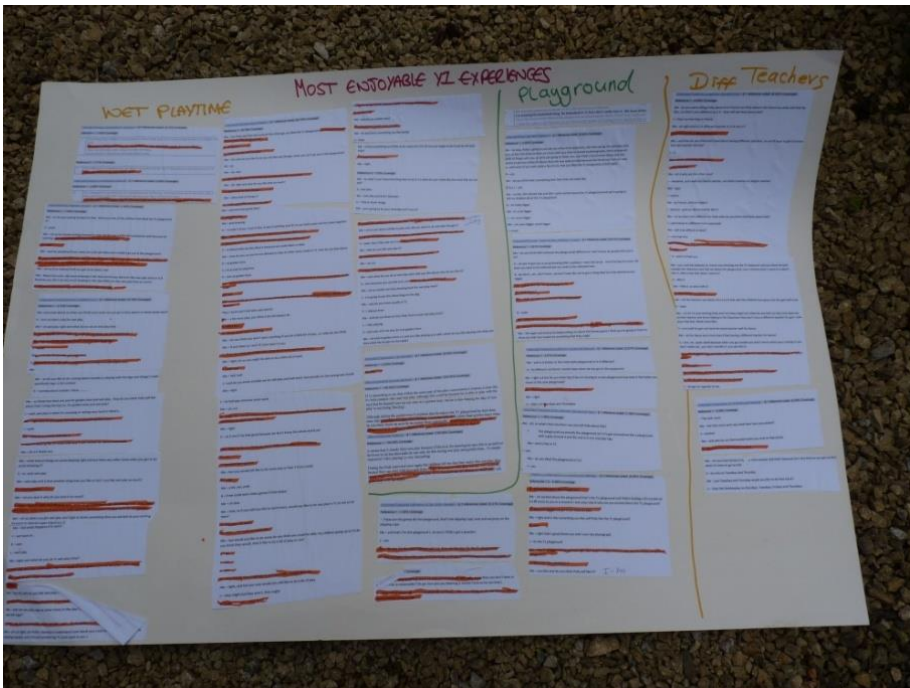
Table 3. Coded categories in relation to research questions.

Research questions:	Coded to determine emerging themes:
1. What are children’s perceptions of the Maternelle environment?	Creative activities, less work, less learning, outdoor experiences, play, conflict, separation.
2. What are children’s perceptions of the Year 1 environment	Behaviour / rules, rewards, learning, levels, work, creative activities, new teacher (expectations),
3. What are children’s most enjoyable Maternelle experiences?	Outdoor / playtimes, creative, play, ICT,
4. What are children’s most enjoyable Year 1 experiences?	Playground (bigger), wet play times, golden time, work, rewards, ICT, second language.
5. What are children’s least enjoyable Maternelle experiences?	Conflict (sharing), separation.
6. What are children’s least enjoyable Year 1 experiences?	Work, rewards, behaviour / rules, not earning golden time, less play.
7. What changes do children associate with the transition?	Outdoor experiences, environment (bigger), creative experiences, work, ICT,

	teacher, learning, rewards.
8. What do children specifically miss about Maternelle?	Play, creative choice, outdoor experiences, group activities.

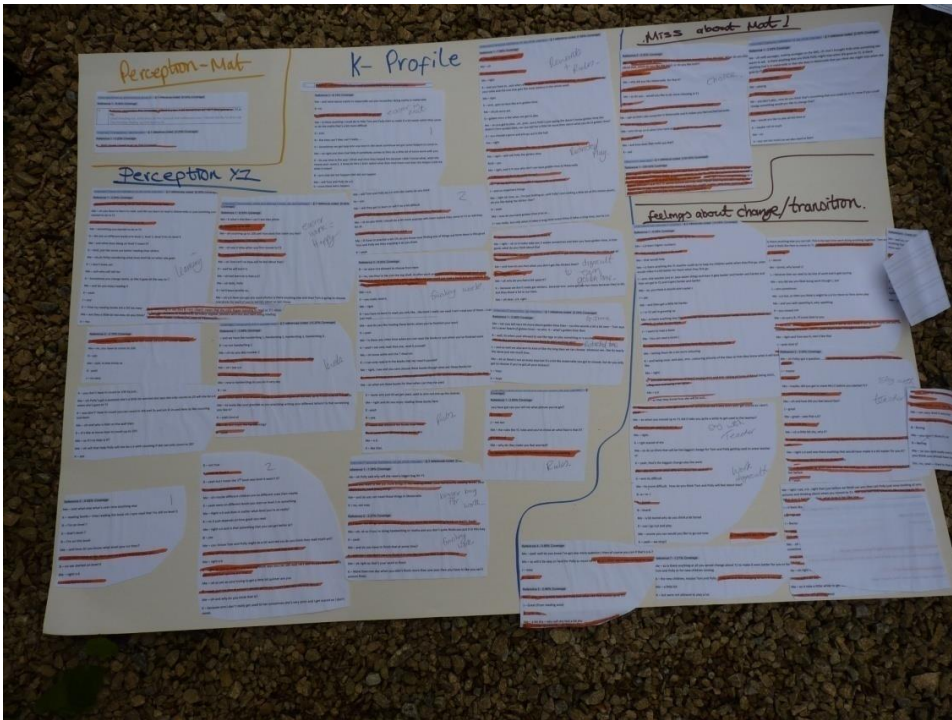
Responses for each identified category were collated, and common and contradictory perspectives noted.

Figure 1. Poster of common perspectives of most enjoyable Year 1 experiences.



The next stage involved pasting individual dialogue from each transcript onto large data profile posters (one per child).

Figure 2. Poster of individual child data poster.



The dialogue on each child's poster was presented in categorised themes related to the research questions (Table 3). The posters were then used to create vignettes for each child. This process identified common themes across the children's experiences, thus providing a deeper understanding of perspectives related to each theme.

Theme 1: Pedagogical changes and discontinuities – from play, choice and agency to directed work

The six children were competent reporters of how they experienced and interpreted significant transitional changes from Maternelle to Year 1. They drew on vivid memories to compare and contrast their experiences, and expressed affect and a deep understanding of changes in teaching and curriculum content, and in the material activities / resources of each setting. Although they accepted that they must adapt to the changes, they raised concerns about their ability or 'readiness' to adapt, and the associated implications.

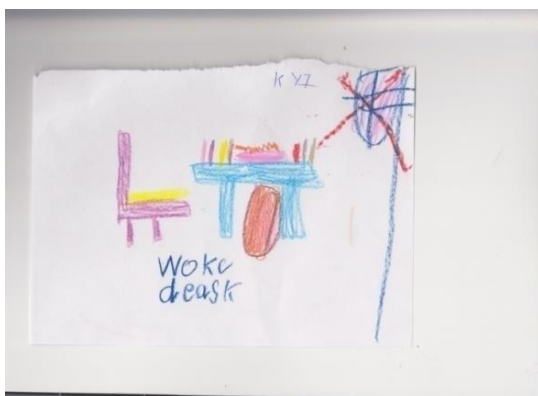
Pedagogical discontinuity was a significant feature of their transition experiences, as noted in their perceptions of the Year 1 environment (Q2, Q6). Nevertheless, they perceived themselves responsible to adapt to new ways of learning. Play was identified as a most enjoyable experience in Maternelle (Q1, Q3), and was missed in Year 1 (Q8). They reported the shift from play-based learning to ‘work’ as a significant transitional change.

During the first interview the children were asked to describe Year 1; Sean reported, ‘We do like lots of work’, Katie added, ‘we erm, like work’, and Leanne confirmed, ‘it’s very strict about work’ (Q2). Sean continued to explain that there was ‘not much playing’ in Year 1, to which Katie clarified ‘we don’t play anymore’. During the Drawing Conversation activity Katie took a moment to compare the following drawings in order to consider transitional changes (Figure 1 and Figure 2).

Figure 3. Katie’s drawing of Maternelle.



Figure 4. Katie’s drawing of Year 1.



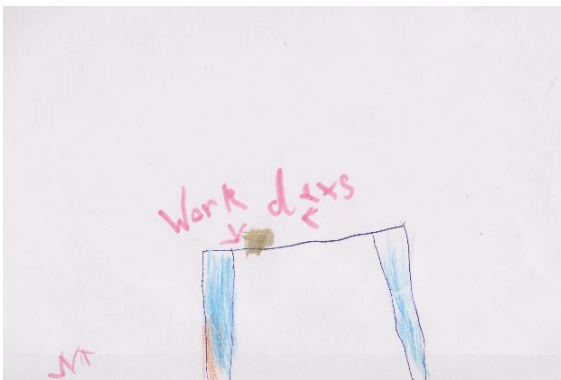
Katie is dressed up as a princess within the Maternelle setting. She is pictured beside the computer (which was a favourite activity), and the material activities / resources of the setting are flowing around her. In contrast, her depiction of Year 1 is of a contained environment, which is clearly associated with 'work', as she has labelled the picture 'work desk'. When comparing these pictures Katie explained, 'There's no working in Maternelle picture, we don't play that much now' (Q2, Q6).

Bobby reached a similar conclusion to Katie when comparing his photos (Figure 5 and Figure 6).

Figure 5. Bobby's drawing of Maternelle.



Figure 6. Bobby's drawing of Year 1.



Bobby's drawing of Year 1 portrays a similar working environment to that of Katie's drawing, with the featured 'work desk'. Bobby, however, chose to draw the Maternelle playground, with the basketball net, play house and bicycle (Q1). On comparison of his drawings Bobby simply stated, 'We have to do work and look we don't play now' (Q6).

Katie and Bobby vividly capture the spatial, structural and material discontinuities between play and work in their representations of flow and choice of activities in Maternelle, and physical containment at a desk in Year 1.

The lack of familiar play-based experiences was related to negative feelings during the transition. The children associated opportunities to play in Maternelle with the most enjoyable experiences (Q3), whereas lack of such opportunities in Year 1 was connected to negative transition experiences (Q6). Leanne expressed fond memories of the small world resources in Maternelle, in particular the jungle animals which she chose to draw and photograph (Figure 7 and Figure 8).

Figure 7. Leanne's drawing of the jungle animals.



Figure 8. Leanne's photograph of the jungle animals.



On reviewing her drawing she exclaimed, 'Jungle animals, I liked it, I used to try to play with them nearly always', and then stated, 'I would like jungle animals in Year 1'.

In the Photo and Feelings Interview Leanne selected an excited face to portray her

feelings towards this photo because she was ‘excited to play’ with the animals whilst visiting Maternelle that day (Q1). When completing research activities in the Maternelle classroom Leanne would always request some time to play with these animals, indicating that this was still an enjoyable experience for her. Katie also reported enjoying small world resources in Maternelle. She explained during the First Interview that she ‘loved’ playing with the ‘small princesses’, and she concluded in the Final interview that this type of play was something she missed (Q8).

The children’s enjoyment of play-based learning was further evident in their descriptions of the most enjoyable Year 1 activities, notably ‘golden time’ and ‘wet play time’ (Q4). Golden time was awarded to the group who had earned most reward stickers that week, typically for ‘working quietly’ and individually at their desks. Only the children in the winning group were allocated time to ‘play’ on a Friday afternoon. Wet playtime occurred when bad weather prevented outdoor play, and meant that all children were free to play indoors.

When asked why golden time and wet playtime were perceived to be enjoyable Year 1 activities, the children identified choice of activity and resources (Table 4).

Table 4. Table of participant responses.

Sean	you can do anything you want, erm like drawing
Katie	you can play
Jack	I like wet play cos we play Lego and Capla
Bobby	You can play at wet play, I like it
katie	you can play instead of just running around outside
Isabelle	we are allowed to play and at other times we’re not
Isabelle	it’s playing like Maternelle, and it will remind her about Maternelle (talking about Polly the puppet)

Clearly, the children appreciated whatever opportunities to play were available in Year 1 given their reports about the transition from play to work. When asked how they felt about this change, Bobby explained that it made him feel ‘bored’, and Sean agreed that

he felt Tom and Polly would be ‘a bit bored’ because they could not play as much in Year 1. Katie stated, ‘I miss playing’, and concluded that the reduction in play opportunities was ‘not a nice change’ (Q6).

As the children clearly missed opportunities for play, a follow-up question focussed on whether they believed there should be more play in Year 1. Whilst Leanne was keen for ‘more play’, other children were more tentative with their suggestions. Sean suggested ‘a little bit more play’, and Isabelle considered ‘one play’ session per week to be adequate. It became apparent that the children were concerned that an increase in play experiences might inhibit learning, as they had made a connection between work, learning and rewards, (Q7).

Katie indicated a preference to Maternelle experiences over Year 1 due to the fact that ‘you don’t have to work so much’, however, she also acknowledged ‘but in primary we learn more’ (Q7). Isabelle reported that she enjoyed working in Year 1 because it helped her ‘go quicker into an adult’; after careful consideration she proposed that ‘a little bit of playing and a lot of work’ was appropriate for Year 1. Bobby agreed that more play would be desirable in Year 1, but he was keen to state ‘not too much, or we won’t learn anything’. In relation to pedagogical discontinuity, the children not only made a distinction between play and work, but also associated the latter with learning. Despite the children’s strong desire to play they were willing to forfeit enjoyable play experiences in order to engage in ‘learning’ and to adapt in order to be ‘ready’ for Year 1 (Q7).

In common with previous research (Brooker, 2008), the children in this study expressed sadness about the abrupt transition from play to work. It may be that children not only missed play, but also missed the unique opportunities that play affords for participating in and sustaining peer cultures (Broadhead, 2004). However, they accepted

this change and, importantly, linked their acceptance to a desire to learn. The children's acceptance also indicates that readiness is construed as the responsibility of the child, regardless of whether transitions are abrupt or gradual. The change from predominantly child-led play to predominantly formal, adult-led pedagogical approaches has been identified as the most significant transitional challenge that children experience, as indicated by Fisher (2021), Kay (2021) Howe (2016) and Sanders et al., (2005). Although Broadhead's (2004) research has shown how play progresses in complexity and challenge, particularly in highly social and imaginative play, children may be denied these opportunities in compulsory schooling (Wood, 2019). This is a significant transitional change, because children's participation in play differs significantly from participation in activities that are structured and led by teachers. The pedagogical discontinuity between play and work removes opportunities for child-initiated activities that sustain choice and agency (Howe, 2016), and opportunities for learning co-operatively within peer cultures. From a pedagogical perspective, the approach to the Maternelle-Year 1 transition also restricted opportunities for children to follow their interests and inquiries. The shift from play to work may therefore militate against successful transitions if children are denied opportunities to develop progression and complexity in their play, to sustain peer relationships, to follow their interests, and to make creative choices. Drawing on substantial empirical research in New Zealand, Hedges (2018) highlights the importance of children's questions, interests and inquiries in supporting motivation, effort, memory and attention. The discontinuity between play and work carries the risk that children may feel like 'incompetent novices' within their new environment, as opposed to 'competent and autonomous' learners in their previous setting (Balduzzi, et al., 2019: 12).

The findings on pedagogical discontinuity relate to the theme of changes in curriculum content, and the children's awareness of the need to change their behaviours in order to learn.

Theme 2: Curriculum content and learning behaviours

Transitions have been described variously as a bridge, a border crossing, a process of continuity and change (Howe, 2016; Nicholson, 2019). There were some areas of continuity across the transition in this study, such as creative activities, and ICT (Q1, Q2, Q4, Q7). However, the children experienced Year 1 as tangibly different from Maternelle and, in some aspects, discontinuous, notably in the transition from play to work (Q2, Q6), and in behaviour, rules and rewards (Q2, Q6, Q7) (Wilders and Levy, 2020). Although the children were willing to sacrifice their enjoyment of play in order to learn, they experienced the additional transitional challenge of adapting their learning behaviours in relation to curriculum content and expectations. Difference and discontinuity are exemplified in the Year 1 curriculum, specifically children's perceptions of learning to read and write. Those perceptions emerged from the guided tours, where the children were free to choose which area of the Year 1 classroom to show to the puppets. These data indicate their astute awareness of how they needed to adapt and acquire learning behaviours to 'read properly', and to progress from drawing to writing.

A key change in reading was that they could no longer simply look at books but that they now had to "learn how to read". During a guided tour of Year 1 Katie decided to show Polly the reading area. Katie indicated her awareness of reduced opportunities for choosing books, and the need for learning to 'read properly'.

Excerpt from guided tour transcript:

Katie: – That’s for after work (the reading area).

Bobby: No, we’re not allowed to choose from here.

Katie: – No, cos they’re like just the top shelf, it’s after work and when you’ve done enough work your allowed to read a book or erm, but you have to like really read it you don’t just look at the books.

Katie: – You have to learn to read you, I can’t read any of them, I can just read, I can only read erm the books that say read it yourself.

For Katie, reading words was perceived to be accredited higher status than deriving meaning from pictures.

During the same guided tour of Year 1 Bobby also chose to show Tom the reading area. “These are the reading books we get”, he exclaimed. He then paused to look at the book in his hand and stated, “but, oh, it’s not on my level”. As he was about to return this book to the shelf, he realised, “oh yeah this is my level, I made a mistake, this is my level”. Bobby was keen to show Tom one of his own reading books, so he ensured he selected a book from his level. The children’s perceptions illustrate their internalisation of what it means to be a pupil in Year 1 (Q2), Q7). They were aware of the material culture and the messages this conveyed about reading as a schooled practice – books placed on certain shelves and arranged in ‘levels’ of difficulty.

Consistent with Levy (2011) the children now perceived ‘reading’ to be associated with the ability to decode words, and that existing skills associated with making meaning through pictures were no longer valued. Furthermore, success in reading at primary school level is attributed to progression through the reading schemes (Levy, 2009).

It is interesting to note that when showing Polly the reading area Katie stated quite clearly ‘That’s for after work’ (the reading area). Throughout this study, whilst writing activities were commonly described as ‘work,’ reading activities were not categorised as work.

Figure 9. Jack’s photograph of the reading area.

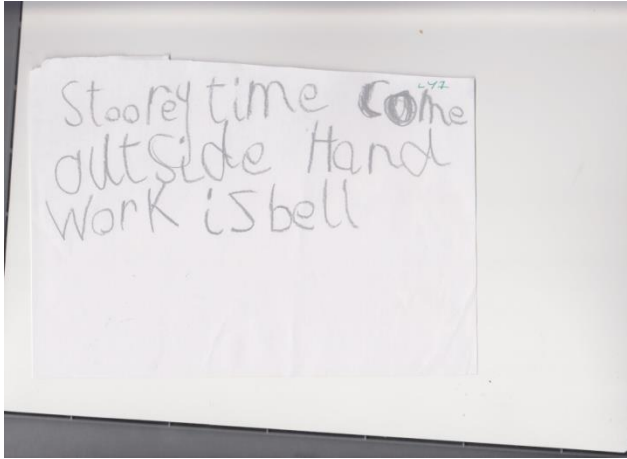


During the photograph and feelings interview, Jack chose to show this photo (Figure 9) alongside an excited face. He explained, “It’s of reading books and if we, we, don’t have anything to do anymore, we’re excited, we’re happy, we can read some books”. In addition, Jack would always request time in the Maternelle reading area when visiting to participate in the research activities, and often spent time reading to Tom during the guided tour. He reported consistently that he really enjoyed reading, but that this was restricted to when other work was finished. Leanne similarly reported “I like doing work cos if, if we do very good things sometimes - nearly, we can always, we can read a book and I like reading”. Reading was commonly described as one of the most enjoyable aspects of Year 1, these children were therefore, intrinsically motivated to read, but were frustrated by the limited opportunities to read books of their own choosing, and when set work was completed.

These findings highlight some interesting tensions; while the children perceived reading to be a pleasurable post-work activity, their understanding of the need to read the words properly and ‘not just look at books’ contests the school’s commitment to reading for pleasure. Although this was having a negative impact on the children’s enjoyment of reading they appeared to accept this change. Moreover, they perceived it to be their responsibility to improve their reading in order to access a wider range of books. They were also responding to the formal modes of curriculum delivery identified by Kay (2021), and the school’s guidance for phonics instruction, to ensure that outcomes are met.

The children were also aware of the need to adapt behaviour associated with writing. Sean reported, during the drawing conversation that “we have to do drawing and writing in Year 1, not just drawing”. He showed how his Year 1 news book was divided into two parts, one for drawing and one for writing, demonstrating an understanding that there had been a shift in work expectations. Moreover, when setting up a replica of the Maternelle and Year 1 settings during the Playmobil activity the children resourced the Maternelle setting with a variety of drawing and painting implements, but chose only writing pencils for the Year 1 classroom. Sean then placed writing books in the Year 1 replica setting explaining that these were not needed in Maternelle because ‘they don’t really need to write, they can play and draw’.

Figure 10. Leanne’s written response to question.



For this research task the children were asked to draw two pictures to portray Maternelle and Year 1 experiences. Leanne drew a picture of her Maternelle experience, and expressed her Year 1 experiences in written form (figure 10). She decided writing was a more appropriate form of communication to portray her Year 1 experiences, again reflecting the pedagogical changes (Q2, Q4). During the first interview Leanne also revealed how she was reluctant to go to school when commencing Year 1 because, she “liked to do lots of drawing at home”. This pedagogical shift had a negative impact on her experiences of the transition, which is consistent with concerns about transition-related anxiety (Di Santo and Berman, 2011; Loizou, 2011). As suggested by Osborn et al. (2006), the demand to adapt in this way can challenge established learner identities, especially in tandem with the effects on children of rules, sanctions and rewards (Wilders and Levy, 2020). However, it is also notable that the children saw work as an enjoyable experience in Year 1 (Q4), they enjoyed learning, and were aware of learning more.

The children’s perspectives and experiences indicate the ongoing transition from literacy as an everyday social practice, to reading and writing as schooled practices, such as the ability to decode words and produce good writing (Levy, 2009). These pedagogical arrangements also convey how children must learn to self-regulate

within the school environment, and to conform to the behaviours and expectations of them as learners (Q2, Q6). Based on these findings, we argue that an aspect of transition is changes in how children are managed, and how they must learn to manage themselves in the context of the cumulative effects of changes in the pedagogical, curricular, social and material environment.

Conclusion

The findings from this small-scale study contribute to understanding school readiness and transitions from the perspectives of six children, specifically how they experienced change, adaptations, continuities and discontinuities. The children were competent reporters of their experiences, and responded positively to the respectful, multimodal methods. A limitation of this small-scale study is that the children were a homogenous socio-economic group, attending an International school. The teachers had a degree of freedom to select and combine curriculum and pedagogical approaches outside of national government policies. Nevertheless, there are significant resonances with the literature that informed the study.

The findings highlight the different influences on the children's experiences of transition, and their affective responses. As noted previously, supra-national and national discourses of school readiness influence structures and processes in pre-school and school settings, including significant changes in curriculum, pedagogical approaches and assessment (Brown, 2015; Smith and Glass, 2019). The findings from this study indicate how the onus is also placed on children to adapt to new contexts and conditions for learning, including changes in the material environment, culture, and expectations of their behaviour. Whatever age children accomplish this transition there

are likely to be within-child variations in their 'school readiness', including their ability to navigate across settings and to adapt over time. Thus readiness cannot be defined at a single point in time, through the achievement of developmental skills or learning goals, or as an attribute of the individual child. Nor is readiness a linear process from play to work, or from child-led to adult-led activities. Children have to learn to become 'school ready' either side of the 'point in time' transition, by experiencing and continuously adapting to the many changes that are required. The children's perceptions and experiences in this study indicate an array of factors that shaped the process of transition, ranging from sadness about the abrupt transition from play to work, to their eagerness to learn in new contexts. In the contrasting cultural contexts of ECE and primary education, children navigate across different pedagogical and curriculum approaches.

In relation to wider international debates on transitions and school readiness, the findings are consistent with research by Rouse et al., (2020) that identified different cultures and expectations of pre-school and school, which lead to misalignments and discontinuity, as well as change. Furthermore, as noted earlier, there are enduring tensions between the espoused play-based and child-centred approaches of the pre-school/kindergarten phase, and the policy drivers towards schoolification (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Fisher, 2021). On the basis of the evidence in this study, we argue that such misalignments, discontinuities and tensions are not abstract concepts but are experienced daily by children as affective, material, social, spatial and temporal. Informed by socio-cultural theories (Rogoff et al., 2018), and the lived experiences of the children in this study, we contend that becoming school ready is an extended process that takes place over time, place and space. We argue that children's transitions

and school readiness can be understood from a socio-cultural perspective as ‘demanding adaptive flexibility in expanding their repertoires of practice... (and) to be able to engage skilfully in different cultural settings’ (Rogoff et al., 2018: 12).

International research indicates that transitions and school readiness increasingly involve technical practices and assessment arrangements that purport to construct the ‘school-ready’ child. As Halpern (2013) has argued in the context of the USA, all that has been accomplished in tying ECE more closely to schools is making ECE less early-childhood like, which reinforces wider international concerns about ‘schoolification’. However, it is reasonable to question whether children can be ‘made ready’, or can be deemed to ‘be ready’ by the end of the pre-school or kindergarten phase. Moreover, the argument that schools should be ‘child-ready’, as discussed by Rouse, et al. (2020), requires further elaboration. Critical examination is needed of how structures, systems, routines and cultures change across the transition, including pedagogical approaches and curricular arrangements. These contextual factors also impact on children by creating new expectations of behaviour, and changes in their identities. More attention is needed to children’s perceptions and experiences of transitions and school readiness from diverse perspectives, incorporating age, gender, ethnicity, additional needs and socio-economic status (Brown, 2015; Smith and Glass, 2019).

This study has presented multimodal, multivocal, accessible and respectful methods as effective for understanding children’s perceptions and experiences, which can be used across age groups, and children’s diverse capabilities. Multimodal and multivocal methods also respond to the call made by Rogoff et al., (2018) for attention to the

cultural paradigms of children's lived experiences, including their learning, development and participation in different contexts.

Indication of figures and tables

Table 1: Table of research activities

Table 2: Table of child participants

Table 3: Table of coded categories in relation to research questions.

Table 4: Table of participant responses

Figure 1: Poster of common perspectives of most enjoyable Year 1 experiences.

Figure 2: Poster of individual child data.

Figure 3: Katie's drawing of Maternelle

Figure 4: Katie's drawing of Year 1

Figure 5: Bobby's drawing of Maternelle

Figure 6: Bobby's drawing of Year 1

Figure 7: Leanne's drawing of the jungle animals.

Figure 8: Leanne's photograph of the jungle animals.

Figure 9: Jack's photograph of the reading area.

Figure 10: Leanne's written response to question.

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