Starting School in Brunei: 
listening to children, parents, and teachers

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ABSTRACT This colloquium draws on recent cross-cultural research undertaken in Brunei exploring the transition of the child from home or nursery school to preschool, which is mandatory for all children in their fifth year. Preschool classes are a part of primary schools in the Bruneian education system and are administered by the Ministry of Education. Interviews were held with children, parents, and teachers to gain a comprehensive overview of the reality of the experience from the perspective of the participants. The colloquium concludes with suggestions for culturally appropriate ways to facilitate starting school.

Starting School in Brunei

Negara Brunei Darussalam is an Islamic Malay society and the culture is grounded in an awareness of the need to preserve Malay traditions and the Islamic religion. The country has an officially articulated philosophy, Malay Islamic Monarchy (MIB), which is embedded in the culture. Traditionally Bruneian families are close-knit structures, the extended family is a dominant feature of the society, and care of children is a shared responsibility (Aisah et al, 1995). This has significance for transition programs in the country, as many children starting school have not attended nursery school and have had little experience of life outside the extended family structure.

Starting school is one of the universal experiences of childhood and marks a significant change in a child’s life. It represents a demarcation between the influence of the family and society as a whole. As suggested by Dockett et al (1999), the consequences of this transition have long-term significance in the social, emotional, and cognitive development of the child. Children’s self-image and perceptions of themselves as learners are influenced by their initial school
experiences. I listened to children, parents, and teachers in Brunei to discover the reality of the experience from the perspective of the participants. It was intended to explicate ways in which the transition to school could be facilitated to meet the requirements of children and their families. This was done with an awareness that differences exist between Asian values and Western values and acknowledged that the culture and values of the country should be given foremost consideration when looking at policies and practices. Feeny (1992), Woodhill (1992) and MacNaughton (1996) agree that there is a need to be aware of the dominant 'Western discourse' in early childhood education and to ensure that local culturally specific issues are considered.

Methodology and Aims of the Study

National recognition of the importance of education in the early years is evident in Brunei, where preschool is mandatory for all children in their fifth year. Preschool classes are a part of primary schools in the Bruneian education system and are administered by the Ministry of Education. This colloquium is based on research which investigated the significant experience of starting preschool from the perspective of children and their parents. The school policies, practices, and procedures that were in place were investigated to ascertain whether they were appropriate to assist children and families in this crucial experience. Questions were carefully worded to ensure that they did not contravene traditional customs, such as the taboo on openly criticising the system, or cause 'loss of face' for the subjects of the interview. As one parent stated: 'It is not our custom to interfere or criticise the school, we don’t believe that is right.'

The aim of the study was to investigate people's understandings and perceptions of the experience and so 18 children, 12 parents, and six preschool teachers from three schools were interviewed. These were chosen to represent a diverse cross section of the population and of socio-economic backgrounds. The schools selected were a water-village school representing a low socio-economic background; a land school representing middle and lower grade public servants; and a school representing middle and upper socio-economic groups.

The interviews attempted to find out 'what it was like' for each of the participants as the children started school. Children, parents, and teachers were invited to discuss their feelings and thoughts about the children’s first days at school in semi-structured interviews. The interviews with the children were held in the last weeks of their first term or early in their second term, so that the experiences and memories of their first days were still clear in their minds. This colloquium discusses some of these responses and uses them to provide a basis for a transition program that would be relevant in the cultural context of Bruneian society.
Discussion

The responses of the participants made it clear that continuity between a child’s prior experience and the experience of starting school was not considered and family involvement in Bruneian schools was minimal. There was no evidence of existing transition programs and parents were given neither support nor advice concerning strategies to help prepare children for this major change in their lives. The impression was given that the emphasis was on children and families meeting the requirements of the school, rather than the school planning for the children and families. Schools did not appear to consider the rights or requirements of children and families and home–school communication was limited to a registration meeting on the first day of school where the focus was on administrative matters. ‘The registration meeting is on the first day ... and the principal tells us about rules, who the teacher will be, and what the children need, like pencils and money for food!’ (parent). Two issues of major significance that emerged from the interviews were a lack of communication between the home and school and the distress and separation anxiety felt by many children.

Home–School Communication

Participants were asked about the amount of communication that occurred between the home and the school to assess whether continuity of experience was provided for the children. There was general agreement among the participants that communication was important but differences existed as to how much communication was desirable and appropriate. While seven of the parents felt they had enough communication and involvement with the school, their interpretation of ‘enough’ varied from one parent who visited the school each day, to another who visited the school once a year on Parents’ Day to sign the record book. Visiting a school daily is not unusual in a water village as the schools are linked to homes by walkways that are used by all community members as they go about their daily lives. As family members pass by the schools they often stand at the classroom windows and wave to their children. Two parents suggested that a Parent–Teacher Association would be helpful: ‘a parent–school committee would be a good way for parents to have input in school business’. Parr et al (1993) and Sharpe & Gan (2000, p. 243) have shown that ‘when parents have contact with and are knowledgeable about the school, children make real progress in the early years’.

The teachers all agreed that communication was important but they tended to focus on communication in the context of children ‘having problems’, ‘academic matters’, and ‘parents helping with homework’, rather than as a means of providing continuity of experience to facilitate starting school. This teacher’s statement reflects the attitude expressed in many of the comments made by the teachers:
If there is a problem with a child, I need to talk with the parents. Also with such a large class [28 children] I can’t concentrate on problems with learning and so parents have to help at home.

Only one teacher made a comment that revealed an understanding of child development or the need for understanding between the home and school:

Parent and school contact is important so that we can see the development of the children … when teachers and parents are close it creates a positive and warm environment between the community and the school. As Muslims we should have a close relationship between the parents and among people, to gain the trust of parents and give them confidence to send their children to school.

Parents and teachers all felt that communicating with teachers and preparing children for school was a family responsibility. This may be related to the importance of the family in Bruneian culture. The following remark reflects the attitude expressed by all of the teachers:

Before children start school parents should explain to the children what school is about, the situations they will be in, and also teach them some basic knowledge and skills.

They also commented on parents instilling negative attitudes in the children towards school: ‘Some parents do not have a good attitude, they don’t trust schools and tell children that the schools are too strict.’

Distress and Separation Anxiety

A critical issue that emerged from discussions about the first days was the emotional distress felt by many children. Parents, teachers, and children all commented on the children’s feelings of distress and separation anxiety was a major concern. Only one-third of the children who were interviewed indicated they were happy or pleased to be at school, and having friends or siblings at school was the reason they gave for being happy: ‘I didn’t cry, I was happy because I started with my cousin’. Another child said, ‘I was happy to start school and I liked having my photo taken. I didn’t cry. I was happy because I had many friends’.

Crying appeared to be accepted as a part of the experience of starting school and was spoken of as something to be endured that would pass with time. One parent commented that: ‘apart from crying and getting upset there were no problems’, and another parent stated that: ‘my child was scared about starting and cried, but that only lasted a few days’. However, other parents discussed these feelings of distress as continuing for much longer periods:

she was afraid when she started school, she was scared and crying … it was because school was strange, even now she is still insecure and not happy at school.
This comment was made several months after the child had started school.

Most parents and teachers did not reflect on ways to alleviate the distress and anxiety of the children. However, only two of the parents did make suggestions of positive strategies to help ease the children’s anxiety.

It is a custom that some parents take their child to a bomah before they start school so the bomah can give them something [and] so make the children brave in the classroom, even I, as a teacher, did it for my child. We don’t talk about it because it is not encouraged by our religion.

The best way to help children is to expose them to the outside environment and take them to visit places … so they can see and be exposed to what is around them such as visiting the museum, the hospital and the army and go places. Children should be exposed to the world outside of home. Staying at home and watching TV does not prepare them for school to learn, to understand, to think and know about the world.

Analysis of the data showed that the incidence of crying was linked neither to the age of the child nor to its position in the family. The reasons given by the children for being distressed related to being separated from their parents and being scared. These comments from three of the children indicate some of the anxiety they were feeling:

A bit nervous and sad but I didn’t cry, lots of children did. I was worried about starting because I was afraid of the teacher.

I was sad and unhappy on the first day and I cried. My father took me to school but he didn’t stay and I was worried because my parents weren’t there.

I was sad about going to school and I was worried because I had no friends at school.

Scared, worried, nervous, sad, afraid, and unhappy were the words used to describe the children’s emotions. Separating from their parents, not having friends, and being afraid of the teacher were the reasons given by the children for their negative feelings about starting school.

Change in a Traditional Society

Many of the issues identified by the participants indicate that significant discontinuity of experience exists between the home and the school. Some of the problems discussed would require complex solutions. However, many of the perceived problems could be addressed by procedures that would not require major changes but would assist in the provision of continuity of experience. While such strategies would not require major changes, they would need the support of the Ministry of Education. Support for change from those in authority is important in a hierarchical society such as Brunei.
by Blunt & Wilson (1990) and Burns & Upex (2002) suggest that, in the context of Bruneian culture, change is a complex issue and a dilemma for the society. The social systems and customs of the country are likely to remain resistant to change therefore it is important that change is carefully considered, culturally appropriate, and relevant to the society.

Possible Initiatives to Assist in Preschool Transitions

The findings of this study indicate that there is a need for the Ministry of Education to work with teachers and families to develop a culturally appropriate transition program, which builds relationships between children, families, and schools. When the home and school work together much can be achieved to facilitate starting school, as recognition of a child’s sociocultural context is crucial to successful transitions (MacNaughton, 1995; Ebbeck, 1996; Richardson, 1997). Strategies to facilitate transitions which meet the interests of children and their families are required. Possible strategies could include schools planning informal visits for children and families prior to the children’s first day so they can see the classrooms and meet the teachers and the other children. Schools could also plan social and friendship groupings, allow for staggered intakes, and provide some playground supervision. The image of the child in a Malay cultural context should be central to planning such a program.

Within the cultural context of Brunei there is room for schools to provide support for families at this crucial time by developing family-friendly policies that include giving families support in preparing children for this major change in their lives. A program to provide continuity of experience could be developed in consultation with teachers and parents, and could initially include strategies such as those mentioned. Sharpe & Gan (2000, p. 243) have suggested that teachers need to become aware of ‘the discontinuities in young children’s lives’ when they are starting school. An initiative that invites parents into the school, gives them information on ways to separate from their child, and allows them to help settle their child into the school would provide a possible and achievable beginning for a transition program. Allowing parents to spend time with their child in the new environment and encouraging parents to stay until the child’s anxiety has been alleviated are important aspects of successful transitions (Robbins, 1997; Sims & Hutchins, 1999).

Awareness in the community of the long-term significance of effective transitions needs to be promoted. The importance of family and school partnerships should be acknowledged and strategies to develop inclusive policies based on the sharing of information need to be implemented. The development of culturally appropriate inclusive practices to facilitate starting school is essential for successful transitions.
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References


