

Better Beginnings



Illustrations by Shane McGowan

While the start of school is a significant event for students and families, children's experiences are anything but uniform, writes Rozanna Lilley.

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Some cultures have formal rituals that clearly mark a child's first day of school. In Germany, for example, kids receive a large colourful cardboard cone known as a *schultüte*. Inside the cone are sweets, school supplies and small gifts. Once parents have said goodbye and left the school, children may open their *schultüte*. This custom dates back to the early 1800s and seems explicitly designed both to make the first day memorable and to ease the pain of parting. In Russia, a rich body of folklore surrounds school life. Candidates wear old clothes to exams in order to bring good luck, the knotting of handkerchiefs is believed to ward off difficult questions in class, and always travelling to school by the same route is thought to help avoid disaster. In one of the few Soviet festivals to have survived the collapse of the system that created it, children's first day of school is celebrated on the first of September every year. This 'Day of Knowledge' is a festive occasion, especially for those entering school for the first time. Party clothes are worn, gladioli are given to teachers and commemorative photographs are taken with educators, parents and students.

The first day of school has been variously described as 'a major social transition', a 'key experience' and a 'significant rite of passage'. Primary school is the first compulsory educational experience for Australian kids and each year, as a new crop of students make their way through the school gate for the first time, the media enjoys gently satirising the parents who are having trouble letting go of their sometimes bewildered and sometimes very eager charges. There is general recognition that a major change is taking place; that children are experiencing a shift from a more private domestic world to the strictures and opportunities that formal education offers, and that they are embarking on a journey that will have major ramifications on their lives.

While education systems vary across the country, the common pattern is for children to start primary school between the ages of five and six. Following infancy and the toddler years, children have a sense of themselves as individuals who are attached to, yet separate from, their parents. A whole set of physiological, behavioural and cognitive changes take place. Physical agility and fine-motor coordination improve, attention span and memory increase, and social relationships alter too, with the beginnings of an appreciation of multiple perspectives and alternative viewpoints. These combined changes mean that the child is capable of new kinds of learning.

These changes are evidence of what developmental psychologists have sometimes labelled the "five-to-seven-year shift". The famous Swiss psychologist Piaget believed that intellectual performance is driven by developmental processes. While some of Piaget's ideas are now questioned, his notion that children's intelligence develops over time, with each stage building on previous stages, has become part of our accepted wisdom about education. We now take it for granted, for example, that successful education depends on a match between the curriculum and the child's emerging abilities and capacities.

These developmental changes, which are the basis for most formal education systems, are recognised across the globe. Anthropologists have found a similar pattern of changes across most cultures when children are between five and seven years of age. Children's roles and responsibilities alter substantially. All around the

world they are expected to take care of younger children, to tend animals and to help with household chores. It is also common for formal instruction to commence at this age. Whether children learn to set traps, to weave or to write, they are perceived as 'teachable'.

If you ask most adults about their early school years, they will often recall a sense of bewildered confusion. My husband, for instance, tells me that on his first day he simply walked home at recess, thinking that school was over. Occasionally these stories involve mild bullying (I was forced to eat the sand in the sandpit by a 'big

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girl'), but more often they involve just a sense of the unavoidable ups and downs of life in any institutional setting. The years before school take on a nostalgia-soaked aura of happiness and freedom, and sometimes our remembrance of starting school is coloured by the experience of separating from our parents. My memories of primary school in South Perth in the 1960s are framed by the soft black material of my mother's long skirts. Quaking beneath them, I did my best to hide from school, but never managed to avoid going there, except when I faked asthma attacks on sports days.

Of course, primary schools have changed since the 1960s. Children no longer sit in regimented rows of cramped wooden desks, the smell of slightly sour milk and a fear of the cane pervading the classroom. Nevertheless, transition to school remains an emotionally charged event for children, for parents and for educators. Whether you have a child who marches confidently in, ready to take charge of the schoolyard, or one who, like I did, clings tenaciously to your clothing, starting school involves

In Australia, we do not have the benefit of formal rituals to ease children and their parents into the first day of school. Nevertheless, families do engage in a wide range of informal practices that tend to be repeated over the years, giving a sense of predictable occasion to the start of the school year. Many families take photos of their kids on the first day of school. The waxy smell of new school shoes or the pleasure of a newly purchased lunchbox might also mark the occasion. Some families will have a special dinner the night before school starts. Each family will mark the event in their own way, reflecting both the diversity of backgrounds in Australia and our cultural emphasis on individuality rather than on a commonly shared national identity.

These different cultural emphases are also apparent in the values taught to schoolchildren in different countries. In Japan, it is very much the school's responsibility to socialise children in appropriate group behaviour. Children learn that their *wagamama*, or personal desires, must be secondary to the demands of group harmony.

While we might argue that in Australia, too, schooling involves a process of socialisation to group norms, our beliefs about the value of independence and autonomy in childhood provide a counterbalance to these tendencies. When I lived in Hong Kong 10 years ago, I met many local parents who did not want to send their children to English-language schools because of the perceived aggression and unchecked egocentrism of 'Western' kids attending. These contrasts between cultures that are more oriented towards 'groupism' and those, like ours, which encourage individualism, can even be found in differing notions of intelligence. In many Asian cultures, an intelligent child is one who listens passively and memorises information well, whereas most Western parents think of intelligence as an active quality associated with questioning and investigation. Of course, these variations are not always so stark. Everywhere, formal schooling provides a different kind of socialisation from that offered in the family, and everywhere, some children will relish, some will detest and some will remain relatively indifferent to the institutional characteristics of school life.

Not all children have the chance to attend school. In many parts of the world, school may be legally compulsory but families still rely on the earnings of their children to survive. The achievement of universal primary education (involving enrolment, attendance and completion) is one of the eight United Nations Millennium Development Goals. In Australia, there are currently considerable gaps in academic achievement for different population groups.

A recent report entitled *A picture of Australia's children 2009*, published by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, points to ongoing concerns about the chronic health problems of Indigenous children and the link between these problems and lower school attendance.

Many studies have highlighted the additional difficulties experienced by children from minority cultures as they make the transition to school. In multicultural Australia, children arrive at school for the first time with very different home experiences, one of many factors that influence their response to formal education. Bilingual and bicultural children and their families often experience language difficulties and a range of other frustrations in their dealings with schools.

Indeed, one of the most common explanations for a child's lack of school success is the incompatibility between home and school environments. Those who do well are often kids whose home and school experiences significantly overlap and whose parents are engaged in positive ways with school staff. A lack of home-school connections, whether caused by cultural differences or forms of social inequality, can leave children feeling anxious and confused, or simply less likely to respond effectively to the unfamiliar expectations and environment of school. The demand to attend to teacher-directed tasks for concentrated periods of time, the formal etiquette of the classroom with the need to raise one's hand to speak, and the food available at the canteen, may all prove to be more challenging for some kids than for others.

There is general agreement that the provision of quality pre-school programs can help to balance out some of the

inequalities experienced by children entering school. According to a 2009 research report, *From Child Care to School*, co-published by the Children and Families Research Centre at Macquarie University, a number of complex factors interact to impact negatively on children's adjustment to and achievement at school. These may include long hours of daycare and attending multiple care arrangements each week prior to starting school. Such studies have implications for parental decisions about childcare, but many families may have little choice in such matters due to socioeconomic circumstances.

Just as children make the transition from 'child in the family' to 'school pupil', mothers and fathers, too, learn new roles as 'school parents'. Parents potentially bring many strengths to the school relationship, including, most importantly, knowledge of their own child. Many parents also contribute in other ways to schools, offering collaboration in teaching, providing resources and by involvement in policymaking. In the debate over parental involvement with schools, the fact that most families want the best for their kids and do the best they can according to their circumstances is often forgotten.

These days there is more awareness that children from diverse backgrounds may need extra help to access the learning culture of schools. It remains the case, however, that parents from minority and low-income groups tend to 'trust' educators and assume that their involvement is not required. More-privileged parents, on the other hand, use their social competence to make more demands of educators. This tends to give their kids an advantage.

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It is important to remember, however, that while cultural differences in children's ability to access school life are evident in Australia, there are minority groups whose children often excel at school. There are always individuals from disadvantaged communities who struggle past language and cultural barriers to achieve highly at school.

Recent Australian research on starting school has emphasised both the need to have culturally sensitive transition programs and to encourage parental input.

Professors Sue Dockett and Bob Perry at Charles Sturt University have consistently pointed to the importance of socially and culturally appropriate processes and programs to help make transition to school a success. Regular readers will already be familiar with some of their research on the factors leading to a successful transition to school (see *Ready, Set...?* in the December 2009/January 2010 issue of *Sydney's Child*). In other writing, they have alerted us to the need to study children's views on starting school. Listening to children's voices

has enabled these researchers to understand something about the process of beginning school from a child's perspective. Children, it seems, emphasise the need to know the rules that apply at school and to have friends with whom to share the experience.

Engaging with the language and the perspectives that children from different backgrounds bring to school is an ongoing challenge for educators. Recognising this involves more than the provision of multi-ethnic dolls in the home corner. As some of our kids walk through the school gates for the first time, we need to reflect on the complexities of schooling and culture, and on the continuing effects of inequality in forging the school experience of many children and their families. ■

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