



VOICES OF CHILDREN

in starting school

Report prepared by

Bob Perry and
Sue Dockett

Charles Sturt University



For the
Wollongong
Transition to
School Network

Contents

Introduction	3
The Illawarra Transition to School Network	5
The Voices of Children project	6
KU Corrimal East Preschool	9
Russell Vale Public School, Russell Vale Pre-school, Bellambi Point Pre-school	14
St John Vianney's Catholic School, Balgownie Kindergarten, Kindy Korner Pre-school	23
Bulli Public School, Bulli Children's Centre, KU Bulli Preschool	27
Woonona Public School, Balls Paddock Children's Centre, Little and Loud Childcare Centre, Tiny Tots Preschool	35
Voices of Children Expo	44
The project overall: What have we learned?	47

Introduction

Over recent years, there has been increasing attention to the importance of listening to children's voices and perspectives. This trend has been influenced by several agendas, notably perceptions of children as capable and competent, and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (United Nations, 1989), which recognises children's rights to be consulted and heard on matters that affect them.

Within these shifts, a number of researchers and educators both in Australia and overseas have sought the views of young children on their everyday lives and events, including their perspectives of early childhood services and the transition to school (Clark & Moss, 2001, 2005; Dockett & Perry, 2007; Einarsdóttir, 2005).

Underpinning these approaches to listening to children's voices has been the philosophy that children are valued as people, as citizens, right now, as well as for the contributions they may well make in the future. In this way, the early childhood period is not merely a preparation for later childhood and adulthood. Rather, it is a time when all citizens have an obligation to demonstrate respect for each other. This view (Clark & Moss, 2001; Lansdown, 2005) regards children as:

- experts in their own lives;
- skilful communicators who utilise a range of strategies to share this expertise;
- active agents, who influence the world around them, as well as being influenced by it; and
- meaning makers, constantly seeking to understand and make sense of the people, places and events in their lives.

Our research in the area of starting school has consistently identified a number of differences in the ways in which children and adults interpret the context of school (Dockett & Perry, 2005, 2007). Children's perspectives remind us that living the experience of starting school is different from planning, implementing or reporting it. They also provide great insight into ways that starting school experiences can be enhanced.

The project undertaken by the Wollongong Transition to School Network in 2006-2007 reflects both the changing views of children noted above and a commitment to listening to children's perspectives for the purpose of improving their experiences as they start school.

References

- Clark, A., & Moss, P. (2001). *Listening to young children: The Mosaic approach*. London: National Children's Bureau and Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- Clark, A., & Moss, P. (2005). *Spaces to play: More listening to young children using the Mosaic approach*. London: National Children's Bureau.

- Dockett, S., & Perry, B. (2005). "You need to know how to play safe": Children's experiences of starting school. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 6(1), 4-18.
- Dockett, S., & Perry, B. (2007). *Transitions to school: Perceptions, expectations, experiences*. Sydney: University of New South Wales Press.
- Einarsdóttir, J. (2005). 'We can decide what to play! Children's perception of quality in an Icelandic playschool'. *Early Education and Development* 16(4), 469-488.
- Lansdown, G. (2005). *Can you hear me? The right of young children to participate in decisions affecting them*. Working paper 36. The Hague: Bernard van Leer Foundation.
- United Nations. (1989). *Convention on the rights of the child*. New York: Author. Available online: <http://www.unicef.org/crc/crc>.

The Illawarra Transition to School Network

The following information is posted on the Illawarra Transition to School website:

The Illawarra Transition to School Project has been operating since 2005. It is funded by Families NSW Illawarra, an initiative of the NSW Government, in association with the Department of Education and Training, Illawarra Children's Services, Department of Community Services, Illawarra Area Health Service, Wollongong City Council and Shellharbour City Council to develop, establish and promote research-based best practices in transition to school programs.

The Transition to School Networks are in close consultation with education experts at Charles Sturt University, such as Dr Bob Perry who has extensive experience researching and initiating transition to school programs. Of particular importance across the TTS network region is connecting with members of culturally and linguistically diverse communities, Indigenous communities and those in the community whose children may not access prior to school services.

The Voices of Children project

In June, 2006, the Illawarra Transition to School Network commenced planning a small investigation into the ways in which primary school children can be actively involved in the planning, implementation and evaluation of transition to school programs. The aim was to work in a small number of schools - and their feeder prior-to-school settings - to trial various ways in which children might be so involved and to ascertain which of these approaches might be appropriate to adopt within transition programs.

The project was outlined during initial meetings with staff from prior-to-school settings and schools by the investigators - Tracey Kirk-Downey, Wollongong City Council, Carrie Sutherland - Transition to School Project Officer and Bob Perry, now at Charles Sturt University. The outline was very general, providing opportunities for settings to interpret the project in ways that were relevant within their particular contexts.

The following information was included in the call for Expressions of Interest for the project.

The purpose of this announcement is to seek expressions of interest from schools for them to be part of this project. The exact details of what might be involved in the project will vary from school to school and will be formulated by the school community in conjunction with the investigators. However, in broad terms, the project at each site will involve a small group of children - possibly, but not necessarily from right across the school - working with the school's transition team to plan, implement and evaluate the transition to school program for the school and its community. Clearly, there would also need to be input from teachers and the broader community but such input would be part of the normal transition program.

The proposed project has few funds and is not in a position to offer teacher release in recognition of schools' involvement. There are some funds available, however, for matters such as catering for meetings and transport for children and staff. The only other enticement we can offer is the expertise of the investigators built up over many years of work in this area.

A small number of schools and prior-to-school settings submitted Expressions of Interest and were included in the project. These were:

- KU Corrimal East Pre-School
- Russell Vale Public School
- Russell Vale Pre-school
- Bellambi Point Preschool
- St John Vianney's Catholic School
- Balgownie Kindergarten
- Kindy Korner Pre-school
- Bulli Public School

- Bulli Children's Centre
- KU Bulli Preschool
- Woonona Public School
- Balls Paddock Children's Centre
- Little and Loud Childcare Centre
- Tiny Tots Preschool

An initial meeting of representatives of these educational settings was held in July, 2006 in which the investigators outlined their (flexible) vision of the project and the administrative arrangements. In particular, arrangements for the limited support available and the reporting requirements were discussed.

During school Term 3, programs were planned and implemented. A range of documentation was prepared, reflecting the nature of the program and the context of the particular setting.

In September, 2006 children who had been involved in the project, their teachers and some of their family members attended the **Voices of Children Expo** at Wollongong City Council. Children from each setting were involved in the presentation, noting particularly what they had done and the impact this had made on their transition program. Noticeable across the participants in this Expo was the consistent expression of the value of incorporating the voices of children and the considerable amount that had been learned by doing this.

Following the **Voices of Children Expo**, Bob Perry visited the schools and prior-to-school settings involved in the project to gain feedback on the project.

A further forum was held in March 2007, where representatives from each of the settings involved shared their experiences and reported on the changes they had made. The value of listening to children's voices and respecting their perspectives was emphasised.

There were some fantastic tangible outcomes from the project. These included:

- books made by children at school to describe what school was like for them and what new children needed to know;
- videos and DVDs of what school looked like and what happened at school;
- PowerPoint presentations where children shared what was important about their school;
- drawings about what preschool children expected school to be like; and
- letters seeking specific information about school.

Less tangible, but incredibly important were:

- the opportunities for learning - about transition, different settings, children's competencies and much more;
- the many links between schools and prior-to-school settings that were built or strengthened;
- the changes made to transition programs as a result of children's input;
- the relationships children built with each other;
- the relationships built between and among teachers in different settings;

- the relationships built between adults and children;
- the many ways in which children were treated seriously, as people with valuable contributions to make and the skills and abilities to make these;
- the marked value adults reported in talking and listening to children; and
- the affirmations that children are competent and capable and have the right to be heard.

The specific projects undertaken across the schools and prior-to-school settings are outlined in the following sections.

We take this opportunity to thank each of the children and adult participants in the project. The children from each of the schools and prior-to-school settings (and their families) have agreed to share their involvement in this project overview. We thank them for this. In addition, we thank the many adults who have been integral to this project:

Tracey Kirk-Downey
Carrie Sutherland
Michelle Kicks
Rebecca Jermyn
Louisa Raymond
Denise Eyles
Donna Robertson
Rhonda Morton
Janie Butler
Nyssa Pagett
Gail Crawley
Karen Tonge
Steve Leonard
Jeanette Davids
Megan Dodds
Tina Murray

KU Corrimal East Preschool

Aims

To:

- recognise the value of children being involved in transition to school processes;
- recognise the importance of experiences being designed for children by children; and
- provide opportunities for children to be involved in decision making and planning.

Who was involved

All the children who were to start school the following year, and two early childhood teachers.

What happened?

All children starting school the following year were invited to talk about going to big school. Children were asked to respond to the questions:

- How do you feel about going to big school?
- How do you feel about leaving preschool?
- Is there something the teachers at preschool or big school could do to make it better?

The early childhood educators recorded children's comments and compiled them into a book entitled *Voices of Children in Transition to School: It's a celebration!*

In this book, the educators note:

We are convinced about the value of children being involved in the transition to school process and the importance of **experiences being designed for children by children**. This process of collecting information from children and giving children the opportunity to be involved in decision making and planning at preschool is not a new concept. We have over the years developed skills to allow children every opportunity to be involved and we often call for a meeting to discuss issues, planning, concerns, exciting changes happening, new information and so on. For the Voices of Children project, we followed this same approach.

Responses/feedback

The book *Voices of Children in Transition to School: It's a celebration!* includes children's comments and conversations about big school, as well as summaries from the educators.

These are reproduced below.

How do you feel about going to big school?

- Kane: Well, I'm going ... well it will be Christmas first, then my birthday and I'll be five and then after that I'll be going to Aaron's school.
- Charley: I dunno.
- Amy: It's exciting.
- Natasha Lilly: Maybe a clown.
- Vanessa: Slippery dip there, maybe a sandpit.
- Amy: There's a sandpit at my big school. I've been there for plays in the park lots of times. I've seen the sandpit lots of times.
- Kane: ...well at Aaron's school, at my 'heverow', you know that thing I did at Aaron's school?
- Teacher: Do you mean your interview?
- Kane: Yes, my interview. Well, they know me now. My school does sports and has a playground...
- Jacob: My sister goes to big school. Her school has a playground and I even think they have fish there ...
- Amy: I don't think big schools will have fish. I don't think there will be fish there. Do you know, Bronwyn, that when I go to big school, Zoe will come here. It's exciting to go to big school.
- Bradley: I'm excited because I like the school I'm going to. I love doing reading and it will be fun. You'll be able to play just a little bit.
- Luca: You can play when they ring the door bell!
You have to do homework all the time when you get home.
[to Bradley, who will go to the same school]
It might be fun to play together, we'll get to be friends forever!
You get to do a lot of craft.
- Allahna: No you don't!
Don't throw rocks at people or you will get into trouble.
- Logan: I like going outside.
- Bradley: I can't wait until I get homework and my uniform next year!
- Dylan: I feel just fine 'cause I'm already 5. Tell Bob I'm already 5.
- Mikayla: I feel happy about going to big school next year, doing some words. I can do good words!
I'm sad about leaving preschool, 'cause it's fun.
When I go to big school, I'm going to invite my teacher to preschool.
- Tiarna: You do lots of things at school like puzzles, reading and climbing stuff.
- Angus: Good because my sister goes to my big school.
- Jye: Actually, good. My big school is near my house and I'm going there when I turn 5. My Mum took me to have a look in the window and there were heaps of kids!
I know all about big school 'cause my Mum told me all about it.
- Charlotte: It's good because I'm going into Kindergarten and then Year 1, and I'm going to play basketball!

From the educators:

Children's comments reflected general excitement about going to school, touched with sadness at leaving preschool. In their discussion, the children described a mixture of realistic and unrealistic expectations of school. They described a strong sense of anticipation and excitement at going to school, with recognition of their own development and progression - starting school was a process of getting big and moving on to something new. School was often described in terms of what children can do there and who they will be with. The possible connection with older siblings and friends already at school was important.

How do you feel about leaving preschool?

Aaron: It's very, very sad.

Amy: I'm not sad because Zoe will be here.

Aaron: Yes, it is sad because you have to leave all your friends.

Joel: I'm sad because I don't want my friends to go away.

Charley: We could stay at preschool.

Amy: ...you have to go to big school when you are five.

Allahna: I feel sad about leaving preschool because I love it. Sometimes I cry about preschool and I say 'I miss everyone'!

Luca: It will be lots of fun. I will be very much sad because I will miss all my friends.

Mikayla: I feel sad 'cause I'll miss my preschool. I will miss being with Bradley and Allahna.

Jye: Really sad!

Charlotte: Mummy will bring me back to preschool to visit. I will miss drawing and play dough at preschool.

From the educators:

In these discussions, children reflected great emotional depth. The combination of excitement about going to school and the sadness about leaving friends is powerful. Clearly, there was a strong sense of attachment to the preschool and the people (children and adults) at the preschool. The strength of that attachment is reflected in the children's expectations that school will be a good place (so a sense of security about themselves as people that has come from successful experiences at preschool) and that the preschool will be there for them to come back to.

Is there something the teachers at preschool or big school could do to make it [preschool or big school] better?

Teacher: Some of you said it would be sad to leave preschool and your friends. I wonder what we could do to make it not so sad.

Luca: How 'bout we have a celebration! On the first day I have at school and stay there the day. Then we go home and get some party clothes on and then come

- here for a celebration with everyone who goes to school next year!
- Bradley: Can we take our preschool teachers with us? Can we take our big school teachers to the party?
- Luca: We could ask the big school teachers to introduce us to some friends!
- Jye: Don't leave!
- Allahna: Talk about big school at home.
- Charlotte: We could do some drawings at big school and send them to you.
- Dylan: You could call my principal!
- Mikalya: Or our teachers and our families!
- Charley: We could have a birthday.
- Amy: You mean a party?
- Kane: Yeah, a party to see our friends ... you know like Megan's party ... the pyjama afternoon party. Let's have a pyjama party.
- Teacher: Do you mean you could come back and visit for a party after school?
- Charley: Yes. I might be really hungry because I mightn't get lunch at school.
- Amy: No, your Mum packs your lunch.
- Aaron: Are we going to wear pyjamas?
- Amy: We could wear our school uniforms so everyone could see them.
- Vanessa: I have a very beautiful Cinderella dress.

From the educators:

The notion of a celebration party reflects both the excitement and sadness noted in earlier discussions. The children are eager to celebrate their changed status, but also keen to retain contact with the preschool.

Reflection on children's engagement, participation and the inclusion of children's voices in transition

From the educators:

Not all children were active contributors to the conversations. Some children sat quietly and listened, other strained to include their comments.

The strength of the emotions expressed by children in these discussions is obvious. Including children's voices enables us to recognise that this is a time of significant change and challenge for children. The friendships they have already created are important to them and they are anxious about losing these.

From the researchers:

The implementation of the project in this site reflects an ongoing commitment to involving children in discussions and decisions that impact on them. The confidence that children have demonstrated in presenting their views, voicing concerns and raising issues indicates that they feel very comfortable in doing so, knowing that these are respected by staff and responded to appropriately.

Changes in practice as a result of the project

- Plan to have a celebration party. Possibly not on the first day, but soon after (Luca, Charley, Amy, Kane).
- Invite the children's kindergarten teachers to come to preschool for the celebration (Bradley).
- Teachers from the preschool plan to visit each of the children in their classroom at school (Bradley).
- Contact the schools (Dylan).
- Ask the schools to give children the opportunity to communicate with us via drawings/writing after they have been at big school for a while (Charlotte).



Where to from here?

As well as having the celebration the children talked about, the preschool will continue to:

- recognise the value of children being involved in transition to school processes;
- recognise the importance of experiences being designed for children by children; and
- provide opportunities for children to be involved in decision making and planning.

Russell Vale Public School, Russell Vale Pre-school, Bellambi Point Pre-school

Aims

To:

- reflect on what was already happening at the school relating to transition;
- listen to children's perspectives about transition;
- provide opportunities for children to ask questions and seek answers about starting school;
- promote relationship building between different groups of children; and
- change transition programs to take account of children's perspectives.

Who was involved

Staff at school and prior-to-school settings, children about to start school, children who had recently started school and their Year 6 buddies (these buddies had been in Year 5 when they had first met the children who were starting school).

What happened?

Staff from the different services held initial meetings to discuss possible outcomes and approaches.

- Preschool staff identified the need for social stories books about starting school. The strategy employed to construct these books involved having children in the preschools write letters to the school asking about specific aspects of school, and then having the teachers and children at the school reply in a book format. Books were constructed and sent from the school to the preschools, covering the information requested by the children.

After the books were sent out to the preschool, children and staff from the school went to visit the preschools. The kindergarten children had things they wanted to tell the preschoolers and the preschoolers could ask questions. When the preschool children started the transition program at the school, the Kindergarten children who had been to visit the preschool, also went to visit the transition program.

- A small group of six current Kindergarten children and their six buddies had discussions about what they thought of the transition to school and how they would change it. The teacher scribed comments for the younger children, and the older children wrote their own, listing things they regarded as good and bad about the program and how they would change it. Their comments were conveyed to the organiser of the transition program.

- As one strategy to help them become familiar with the school, children and their families were invited to the school end-of-term assembly. One highlight of this assembly was that Kindergarten children were performing an item. The decision to attend the assembly was driven by both children's comments and preschool staff who indicated that this would be beneficial - for the children, families and the preschool staff as well.
- Production of a DVD that covered many of the questions children in the preschools had about starting school.

Responses/feedback

1. Social Stories Books

Teachers at the preschools had been reading books about starting school with the children. They had some discussions with children about what they thought school would be like. Teachers in one preschool indicated that the preschool children had some unrealistic expectations of school - for example, they were looking forward to climbing trees, having homework and watching their older siblings in class. To find out about these activities and other expectations, the preschoolers wrote letters. The kindergarten children at school wrote back, describing what it was like for them when they started school. The kindergarten children talked about being scared when they started school and what they liked about school now. The questions and responses formed the basis of books prepared at school and presented to the preschools.

Preschool children's expectations of school were gathered in response to the question, "What are you looking forward to at school?" responses included:



I'm looking forward to playing in the sand.



I'm looking forward to dance and homework.



"I'm looking forward to riding on the school bus"



"I'm looking forward to homework"

I'm looking forward to riding on the school bus.

I'm looking forward to homework.



"I'm looking forward to climbing trees"



"I'm looking forward to watching Ryan do his work"

I'm looking forward to climbing trees.

I'm looking forward to watching Ryan do his work.

In the other preschool, children asked for information about the following questions:

- Where are the rooms, toilets, canteen, office and teachers' staff room;
- Where are the children allowed to play and not allowed to play?
- Where do they sit to each lunch and where are the water bubblers?
- What do they need to bring in their bags?
- What food and drink are they allowed to bring to school?
- Who will their teacher be and which children will be in their class?
- Where will their Mum or Dad drop them off and pick them up?

In response, children in the current Kindergarten class prepared a short story with illustrations about when they started school. These books, called "Stories from Big School" were taken to the preschools early in Term 4, prior to the commencement of the transition program.

As a follow-up, a small group of Kindergarten children from the school visited the preschools to talk about the book. Conversations between the Kindergarten and preschool children provided opportunities for information sharing and relationships building. For example, some preschoolers asked "Can you read and write now? What happens?" and Kindergarten children

were able to share the information that some children at school couldn't read or write yet, but they were still OK at school.

2. Children's feedback on the transition program

Kindergarten children noted the following about the Kinderplay (transition) program:

Good things: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Year 6 reading books• Soccer balls• Parachute• Grip bats and balls• Colouring in• Scoop bats• Outside• Space hoppers• Made new friends	Bad things: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Drawing• Big space hoppers• Scoop bats• Listening to stories
--	--

While most of the things considered related to activities, it is worth noting that the same things were considered problematic by other children. Far from suggesting that the children involved did not have a consistent view of the program, it is important to note that children have diverse interests and expectations - it is unlikely that one set of experiences will be enjoyed by all those participating. Suggestions for improving the Kinderplay sessions included:

- Frisbees
- Balls for catching games
- Hoops
- Under 4s races
- Some free choice activities and some organised activities
- A treasure hunt to find places at school
- Being outside when we can
- Buddies to share - 3 or 4 for each class. Year 4 kids are just the right size.
- Dress up for a day
- Craft.

This is an impressive list of improvements, reflecting high levels of thought and reflection about the program.

The buddies also nominated a range of relevant and creative improvements, after noting their own list of positives and negatives:

Good things:	Bad things:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outdoors • Exercise • Fitness • Get to know each other • Learn new skills • Listen to each other • Parachute • Meeting new children, interacting with others • Well organised • Session time adequate • Colouring 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not long enough • Inside is too noisy • Some activities too dangerous - e.g. scooter boards, balance beam • Need more sessions - e.g. 2 days per week - one with buddies and one without so Kinders get to know each other • Kinders didn't understand • Too much playing instead of making friends • Kinders were nervous and shy - need to boost confidence

Suggestions to improve Kinderplay:

- More visits
- Parents less/not involved so Kinders get used to being at school
- A little booklet to take home - e.g. tracing numbers and words
- More group games rather than individual activities
- More 'concrete' games e.g. snail trail, hopscotch
- Teddy Bear's picnic
- Pyjama party
- Kinders suggest activities- choose 4 and have groups rotate
- Clay and painting
- Coffee/tea for parents
- Water for Kindies
- Each week, let the children have a 'little talk' in the newsletter
- Mini dance-a-thon with a spotlight - when it lands on a child they have to call out their name and everyone repeats it.



These older children had a range of interesting suggestions - reflecting both their greater awareness of school environments and a concern for the wellbeing of those involved in the transition program, both adults and children.



3. School assembly

The preschool children, families and preschool staff attended the end-of-term school assembly. Preschool staff reported that the children were fascinated, in awe, overwhelmed and excited that they could be involved in such an event the following year. Children made comments such as "I was at big school today and I sat and watched the big children and that's going to be me next year". Children continued to make comments about the assembly for some time.

4. Starting school DVD

The DVD was prepared by the staff and children at the school as another means to share information about school and to answer some of the children's specific questions. The DVD was specifically about Russell Vale Public School, but also contained a range of information relevant across different schools. Billy Backpack was a prominent, and very popular, feature of the video. Children in the preschools watched the DVD and had a range of conversations with their teachers about what school would be like, and what they would do there.

Staff in the preschools found the DVD very valuable - as it showed the actual school classroom and environments that children would see during their visits to the school as well as when several of them attended that school the following year.

Reflection on children's engagement, participation and the inclusion of children's voices in transition

From the co-ordinating teacher at the school:

- Children (at the school) felt like they had the opportunity to be heard and to think, and that it was not just the teacher doing all the talking and thinking
- Children had chance to interact with each other and bounce ideas off each other about the transition program.
- Teachers got to build relationships with the children by listening to them.
- The project built a sense of trust between all the children involved and the teachers as well.
- Children got to build relationships with each other.
- The older children felt respected because they had an opportunity to contribute what they thought was important. When they made the presentation, they really built up those skills of public speaking, articulation, putting thoughts forward in a coherent way, and the relationships between the two groups (Buddies and Kinder) were really important. The teachers involved certainly saw benefits for the children who were involved.
"The best thing was actually getting to know those children (Kindergarten and Year 6 buddies from the school involved). I really appreciated the hours we spent together, just talking and conversing and watching them interact.... I'm not just the teacher anymore, I'm the person they spent all this time with...it was a different level of relationship... it has built a better rapport between the children as well."

From the preschool teachers:

- The project has led to enhanced collaboration between prior-to-school settings and school:
“We’ve been able to work on bridging the gap ... before this year, as a preschool, we didn’t know how much we could collaborate with primary schools to help our children in transition.”
- Enhanced opportunities to help children become familiar with school:
“I feel like we have better prepared the children for school ... it’s all because of the collaboration... has just involved us a lot more in thinking about ways that we can actually prepare our children... it’s really enabled us to concentrate on helping these children and being sensitive towards their transition rather than getting caught up in the end of year things ...”

From the Year Buddies:

Interviewer: What was your role (as Buddies)?

Buddies: I was just helping around the playground and in the classrooms...
And in the computer lab and stuff...

Interviewer: What sorts of things were good about looking after the younger children?

Buddies: You got to know them.
They got to know us.

Interviewer: How did you know what to do with the little kids?

Buddies: Going through that growing up, being little like them
Got two little cousins.
Looking after the kids...

Interviewer: Do you think it’s good for you to be involved with these children, or is it just a bit of a nuisance, sometimes?

Buddies: Lots to learn.
It’s good.

Interviewer: What sorts of things do you learn?

Buddies: That little kids just sometimes aren’t pests, like a little brother!

From the Kindergarten children:

Interviewer: When you made the books, what did you tell the children?

Kinders: School is fun.
We would have to do some work.
You can’t go past the blue bin.

Interviewer: What is the blue bin?

Kinders: It’s a bin where little kids can’t go past because big kids play rough games.
And you do artwork.

Interviewer: Did you tell the children about your classrooms?

Kinders: No. We sent them one video.
We stand in our room and go “This is our classroom” .
We said “See you next year” at the end.

Interviewer: What did your buddies do?

Kinders: They helped us.
Helped you find your classroom.
Tell you where the toilets are.
Interviewer: Did you like having your buddies?
Kinders: Yes.
They are the best.
Not too big.

From the researchers:

There are several key outcomes from this project:

1. relationship building occurred at multiple levels: between preschool and school teachers, between Kindergarten and preschool children, and between Buddies and Kindergarten children. As a result of these enhanced relationships, all those involved reported feeling much more positive about the transition process.
2. an important part of the relationship building was the trust and respect shown to the children. Children's questions and concerns were respected and responded to; children's answers formed the basis of the information shared with preschool children; Year 5 buddies reported new respect within their school context; preschool and school staff demonstrated their respect for each other by their continued collaboration.
3. the collaboration between preschools and the school has resulted in a greater sense that both settings are doing their best for the children about to start school.

Changes in practice as a result of the project

1. Social story books

These books became important preschool resources. There are plans to continue the collaborative processes that underpinned these and to promote communication between children in preschool and the school.

2. Suggested improvements to the transition program

Several of the children's suggestions were incorporated into the revised transition program. Of particular note was the popularity of the treasure hunt around the school where children needed to find different places and people who could help.

3. Assembly visit.

Visiting the school assembly was to become a continued feature of the interaction between preschools and school.

4. DVD

The DVD was produced in such a way that it would not need to be revised each year. It continues to be used as an important resource - both for preschools and for individual families.

Where to from here?

- Continue the cooperation and collaboration between the school and preschools.
- The preschools are eager to collaborate with other schools as well, and feel much more confident about doing this than they have in the past.
- Continue to foster relationship building - between and among children and adults.
- Incorporate children's suggestions into transition programs.

St John Vianney's Catholic School, Balgownie Kindergarten, Kindy Korner Pre-school

Aims

To:

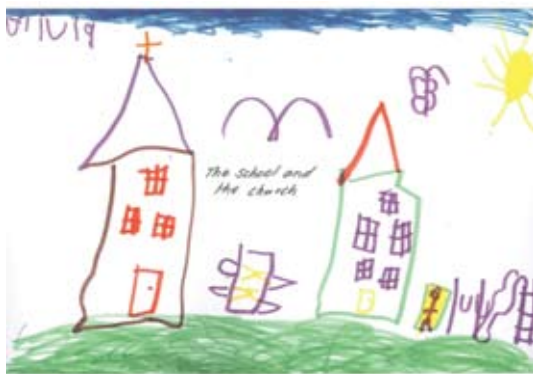
- develop closer ties between the school and preschools;
- involve children in talking about starting school;
- recognise children's perspectives about starting school; and
- facilitate networking between children.

Who was involved?

A group of Kindergarten children, Year 3 and Year 4 students from the school, staff and children from the preschools.

What happened?

Children at the preschools discussed what they thought school would be like and drew pictures about this, to share with the school staff and students.



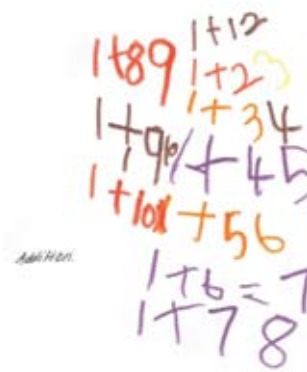
The school and the church



The kids listening to the teacher



Me at school doing quiet activities



Addition

Staff and students at the school prepared a book and a DVD to explain what happened at school, what Kindergarten students did at school, what the school looked like and what they liked about school. The book was entitled *Now I'm in Kindergarten* and the DVD was called *Kinder Transition*.



We do some writing.



I go to the canteen.



This is my school uniform.



This is my school bag.

Examples of pages from *Now I'm in Kindergarten*

The schools and preschool exchanged emails to prepare for a visit from the school - teacher and kindergarten students - to the preschools. Kindergarten students were matched to the preschools - that is, the children visiting the preschools were chosen because they had previously attended that preschool. During the visit, the Kindergarten students took the DVD and some big books they had made about starting school to share with the preschoolers.

Responses/feedback

The preschool children's drawings about school demonstrated that they had some specific expectations about what school would be like, particularly about the playground, how they needed to listen to the teacher, the homework they would have and some of the learning tasks they would encounter at school. Many of the children noted the importance of being with their friends at school.

The Kindergarten children eagerly engaged in conversations about what they thought was important for new children to know about their school and about starting school. The children's comments, which serve as narration for the DVD include:

- Before school started I:
 - met my buddy.
 - met different people who work at school.
 - visited important places at school
 - learned what we do in the classroom.
- Before school we met our buddies and got to know them better. We made friends and then they helped us learn what to do at school.
- In the first five weeks of Kindergarten we learned lots of things that helped us at

school:

- we learned how to talk nicely to each other
- we learned how to move around the school
- we learned how to share
- we got to do some work
- we did things with our hands like colouring, cut, paste and write
- we learned how to use our bodies to dance, jump, walk in a line, jump, freeze and leap like a frog.
- Our buddies help us all the time. My buddy plays with me in the playground. I know she will always be my friend.
- We do lots of things at school:
 - Computers
 - Painting
 - Playing games
 - Dressing up
 - Having assemblies
- We love being in Kindergarten.

Reflection on children's engagement, participation and the inclusion of children's voices in transition

From the educators:

The preschool children were very happy to talk and draw about what they thought school would be like. They enjoyed the visits from the school staff and students and were especially excited to see children they recognised from the previous year at preschool now in their school uniforms, telling them about what school was like for them.

The Kindergarten children and staff reported that the making of the DVD was both time consuming and very worthwhile. The children particularly enjoyed making their contribution to the DVD and were very excited to see themselves.

The conversations with Kindergarten children about their early school experiences provided a valuable opportunity for teachers to hear about children's perspectives.

A major outcome from the project was the involvement of the Kindergarten children in visits to their 'old' preschools. The preschool children were excited to see children they recognised from the previous year, now in their school uniform, presenting the DVD and big books and describing their experiences at school. One of the highlights of the project was "the networking of those children amongst themselves, the 4, 5, and 6 year olds getting back together again".

The importance of buddies was a consistent message from this project. The Kindergarten children nominated buddies as a significant positive aspect of starting school. School students in Years 3 and 4, who had started school without a buddy, reported in a survey that they

would have really appreciated having a buddy. Their suggestions for changes to the program they experienced emphasised the importance of buddies. All of the school children noted the importance of buddies - the Kindergarten children valued buddies for the practical assistance they provided: "our buddies always help us" and the older children appreciated the sense of responsibility and trust that being a buddy engendered. School staff also reflected on the value of the buddy program and ways to enhance it. For examples, buddies for Kindergarten children are drawn from Year 4 during the transition period, and then take on the full buddy role as Year 5 students. As the Kindergarten children move into Year 1, their buddies enter Year 6 - hence there is a two-year buddy relationship.

From the researchers:

The involvement of children from preschool, Kindergarten and Year 4 students demonstrates that transition to school is not just relevant for the children actually starting school. Each of these groups had a valuable contribution to make to the project and was involved in active and meaningful ways. The personal connections and relationships built through this project will provide powerful supports for children starting school, and for the children already at school. In addition, the connections between school and preschool staff will promote continued professional interactions among the settings.

Changes in practice as a result of the project

The project has highlighted the importance of buddies in transition - and the school intends to continue and to build on the existing buddy program.

The Kindergarten students visit to the preschools was "like a school reunion for them, a one year school reunion". The importance of this return visit for network and relationships building among children was highlighted and plans discussed to provide ongoing opportunities for the children from both preschool and school to meet.

Where to from here?

- Build on the closer ties with the preschools - continue to promote interactions for children and for staff.
- Look to provide continued opportunities for children to strengthen their networks of relationships.
- Continue to provide opportunities for children at the preschools and at school to talk about the experiences and expectations of starting school.

Bulli Public School, Bulli Children's Centre, KU Bulli Preschool

Aims

To:

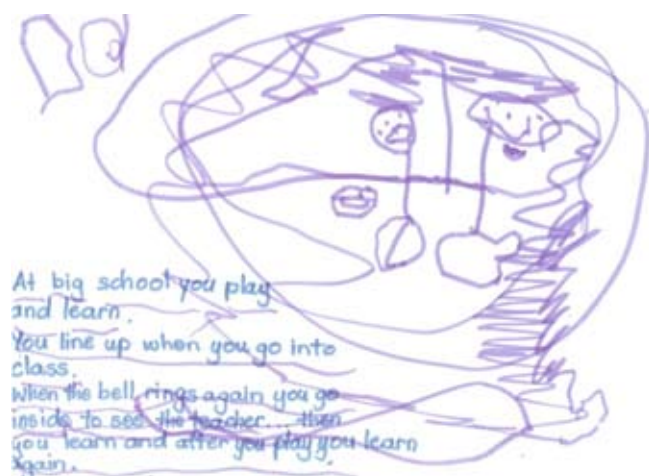
- promote collaboration between the prior-to-school settings and the school around transition;
- strengthen relationships between staff in the three settings;
- have the Kindergarten teacher spend time visiting the prior-to-school settings and build relationships with the children; and
- rethink what happens in transition to listen to what children think works.

Who was involved

Kindergarten and Year 1 children, Kindergarten teacher from the school, teachers and children from the prior-to-school settings.

What happened?

Teachers in the prior-to-school settings had discussions with the children about school. For example, children were invited to draw what they knew or wanted to know about school and to engage in some discussion around pictures of school and school events - including working in the classroom, playing outside and eating lunch. Children's comments suggested that they knew quite a bit about school already. These comments were collated into booklets entitled: *What I would like to know about school.*



At big school you play and learn. You line up when you go into the class. When the bell rings again you go inside to see the teacher... then you learn and after you learn you play again.



That's me playing soccer. All the windows at school. My teacher's behind the school. That little girl is getting in trouble and she's in the trouble room. This naughty girl is swinging on a swing. She's in another class.

Kindergarten children were asked to think about their transition to school. Their comments were recorded on a survey:

Transition to School Recollections Aymen



What was the playgroup like?

It was fun. I met new friends. I played with my new friends. I had nice food.

What is different from preschool to big school?

We had a slippery dip at pre-school.

Can you think of anything that you really wanted to know about big school before you came and that somebody might have not told you about?

I wanted to know how to get to know people.

Are there any things that you found difficult, hard or scary about big school?

I found it difficult to line up.

Following these initial conversations, brainstorming and drawing activities, the educators across the settings arranged a series of visits. In these visits, the Kindergarten teacher and some students visited the prior-to-school settings and the children and teachers from the prior-to-school settings visited the school.

The Kindergarten teacher arranged four visits, of one hour each, to each of the two prior-to-school settings. The format of the sessions was:



Session 1

Introductory activities and familiarisation activities

- songs and rhymes
- nursery rhymes
- finger plays
- stories
- simple games

Session 2

Introductory activities and familiarisation activities

- songs and rhymes
- finger plays
- introduce children from Bulli Public School
- question and answer session
- social stories
- story



Session 3

Introductory activities and familiarisation activities

- songs and rhymes
- nursery rhymes
- finger plays
- discussion and display of kindergarten items from KR classroom

Session 4

Introductory activities and familiarisation activities

- songs and rhymes
- social story - people who help us at school
- big book - shared reading and related drama activity
- movement songs



The sessions were followed by an excursion from the prior-to-school settings to the school.

Responses/feedback

The drawings and comments from the preschool children indicated that they had a range of knowledge and expectations about school. This information came from a range of sources, including parents, siblings, books and, for one child, a CD that he had about school. The preschool children expected to play outside on the slippery dip and in the playground at school, but also expected that they would do work - especially maths - and homework.

The visits to the prior-to-school settings were arranged to provide opportunities for the children to interact with someone they may well meet the following year at school. The Kindergarten teacher and prior-to-school teachers met on several occasions to plan the visits. This ongoing interaction was valuable for all teachers, serving to strengthen relationships and build connections.

As preparation for the visits to the prior-to-school settings, the Kindergarten and Year 1 children brainstormed a number of issues. During the second session, these children visited the prior-to-school settings with the Kindergarten teacher. Children who had previously attended the settings accompanied the teacher. In preparation, they brainstormed:

- What do you think new children need to know about school?
- What did you need to know?
- What do you think they will ask you?



The prior-to-school children did have a number of questions to ask the Kindergarten teacher and students, including:

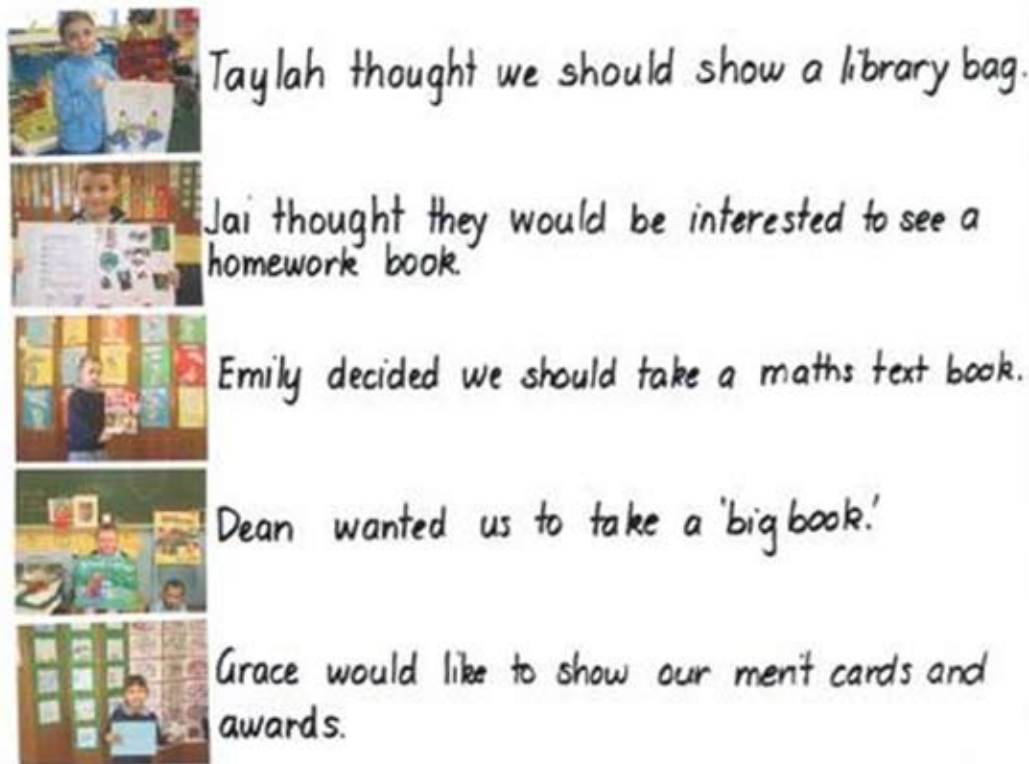
- is my sister allowed to play with me?
- do you have any animals?
- will I get some homework?
- do you have TV?

The preschool children also commented on what they knew about school, noting that there would be:

- hard work; and
- no running in the playground.

When the Kindergarten teacher was preparing to take things from the classroom to the prior-to-school settings, the Kindergarten children brainstormed:

- What do you think they might like?
- What will I take to show them?



When preparing for the visit of the prior-to-school children to school, the Kindergarten children brainstormed:

- What will we put out for them to play with?
- What do you think they might like?
- What do you enjoy doing?
- What do you think they'd be good at having a go at?

Bayley decided the blocks should go out.



Zac thought the children would like the office.



Alexia thought that the puzzles should go out.



Sienna decided duplo would be a good activity.



Following the visit from the prior-to-school children to the school, the Kindergarten children thought about what had happened and what they had enjoyed.

Tasmyn said "I made some friends."



Zara said "I liked when I sat down next to the pre-schoolers at lunch."



Stephany said "I liked having lunch with the children."



Grace said "I thought that the textas and crayons were good for all of us."



Aymen said "I liked helping the children."



Fynnlae said "I liked when I sat down with them and had lunch."



The prior to school children also commented on the visit.

On Tuesday we went on an excursion to Bulli Public School to visit Mrs Robertson and her class KR. We walked along the highway to the school. "It was a long way", said Kaleb and "We saw lots of busy cars," said Ethan.

First we sat with Mrs Robertson's class and sang some songs. Then we read a story, it was called "Mrs Wishy Washy" said Bronte. The children in KR set out lots of activities for us to play with. "I played with the cars", said Oscar and Damon. Amelia did some gluing. Bella, Asha, Lara and Morgan enjoyed drawing. Zachary made friends with a KR boy and they did puzzles together. After we packed up the activities we went to wash our hands and have our lunch. "We ate sandwiches", said Amy. When we finished our lunch we put our scraps in the bin and got ready to come back to Bulli Children's Centre. "We had a turn of the bubblers", said Joshua. "We had a good time", said Dylan.



Reflection on children's engagement, participation and the inclusion of children's voices in transition

From the educators:

The educators across the settings noted how valuable the project had been for them. The visits across settings and the chance to work with educators in these settings were both regarded as very positive events. One teacher commented that "it's a different relationship to what we had". The stronger connections between teachers meant that they felt much more able to call on each other for information or assistance than they had in the past.

For the Kindergarten teacher, a particular benefit was the chance to "re-think the way I did things" in relation to transition, particularly having the Kindergarten and Year 1 children so much involved in the planning of the interactions with the preschool children. For this teacher, the best thing about the project was "the learning, and the professional learning and re-thinking and re-evaluating and trying to make things better for everyone".

Collaboration between the prior-to-school settings and school was enhanced by the project. The amount of time committed by the Kindergarten teacher to planning and visits was critical to its success. Certainly, teachers reported having a different, more positive and consultative relationships as a result of their involvement in the project. The Kindergarten teacher reported learning a lot from the opportunities to spend significant periods of time in the prior-to-school settings.

There were also many benefits for the children involved. The Kindergarten children who visited the prior-to-school settings seemed to develop confidence, particularly when they got to revisit their old prior-to-school setting, saying that they felt "very special". This

feeling was enhanced by seeing themselves, their work and their comments reflected in the documentation that was shared across the settings.

The interactions between the preschool children and the school students were positive. The children from school were excited to revisit their old prior-to-school settings, and the preschool children were impressed to see these children and to hear from them about school.

One of the major challenges of the project was the time commitment required. The Kindergarten teacher spent a considerable amount of time visiting the prior-to-school settings, and teachers in the prior-to-school settings spent considerable time liaising and planning their visits to the school. Balancing existing commitments at school and prior-to-school settings at the same time as introducing new experiences such as the visits, required leadership support from each of the settings as well as positive management from the educators involved.

From the researchers:

There were multiple opportunities to listen to children's perspectives and to incorporate these into both the project and the transition program. Children across all settings were eager to share what they currently understood about school and to ask - and seek answers to - specific questions. The high level of documentation for the activities added to children's understandings - providing opportunities to revisit and explore issues as well as demonstrating very clearly that children's perspectives had been listened to.

Changes in practice as a result of the project

There has been strong recognition of the importance of collaboration between prior-to-school settings and the school, and particularly the opportunities for children to interact and for teachers to co-operate in the delivery of transition programs and experiences.

Children's perspectives were already taken seriously across the settings. However, this project has provided opportunities to document and share children's perspectives in different ways. Having the books made by the children in prior-to-school settings at the school, and the books from school at the prior-to-school settings made some very tangible connections.

Where to from here?

- Build on and strengthen the collaboration that has been the basis of this project;
- Ensure that there are continued opportunities for educators across the settings to interact, plan and evaluate transition to school experiences;
- Celebrate the opportunities to listen to children's perspectives;
- Continue to incorporate the range of strategies used in this project to listen to, document and respond to children's perspectives;
- Continue to rethink transition to school experiences based on children's perspectives of what works and what is valuable and important for them.

Woonona Public School, Balls Paddock Children's Centre, Little and Loud Childcare Centre, Tiny Tots Preschool

Aims

To:

- talk to the preschool children about what they think school will be like;
- talk to children at school about what they think should be included in a transition program;
- seek parents' views about appropriate transition experiences;
- make time for the Kindergarten teacher to visit children and staff in the child care centres;
- seek input from the broad school community about ways to improve the transition to school program;
- involve Kindergarten children in preparing a resource (DVD) to share with new children about what happens across a week in Kindergarten.

Who was involved?

Children who were planning to start school the following year from each of the three prior-to-school settings, staff from these settings, Kindergarten children and teacher, children from Stages 1-3 at the school, members of the broad school community.

What happened?

- Through the Kindergarten teacher, an invitation was extended to the broad school community to comment on the transition program and make suggestions about changes and improvements. From the comments of Kindergarten children, a book called *Let's find out all about school* was produced.
- The prior-to-school teachers and Kindergarten teacher planned a visit to each centre to talk with children about starting school.
- Children at the prior-to-school settings and the school were encouraged to talk about starting school and what was or had been important for them.
- Kindergarten children participated in the development of a PowerPoint presentation for new children, presenting an overview of a week in Kindergarten at their school.
- A small group of Kindergarten children (who had previously attended the respective centres) took the PowerPoint presentation to these settings and shared it, along with their experiences of school, with the children and staff.

Responses/feedback

Children and parents from Woonona Public School were asked about what new Kindergarten children needed to know or do when they started school.

Kindergarten children said that new children should be told:

- At school we wear a uniform.
- We have news time.
- There are lots of different children not just the children from your preschool.
- We do maths and learn about numbers.
- We eat our lunch outside on the lunch seats.
- We don't have a sleep because we do lots of work in our special books.
- We have homework to do each week.
- We play in the classroom and in the playground.

These comments and matching photos were incorporated into a book called *Let's find out all about school*.



At school we eat our lunch outside on the lunch seats.



At school there are lots of children, not just the children from your pre-school.

Other children across the school made suggestions about what was important for new Kindergarten children. These suggestions included:

Early Stage 1 and Stage 1:

- Let them play.
- Let them look at Kindergarten work.
- Let them get to meet the teachers and get to know them.
- Tell them the school rules.
- They should come to a Stage 1 assembly so they know what happens.
- Let Kindergarten children show them around the school and tell them about school.
- Read the new Kinders lots of stories.
- Let them make a card to take back to their preschool teacher.
- Take a photo of them at big school to take back to preschool to show everybody.

Stage 2:

- The children should do lots of drawing, colouring and art/craft activities.
- Listen to stories read by the teacher and be given time to read books themselves.
- Play games outside so they can see the playground and get used to it.
- Look around the school and in the classrooms, canteen, sport shed, toilets ... if possible spend some time in different classrooms to see what happens.
- Meet the other children who are starting school with them.
- Meet their actual teacher and the school principal. This was important as the children might get confused if there was a different teacher there the next year when they start school.
- Meet their buddies before they start school.
- Play with lots of games and toys.

Stage 3:

The children in Stage 3 discussed the buddy system that had been operating for the last few years. They discussed having a buddy when they were in Kindergarten and talked about ways it could be made better. They recommended:

- Each Kinder child should have one Year 6 buddy.
- If possible buddies should be girl with girl, boy with boy.
- Each Kinder class could have a buddy group of 6 to 10 Year 6 students - an even mixture of boys and girls. This group would meet the children at orientation and work with them throughout the year.
- We should continue the current peer support groups as they work well.
- Different Year 6 students could come to Stage 1 sport each week to help the Kinder groups.
- All Year 6 students said they would like to help the Kinders but they would not be offended if they were not part of any program implemented.

Parents were asked for suggestions to improve the transition program. Suggestions included:

- Implementing a buddy system for new parents to the school with other parents assisting.
- On the first day of Kindergarten, inviting all the Mums for a morning tea and chat to reassure them.
- Having playgroups in Term 3 where parents can stay.
- New Kinders meeting their buddies with their parents.
- Have buddies at playgroup sessions.
- Have buddies at Orientation sessions.
- Have buddies there on the first day to greet Kinders and take them to class.

In preparation for visits to each of the prior-to-school settings, the Kindergarten children and teacher made a PowerPoint presentation called *A week in Kinder*.



MONDAY

Reading, Maths, K-6 assembly and playing with friends



WEDNESDAY

English, Maths, Music, Scripture and more



Making the PowerPoint presentation provided an opportunity for everybody in the school context to share their views and ideas. The children thought it particularly important to tell new children what they did at school - hence, the focus on a week in Kindergarten.

The Kindergarten teacher, accompanied by several children who had attended each of the prior-to-school settings visited each setting to share the PowerPoint and to talk about what school was like. The Kindergarten children shared their experiences of school, and the preschool children shared some of their drawings about school and asked questions of both the Kindergarten children and the teacher.

School will be like:

This is Geoffrey playing outside near the sign that says "No pushing, no hitting and no being naughty".



This is the teacher in the classroom doing work with the lights on.

What school will be like.

It's a lovely sunny day.

This is the classroom. Daniel is playing with an aeroplane.

This is the ramp to go outside.



The sandpit with trucks and cars.

Children at the prior-to-school settings had some questions for the Kindergarten teacher and the children.

The children from Little and Loud wanted to know:

- Do you have a sandpit at school?
- What are the rules when you're playing in the playground?
- Will there be someone at big school to help open lunch boxes, food packets and drink bottles?



At Little and Loud, Liam, Keeley and Indilee told the children all about school and especially about the things they like to do.

The children from Balls Paddock wanted to know:

- Can you talk when you eat your lunch?
- Do you go in racing cars outside of the school?
- Can you be naughty at school?



Ashley, Rebecca, Keegan and Will told the children at Balls Paddock that:

- We don't talk with food in our mouths but you can talk when you've finished eating.
- We don't go outside the playground because it might be dangerous;
- We try not to be naughty at school because people might get hurt or it might disturb other children when they are trying to learn lots of things.

The children from Tiny Tots wanted to ask about:

- The school uniform; and
- Wearing hats at school.



At Tiny Tots, Hamaad, Joshua, Cassidy and Gemma came to talk to the children.

Hamaad had been to Tiny Tots last year and he was pleased to see his preschool teachers again.

The Kindergarten children were excited to visit their preschools and happy to share their experiences of school.

Reflection on children's engagement, participation and the inclusion of children's voices in transition

From the educators:

While there were relatively few responses from the broader school community, three parents did make suggestions for improving the program. Across the school, several older children made suggestions about the program. In one group discussion, Year 6 children discussed their transition program. Most were very positive and made helpful suggestions about what should be involved. However, two boys did indicate that they had not had positive relationships with their buddies: "I hated my buddy", "My buddy was horrible to me". While this situation was not positive, their honesty and willingness to talk about ways to change the situation for other children was impressive.

Communication between staff in the prior-to-school settings and school set up a positive context for the visit of the Kindergarten teacher and school children. When these visits occurred, the children were very excited. The preschoolers had been talking and drawing about school, and some children had questions they wanted to ask about school. When the school group arrived, some of the preschoolers tended to be very quiet and maybe a bit overwhelmed. However, all the preschool children who then attended transition to school programs through their various schools did seem to respond positively to these, possibly because they felt that they already had some background knowledge. Some of these children who were involved in the Woonona Transition program recognised the teacher and the children from the visit.

The Kindergarten children who had been on the visits to the prior-to-school settings were also involved in the transition program at the school - for example, visiting the transition group, showing them some work, their books and things, walking with the new children around the school, telling them where things were. That came from their suggestions about how we could change and improve the transition program.

Other suggestions from school children for changing the program related to play. The Kindergarten teacher noted: "play came into everything: they should play outside; they should play inside; they should meet their friends now ... Like [one child] said "They should make something while they're here to take back to their preschool" ... that was really important to her."

Kindergarten children who made the prior-to-school visits were also excited. Their involvement in the PowerPoint presentation, and their appearance in photos used in this, meant that they felt 'special':

"the kids that I took to the preschool just got a lot out of "Aren't I big?" "Aren't I clever". They came back and ... you could just see their chests stick out with "I'm telling these children what I do" ... it was really, really good for their self-esteem, their self-confidence".

The opportunity for more interaction between child care centre and school was welcomed. The Kindergarten teacher commented: "actually going to the preschools and getting to know

them because we just didn't do that before. It never came into the equation before that you really had anything to do with your local preschools. Which, when you think back is so stupid ... every year since I've joined the transition network, I've sort of increased a little bit what I do with the preschools and just getting to know the [children] and their teachers has been a real benefit."

Further, there was recognition that without such visits, teachers in schools often were unaware of what happened in prior-to-school settings: "because we didn't go and see what they do we often misunderstood what they did".

Teachers in the child care centre also commented positively on the increased interaction. As well as the professional benefits of collegial relationships among early childhood educators in different settings, they noted that the opportunities for children to talk about school had prompted a great deal of conversation and reference to siblings and friends who were already at school.

One of the teachers noted that the chance for interaction between preschool and school children sets up opportunities for relationship building. She noted, however, that more than one visit may be necessary to overcome the preschoolers' initial shyness. Without this, there is the potential to listen to the perspectives of the school children, but not so much to the preschoolers.

The project focus of listening to children's voices has had a number of positive impacts. From the prior-to-school teachers: "we've been asking a lot more about their [children's] ideas about school. We haven't said, "This is what school will be like". We're letting them think about what school will be like, listening to their ideas and doing a lot more drawings of their ideas of school and what will happen at school ... It's made us aware of the importance of listening to children and taking on board their ideas. They are very knowledgeable about school, I'm thinking, compared to when I was at school and how scary it was for me to start school. The kids now, they're just so looking forward to it and they want to go out there and they want to do it all. It's different, even to four or five years ago, just having all that knowledge out there. We need to listen to children. What they have to say is really important. Just talking and listening to the children has been one of the biggest things that has happened here..."

From the researchers:

The increased communication and interaction between prior-to-school settings are powerful outcomes from this project. Not only are the educators in each setting more comfortable in their interactions with each other than previously, they are also entering into much more collegial professional relationships where they value the contributions made by educators from different settings and learn from these. In addition, the focus on relationship building between children across the settings is also a major outcome. Finally, the insightful comments from children across the different stages at school remind us that starting school is an important time, and one that has an impact on future engagement with, and at, school.

Changes in practice as a result of the project

- Enhanced visits from the Kindergarten teacher and students to the prior-to-school settings;
- Enhanced visits from the prior-to-school staff and children to the school;
- The introduction of the PowerPoint slide show provided opportunities for preschool children to ask questions about school;
- Incorporation of the children's suggestions into the transition program;
 - As part of the transition program, new Kinders and their parents will be invited to attend a Stage 1 assembly;
 - Each Kinder class will have a buddy group of Year 5 and 6 helpers. These buddies meet the children during Orientation and be there to meet them and help them on the first day next year. These buddies will be with the Kinder class quite regularly in Term 1 and continue to help at certain times throughout the year;
 - Peer support groups will continue in term 1 and Year 5 and 6 helpers will be invited to help with Stage 1 sport; and
 - More play sessions in the transition to school program.
- Incorporation of suggestions from the parents:
 - We will continue with a parent mentoring system and have an informal morning tea and chat for new parents on the first day [this has happened previously, but not all new parents were aware of it]; and
 - During the play sessions, parents will be asked to provide suggestions about what they would like to know about school before their children start school the following year. These suggestions will form a major part of the Parent Information sessions held in term 4.

Where to from here?

- Continue the enhanced collaboration between prior-to-school settings and the school. Look to involve other prior-to-school settings and/or schools in the collaboration.
- Continue to seek input from the children - from prior-to-school through to Year 6 at school - about ways to improve the transition program.
- Develop more ways to promote interaction across the different settings.
- Use the resources to celebrate the transition to school.
- Update the resources as appropriate and relevant to new groups of children.

Voices of Children Expo

At the conclusion of the project, the children who had participated, their teachers, members of the Transition to School Network, council officers, the researchers and some family members attended the Voices of Children Expo, held at the Council Chambers. This was an opportunity for the teachers and children to share their involvement and to celebrate the outcomes.

Each site involved in the project was invited to share their experiences. Each presentation was to be led by the children involved. Needless to say, the children were stunning and their teachers were all to be commended on the incredible journeys they had undertaken throughout the project. Some of the highlights were captured in photos.



Billy Backpack attended the **Voices of Children Expo**, to the delight of the children involved.

In correspondence about the Voices of Children Expo, one of the early childhood educators commented:

It was fantastic to see everyone again at the Council on the 26th September and to observe their varying journeys. I found it particularly beneficial for all our children involved in terms of them being able to see the whole project through from inception to completion. All our children were very excited about participating in the project itself and the excursion (predominantly the bus ride) was a nice 'reward' for all their hard work. I must commend all other schools and prior-to-school settings involved on their fabulous job, the presentations were fabulous!



'Voices of children in starting school' - Bob Perry and Sue Dockett



Starting Big School
in 2007?

You're invited to
Russell Vale Public School's
Kindergarten Assembly

9.15am, September 29th

Russell Vale Community Hall
Corr Keerong Ave & Channon St

Ph: 4284 4396

We hope you can join us!



Prior to school settings.

Little and loud; Balls Paddock and Tiny Tots were involved in the project.

- Visits to the three centres to show 'A Week in Kinder' presentation.
- Ex students of each centre came along to talk about school and answer questions.
- Preschool children asked about big school and told us what they would like to see and do on their school visits.
- Some preschool children drew pictures of big school and gave them to us.

The project overall: What have we learned?

The Voices of Children project has been remarkable in many ways, including:

- the enthusiasm and commitment of the educators involved;
- the interest and competence of the children involved; and
- the willingness of all to undertake a project and make it meaningful for them and their particular educational context.

In summarising the project at the Voices of Children Expo, Bob Perry noted that:

- Participants - both children and educators - were unanimous in expressing their beliefs that the project had given them great opportunities for learning;
- Many links between schools and prior-to-school settings were built or strengthened;
- Children in many cases changed the transition programs through discussions with their teachers;
- Outcomes of the project:
 - Videos were made;
 - Letters were written;
 - PowerPoint presentations were created;
 - Drawings were shared;
 - Buddy pairs were formed;
 - Activities chosen by the children were introduced;
 - Visits were made; and
 - Relationships were built.
- In addition:
 - Children and their views were treated seriously;
 - Children were listened to;
 - Children's contributions improved transition programs;
 - Teachers were impressed by, and used, children's input and perspectives on transition programs.

A lot has been learned from the project about:

1. The importance of taking children's perspectives seriously.

Underpinning this has been recognition of the importance of:

- Taking time to talk with children;
- Ensuring that adults listen to children;
- Making sure adults respond to children.

Conversations with children have occurred in contexts where children feel valued and respected and comfortable sharing their thoughts, concerns and understandings. The classroom contexts generated by educators and children have contributed greatly to this willingness to communicate.

2. The importance of relationships

Critical to this project has been the initiation, building and maintenance of positive relationships between:

- Children and their peers - both in prior-to-school settings and schools;
- Educators in different settings; and
- Educators working across settings.

Children's relationships remain an important element of making a positive start to school. Children who had been at school some time reiterated the importance of buddies as they started school, and children about to start school were eager to meet their buddies, knowing that they would help them manage the new environment of school. Having children from school visit their old prior-to-school settings was a major element of several projects. The positive comments from all the children involved emphasised the importance of maintaining existing relationships while building new ones as well.

While this project was about children and listening to children's voices, the relationships built and/or extended between adults in this project was remarkable. Many professional, collegial relationships were facilitated and supported. These will provide the basis for even greater collaboration in the years to come, and can only enhance the ability of educators to listen to children's perspectives even more.

3. The importance of context

Each of the schools and prior-to-school settings across the project adopted the same general aim of listening to children's voices in the transition to school. However, the implementation of the project at each site varied considerably, emphasising the point that there are many different ways to achieve the same aim. In each specific site, educators responded to their context, making the project directly relevant for that setting and resulting in changes that were significant for that setting. Because of this contextual relevance, the changes made are likely to be sustained and refined over time. It is a strength of the project that local context was considered and there was no attempt to suggest that one idea or approach should be adopted in every context.