

Phenomenological insights into children's experiences: The transition to preschool

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ABSTRACT

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Children's transition to preschool has significant theoretical implications, especially regarding the expectations formed by parents and teachers, which often raise concerns. The purpose of this study is to explore children's experiences during the transition to preschool, understand their perceptions, emotions, and interactions, and identify factors that support a positive adaptation. This qualitative study used a case study to explore the transition of preschool children in Malaysia, focusing on forming social relationships. The research methodology involved observation, interviews, and photography over eight weeks, highlighting the importance of listening and understanding children's voices to support their social and emotional adaptation to a new environment. The results showed that rules and routines played a significant role in helping children adapt to preschool, contributing significantly to their academic, social, and cognitive development. The transition process was enriched by event-based activities such as birthday parties, which were fun and important in teaching social skills through collaboration and shared celebration. This study highlights the importance of designing child-centered educational activities that educate, inspire, and engage children, helping them feel valued and an integral part of their preschool community. The contribution of this study lies in emphasizing the importance of rules, routines, and event-based activities in supporting children's adaptation to preschool. These findings provide guidance for educators in designing child-centered educational programs that enhance academic, social, and cognitive development while strengthening children's sense of engagement and belonging within the preschool community.



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INTRODUCTION

Research equates a child's first day at preschool to undergoing a significant life transition, similar to starting a new job or relocating to a new city, which can be overwhelming and stressful for young children and their parents and teachers (Thomson, 2015). Studies have shown that this stress can lead to anxiety, reluctance to leave parents, and challenges in adapting to new routines (Fives & Buehl, 2012; Kim, 2009; Miller, 2014; Puccini, 2014, Puccini, 2018; Richardson, 1996; Urbina-Garcia, 2019; Webb et al., 2017). Dockett and Perry (1999 & 2004) have identified a significant disparity in the perspectives of children and parents regarding the transition to preschool. While parents often prioritize educational outcomes and academic readiness, children tend to focus more on social challenges, such as making friends and navigating new social environments (Allen & Kelly, 2015; Breiner et al., 2016). This mismatch can sometimes increase stress for children if their social needs are overlooked. Further research underscores the importance of careful preparation and support to ease this transition. Recommended strategies include a gradual introduction to the preschool setting, enhanced communication between parents and teachers, and creating a welcoming atmosphere that can significantly reduce transition-related stress and facilitate a smoother adjustment for everyone involved (Broström, 2002; Fabian & Dunlop, 2007; Margetts, 2002).

Various studies have examined children's transition to school life using various approaches. Salmi and Kumpulainen (2019) highlighted how the visual narrative method can deepen understanding children's reactions and perceptions towards school transition, demonstrating its effectiveness in understanding their experiences. Bryant (2018) found that positive attitudes of teachers and external stakeholders towards teaching in an inclusive environment significantly contributed to the success of inclusion in preschools. Research by Then (2024) showed that regular communication about children's development and general issues was teachers' most frequently used method to involve parents in the transition process, including additional support information and visits to preschools or schools. Alvestad and Sheridan (2014) identified challenges in aligning teachers' planning, documentation, and reflection on children's learning in preschool and suggested improvements in educational practices. Cronin et al. (2022) emphasized listening to children's narratives to support their transition to formal schooling. Pedersen et al. (2023) encouraged preschool teachers to take an engaging and growth-supportive approach that facilitates effective collaboration between children and preschool staff. These studies underscore the importance of communication, understanding, and supportive educational practices in facilitating children's transition to formal education.

The purpose of this study is to explore and understand the transition experiences of young children from their perspectives, focusing on how they form and maintain relationships within a preschool setting in Malaysia. This study aims to fill the existing literature gap by exploring children's social dynamics and collective experiences during this critical period. Adopting a child-centered approach, this study seeks to give a voice to children, who are often marginalized in educational discussions. This study provides deeper insights into the educational and humanitarian value of children's transition experiences and enriches our understanding of their needs and experiences. The findings of this study are expected to support the development of educational practices and policies that are more inclusive and responsive to children's needs. In doing so, this study contributes to the academic field. It provides practical implications for early childhood education, ensuring that educational approaches respect and value children's perspectives as an integral part of their learning and growth process.

In this study focusing on the transition experiences of young children in preschool settings, the hypothesis is that children who can participate and voice their experiences during transition actively will demonstrate better social and emotional adaptation than those not given such opportunities. This hypothesis is based on the idea that children's active participation in the transition process allows them to understand and integrate the changes in their environment, which can help form stable social relationships and improve their emotional well-being. Furthermore, rich social interactions and a child centered approach during this transition period are hypothesized to contribute significantly to

children's social and emotional skills development. Therefore, this study will examine whether preschool environments that are supportive and considerate of children's voices will facilitate a smoother and more positive transition to preschool compared to environments that are less supportive of children's participation. This hypothesis aims to provide empirical evidence to support the implementation of child centered practices in early childhood education while offering valuable insights into the influence of children's participation on their transition experiences.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach to understand how preschool children adjust to a new environment, as suggested by Agius (2013) and Dunwoodie et al. (2023). Three children from a private preschool who had been attending kindergarten for more than three months were selected as participants through purposive sampling. Campbell et al. (2020) emphasize the importance of obtaining informed consent from parents and children considered 'newcomers' to ensure ethical research practices. The study was conducted over eight weeks in a preschool that had been operating for more than ten years, providing a stable and experienced context. This approach enabled the researcher to examine in depth how children cope with changes, integrate into the preschool's structure and routines, and interact with peers and teachers. Overall, the study aimed to provide a holistic understanding of children's adaptation experiences during the transition to preschool, capturing both behavioral and emotional aspects of this critical period.

According to Tessier (2012), data collection should involve multiple techniques, such as observation, interviews, memo notes, and photography, especially during children's early adaptation period. Observations focused on children's interactions with teachers and peers during arrival, departure, mealtimes, and playtime, while recording emotions like joy or distress to understand engagement with the environment. Rimando et al. (2015) highlight the importance of in-depth interviews to explore children's emotional, social, and perceptual experiences during the transition. Starting in the third week, children were allowed to take photos of meaningful daily experiences, which were printed and used to create scrapbooks. Open-ended discussions about photo selection and the creative process deepened understanding of their experiences. This child-centered approach ensured that children's voices were prioritized, providing authentic perspectives and enhancing the credibility and richness of the collected data.

Data were analyzed using an adaptation of Joerdens' (2014) "enduring reflexive model," revised to suit the specific themes of children's transition to preschool. This model allowed for a detailed description of children's unique experiences during this critical phase. The data were coded to identify recurring patterns and themes emerging from interactions, behaviors, and narratives. Four primary themes were identified: relationships, rules, routines, and extraordinary events (Immel, 2005; Watton, 2023). The theme "relationships" examined social bonds between children and peers or teachers, emphasizing the importance of interaction in adaptation. "Rules" highlighted how children learned and followed preschool guidelines to shape behavior. "Routines" underscored daily structures that provided stability and predictability, while "extraordinary events" covered significant occurrences that strongly impacted children, such as special activities. This approach offered a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of children's transition.

Data validity was strengthened through methodological and data source triangulation, consistent with qualitative research principles. Observations, interviews, memo notes, photographs, and scrapbooks provided multiple perspectives on children's experiences. Reflective discussions with children about their photos and creative processes ensured the researcher's interpretations aligned with participants' viewpoints. Thematic analysis using Joerdens' (2014) model confirmed that identified themes genuinely reflected children's experiences rather than researcher bias. This approach prioritized children's active participation, making their voices central to data credibility. By integrating various data collection methods with reflective analysis, the study produced trustworthy, accurate, and holistic findings, offering valuable insights into the social, emotional, and cognitive adaptation of children during their transition to a new preschool environment.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The role of teachers in encouraging friendship and social adaptation in preschool

It appeared that the three participants were comfortable with adults because the participants could understand adults' needs. It should be noted here that the conversations showed that the participants received encouragement and trust that enabled the participants to adapt to a new environment. In particular, teachers' personalities and attention to young children also played a role.

Table 1

Interview Results

No	Informant	Interview Description
1	Interactive Learning Method	Informant K highlighted that in Teacher XX's class, all students were invited to learn through fun songs. Singing and dancing together strengthened togetherness and created a fun and interactive learning atmosphere.
2	Teacher XX's Teaching Approach	Informant C likes Teacher XX's teaching method because she focuses on the subject matter and often directly involves herself in playing activities with students, making each learning session more interesting and enjoyable.
3	Communication Skills of Teacher XX	Informant E described that Teacher XX always speaks in a soft tone, making students feel comfortable and appreciated.
4	Involvement in Playing	Teacher XX not only teaches how to play but also actively participates in the game with students, as mentioned by informant E, showing dedication and full involvement in the teaching and learning process.
5	Innovation in Play	Informant E also noted that Teacher XX often introduced new ways to interact with toys, which stimulated creativity and exploratory learning among students.

Note: data based on the results of interviews with teachers at the school

Interviews in Teacher XX's class show that the interactive teaching approach using songs, dances, and games enhances student engagement and learning motivation. The teacher's gentle communication and use of toys as learning tools promote a supportive environment, fostering social skills, creativity, and cognitive development. This child-centered method transitions students to dynamic learning, highlighting the need for adaptive teaching techniques in preschool.

Children's adaptation in preschool: Initiative, compliance, and social interaction

This study describes how preschool children adjust to the routines and rules of a new educational environment. Through careful observation, the study reveals how children demonstrate independence when entering the classroom, following established routines, and actively participating in planned activities. Their adherence to structure and rules highlights the importance of a systematic approach in early childhood education.

Table 2

Children's Interactions and Rules at School

NO	Findings	Description
1	Initiative and Independence	Children demonstrate initiative and independence when entering the classroom after being escorted by their parents, reflecting their comfort and security in the new environment.
2	Compliance with Routines	Children adhere to established routines, such as placing water bottles on designated shelves and stacking shoes on shoe racks, demonstrating their adaptation to the preschool's structure and rules.
3	Participation in Activities	Participants engage in planned activities, such as playing with toys and storytelling, demonstrating their ability to follow a schedule and participate in group activities.
4	Maintaining Cleanliness and Order	Children maintain the cleanliness and order of the classroom by returning toys and keeping their place tidy, such as putting bags and water bottles in the appropriate places.
5	Collaboration and Social Interaction	Chloe and Ethan, for example, demonstrate effective social interaction during play, working together on activities such as building structures or cooking, and learning to use note cards.

The study findings indicate that clear structures and consistent rules in preschools help children adjust and develop social skills and independence. The reward system teachers implement effectively motivates children to follow the rules and reinforces positive behavior, which is crucial in the early stages of learning. The study also emphasizes the importance of sensitivity and adaptability in teaching methods to meet the needs of each child and maximize their potential. Therefore, educators must continuously monitor and adjust their teaching approaches, ensuring each child feels valued, supported, and accepted in their learning environment.

Friday routines and roles: Book borrowing and responsibilities in the preschool classroom

Analysis of children's interactions and educational activities in preschool on Fridays shows the importance of this day in developing valuable skills and habits. Activities such as borrowing books and playing the pencil box captain are fun and rich learning opportunities, combining literacy, responsibility, and social skills. These activities help children develop important skills in a supportive and interactive environment.

Table 3

Children's activities on Friday

NO	Findings	Explanation
1	Friday Passion	Children were especially enthusiastic on Fridays, when they could borrow story books to take home, highlighting the importance of reading in their routine and boosting family involvement in their learning.
2	Interaction with Reading Materials	Children like Chloe reflect a desire to compare reading at school with reading at home, demonstrating awareness and critical thinking about how information is presented by different people.
3	Writing Skills and Etiquette	Routines like organizing pencil boxes teach children etiquette and organization, crucial for writing skills. Kate's grasp of pencil box etiquette shows her early learning in material management and discipline.
4	Creative Learning Methods	The use of the metaphor of "two little birds" to teach how to hold a pencil demonstrates the use of creative and kinesthetic learning strategies that facilitate children's fine motor development.
5	Collaboration and Interaction in the Classroom	Daily routines and roles assigned to children, such as pencil box captain duties, encourage collaboration and positive interactions between students, supporting a cooperative and inclusive learning environment.

Note: data based on the results of interviews with teachers at the school

These findings emphasize the importance of structure and routine in preschool children's development. Borrowing books, being a pencil box captain, and creative writing promote independence, literacy, and social skills. Educators' consistent approach contributes to children's holistic growth.

Playing, learning, and developing: Play in the social formation of preschool children

Birthday celebrations and imaginative construction in preschool education are important for children's social and emotional development. Research shows that structured play activities increase children's creativity, cooperation, and social bonding and provide happiness. Children like Kate, Chloe, and Ethan show increased interpersonal skills and creativity through these activities.

Table 4

Major Events for Children at School

No	Findings	Explanation
1	Role of Celebrations	Birthday celebrations in preschool provide opportunities for children to interact socially and develop an understanding of culture and traditions through creative activities such as making cakes from toys.
2	Creativity in Construction	Children, like Chloe and Ethan, demonstrate their abilities in collaboration and creativity by building imaginative structures, which helps develop planning and problem-solving skills.

3	Active Socialization	Ethan participates in turn-taking play, demonstrating the importance of sharing and cooperation in the social development of preschool children.
4	Happiness and Well-being	Ethan's expressed happiness during play demonstrates the importance of positive social interactions for children's emotional well-being in educational settings.

Note: data based on the results of interviews with teachers at the school

The study's findings highlight the importance of integrating rich and varied play into the preschool curriculum. Activities such as birthday celebrations and imaginative structure building support children's creativity and symbolic thinking and teach them cooperation and empathy. Social interactions through play, such as Ethan's turn-taking, positively impact their emotional well-being. Well-designed preschool activities are essential for children's holistic development, preparing them for future challenges academically, socially, and emotionally.

Discussion

Forming meaningful social relationships in preschool

Not all children experience a smooth transition to preschool; emotional, social, and cognitive distress can hinder their ability to adjust to their new environment (Harper, 2005; Foti, 2020). This distress can manifest itself in a variety of ways, such as difficulty adjusting to new routines, separation anxiety, or challenges in developing relationships with peers (Beesdo et al., 2009). However, in this study, all three children reported a positive relationship with their transition to preschool. They demonstrated enthusiasm and joy in attending preschool, consistent with Lokken's (2000) findings that children's joy and eagerness to attend school are strong indicators of successful adaptation. Their interactions with peers added evidence of a successful transition. Positive and supportive exchanges characterized their play, and they consistently initiated and responded to conversations with their peers (Gilmore et al., 2019; Taylor et al., 2023).

Effective social engagement helps children build and maintain friendships, which is recognized as one of the signs of a successful transition to preschool education, according to Belcher (2006) and Brooker (2008). Developing these relationships indicates that children can overcome early challenges and integrate successfully into their preschool community (Liu et al., 2023; Elsayed, 2024). Furthermore, these social interactions facilitate them to build trust, collaborate, and understand how to navigate the social dynamics in a new environment. These abilities are essential not only for their adaptation but also for their future interpersonal development (De Prada et al., 2022; Bayley, 2022).

On the other hand, children's ability to establish and maintain friendships with their peers indicates their social competence and adaptability (Guralnick et al., 2007; Khalfaoui et al., 2023). These positive relationships are vital for their emotional well-being and support cognitive and social development during this transition (Mertika et al., 2020; Sahi et al., 2023). This underscores the importance of a successful preschool transition, often characterized by children's ability to form meaningful relationships with peers, adjust to the social environment, and feel a sense of belonging in a new place.

Forming and maintaining meaningful social relationships in preschool is important for children's emotional well-being and serves as a foundation for their cognitive and social development. These skills, such as the ability to build trust and collaboration and navigate social dynamics, are crucial for their initial adaptation and long-term interpersonal growth. This confirms that a successful transition to preschool involves more than just academic adjustment; it involves deep integration into a supportive social environment where children can feel a sense of belonging and value.

Emotional relationships and social adaptation of children in educational environments

Children's emotions and social adaptation in educational settings are complex and vital subjects, especially in the context of their relationships with teachers in the classroom (Aldrup et al., 2023; Wang, 2024). A study involving three participants showed that strong and emotional relationships between children and teachers can significantly influence their learning experiences (Ladd et al., 2006). Data collected during this study showed rich verbal and non-verbal social interactions,

including linguistic and non-linguistic features between participants and teachers (Diadori, 2024). These interactions not only reflect deep emotional connectivity but also show how effectively teachers can engage with students in classroom activities, marking the quality of teacher-student relationships that can be observed through the level of student participation in classroom learning activities (Li et al., 2022; Bhattarai & Wagle, 2023).

Second, the teacher's behavior is recognized and appreciated from the participants' perspective. This, according to Salmon & Barrera (2021) and Almulla (2020), shows that children receive instructions and actively process and respond to how the teacher interacts with them. This recognition is important because it reflects the child's ability to connect effectively with individuals and the environment, a crucial aspect of Bronfenbrenner's (1989) ecological theory. According to Bronfenbrenner, children's development occurs through complex interactions in various microsystems or the immediate environments in which they operate, such as home and school. Children's responsiveness to teacher behavior helps form important social and cognitive bonds.

Children's engagement in activities in multiple microsystems, particularly at home and at preschool, demonstrates how adaptive they are in responding to and integrating with new environments (Campos-Gil et al., 2020; Selman & Dilworth-Bart, 2024). Activities in these multiple environments support children's adaptation in a broader context, incorporating experiences from different sources. Their adherence to these two interrelated ecological systems underscores the importance of children's microsystems and their ability to navigate transitions between these environments (Davenport & Holt, 2019; Martinez-Yarza et al., 2024). By actively participating at home and school, children demonstrate their ability to apply learning and social skills across contexts, enhancing their self-confidence and social competence.

Ultimately, children's adaptation to new environments is greatly influenced by their interactions with these microenvironments (Dauch et al., 2018; Chu et al., 2024). Adapting to change and utilizing experiences from various microsystems not only advances their individual growth but also assists in forming broader social identities (El Zaatari et al., 2022; Navarro & Tudge, 2023). The quality of their interactions with teachers and participation in cross-environmental activities confirms the concept that learning and social adaptation is a profoundly interactive process, where children learn, grow, and develop through diverse and supportive experiences in their educational environment (Jia & Yu, 2021; Hosany et al., 2022).

The study highlights that the quality of verbal and non-verbal interactions between teachers and students significantly impacts children's social and emotional adaptation in educational settings. According to Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory, development occurs through interactions within various environments like home and school. Effective participation in these microsystems builds children's social competence and self-confidence, suggesting that learning and adaptation are interactive processes needing diverse and supportive experiences.

Recognizing rules and routines: Children's approaches to preschool adaptation

Recent research has shed light on preschool children's understanding and adjustment to rules and routines in educational settings, a crucial process for transitioning to more structured educational settings (McLaughlin et al., 2017; Hugo et al., 2018; Ongoren, 2022). Using photography and interview methods, this research explores how children understand and apply various aspects of their school life (Briggs et al., 2014; Shaw, 2020). Despite their young age, children demonstrate a remarkable ability to recognize and follow rules in preschool settings, demonstrating their cognitive capacity to remember rules as well as their awareness of the importance of structure and discipline in social contexts (Pears & Moses, 2003; Kupers et al., 2019; Jordan, 2014).

Furthermore, children are actively involved in creating routines during playtime and academic activities, demonstrating high levels of independence and participation (Vitiello et al., 2012; Ren et al., 2022). These daily routines that are understood and accepted by children are not just schedules but also important vehicles for collaborative learning and social interaction, bridging individual knowledge with shared experiences (Danniels & Pyle, 2023; Milton et al., 2023; Zamiri & Esmaeili,

2024). Activities such as shared stories, shared meals, morning exercises, literacy activities, and morning assembly become more than just daily agendas; they are an integral part of the learning experience that facilitates children's social and cognitive development (Dzainudin et al., 2018; Ndlovu et al., 2023).

The importance of listening to children's views on classroom processes, routines, and governance is also highlighted in this research (Mannion, 2007; Hogan et al., 2014). Discussions with children reflect their daily activities and demonstrate their awareness of the function and structure of these routines (Salmon & Barrera, 2021). This emphasizes the importance of children's dialogue and participation in designing a curriculum that is not only informative but also inspiring and engaging, supporting long-term impactful learning (García-Carrión et al., 2020; Zhai et al., 2024).

Introducing rules and routines in preschool is key to helping children adjust academically and develop social and cognitive skills early. This approach provides a solid foundation to prepare them for future challenges and to participate actively and productively in society. This process ensures that children grow into individuals who can interact effectively and contribute positively in various social settings, supporting their holistic development. Thus, rules and routines are about compliance and fostering adaptability and collaboration skills that will benefit them throughout their lives.

Integrating children's perceptions in designing a successful transition to preschool

Extraordinary events often form rich narratives about life experiences and transformations, especially for preschool children (Altun, 2021; Méndez et al., 2023). Activities such as birthday parties, according to Zacks et al. (2007), are special events for them, often reflecting significant changes in how they see and interact with the world. Although children's views and perceptions of these events may differ from those of adults, their discussions and interactions provide valuable insights into how they process and respond to these experiences (Adler et al., 2019; Downey & Crummy, 2022). As explained by Chaplin et al. (2020), children tend to show great joy in participating in these significant events, often taking the initiative to imitate the events in their play, such as by organizing small birthday parties (Rojaka & Lesinskienė, 2018; Izzo et al., 2022).

According to Pękala and Wichrowska (2022) and Chen and Rivera-Vernazza (2023), children's involvement in event-based activities, such as birthday parties in preschools, not only reflects their enjoyment but also strengthens collaboration and a sense of togetherness within the preschool community. Maleki et al. (2019) and Dhawan et al. (2019) emphasize that through planning and executing small activities in the context of play, children learn and practice social skills while understanding what it means to be part of a community. The findings of this study align with these expert opinions but further indicate that children are not merely passive participants; they actively make decisions and engage with peers, enhancing their abilities to cooperate, support one another, and celebrate moments together. Consequently, event-based activities significantly reinforce children's sense of belonging and collective identity, which are essential for fostering social attachment and deeper communal experiences in preschool.

Research on children's experiences in preschool, as described by Joerden (2014), emphasizes how special events such as birthday parties can profoundly impact children's social experiences and development. These events are opportunities for children to have fun and important forums for social learning and interaction (Yohanna, 2020; Riádigos & Gradaïlle, 2023). They provide a natural context for children to explore social norms and group dynamics and to identify and voice their feelings and thoughts in a supportive setting (Eisenberg et al., 2010; Dugas, 2016).

Given the importance of these events in the context of children's education and development, there is excellent potential to further leverage these activities in designing preschool transition programs. Child-oriented activities during this transition can be restructured to better address children's voices and perspectives, strengthening our understanding of how children make sense of and adapt to new environments. It is recommended that educators and curriculum developers consider integrating methods that are more inclusive and responsive to children's needs and experiences to support a more effective and enjoyable transition to preschool.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the important role of rules and routines in supporting children's adaptation to preschool, facilitating their academic adjustment and social and cognitive development from an early age. This transition process is enriched through event-based activities such as birthday parties, which provide fun and teach important social skills through collaboration and shared celebration within the preschool community. The study emphasizes the need to listen to and integrate children's perspectives in the design of educational activities, ensuring that they not only educate but also inspire and engage children, help them feel a sense of belonging and value, and support their holistic social and cognitive development.

The conclusion emphasizes that young children are active social agents, shaping and interpreting their social experiences, particularly during transitions to new environments like preschool. Theoretical implications highlight the importance of understanding how children navigate relationships, rules, routines, and significant events in adapting to new settings, reinforcing both child socialization and adaptation theories. Practically, this suggests that parents should be more attentive to their children's emotional needs during preschool transitions, while teachers should introduce social interactions, rules, and routines gradually to support a smoother adjustment. Additionally, preschools can implement structured transition programs focused on these key elements to enhance children's emotional well-being during this critical period.

Future research could focus on several areas to better understand children's transitions to preschool. Longitudinal studies can track how relationships, rules, routines, and significant events impact long-term social and emotional development. Cross-cultural comparisons may reveal how different cultural norms influence adaptation. Additionally, research on the role of parental involvement and teacher practices in easing transitions could highlight effective strategies for emotional and social support. Exploring the impact of significant events on adjustment would also provide valuable insights. These studies could help improve preschool practices and transition policies.

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