‘It’s just fun, not even boring’: Children’s Views of their Preschool Rooms

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Abstract

This study explores young children’s perspectives on their preschool learning environments following their transition from toddler classrooms. Drawing on the sociology of childhood framework, it centers children's voices to examine how they perceive their current classroom experiences. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and child-led tours with seven preschoolers at a university-based childcare centre in Ontario. Thematic analysis revealed that children expressed overwhelmingly positive feelings toward their preschool rooms, highlighted preferred activities (particularly play), and demonstrated awareness of classroom rules and routines. Though the study originally aimed to explore children’s transition experiences, methodological limitations shifted the focus to their present classroom perceptions. This paper also discusses the implications of these limitations and reflects on the complexities of conducting research with young children from the standpoint of a novice researcher.

Keywords: *Children, preschool, transition, classroom environment, children’s perspectives*

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Introduction

"It's just fun, not even boring." These words, spoken by a preschooler in this study, capture the joy and enthusiasm that young children often experience in early learning and childcare programs. However, behind these simple words lies a complex process, one that involves adapting to new environments, routines, and relationships as children transition between classrooms.

In Ontario, over 500,000 young children attend licensed childcare programs at any given time (Ministry of Education, 2025). As they grow, they transition between classrooms within the same childcare centre, a fundamental aspect of their early learning experience. Research highlights that these transitions can be complex, requiring children to leave familiar environments and adapt to new settings, relationships, routines, and expectations (Recchia & Dvorakova, 2012). Early transition experiences have been found to shape children's future adaptation, underscoring their long-term impact (Amerijckx & Humblet, 2015). Given that transitions can pose specific challenges for children (Cryer et al., 2005), it is essential to understand how they experience and navigate these changes.

Much of the existing research focuses on transitions from home to childcare (Amerijckx & Humblet, 2015; Datler et al., 2011) or from preschool to formal schooling (Dockett & Perry, 1999; Mirkhil, 2010; Yeo & Clarke, 2005), leaving a gap in understanding transitions within childcare classrooms. Furthermore, studies that do examine classroom transitions often prioritize adult perspectives, overlooking children's firsthand experiences (Fincham et al., 2015; Cryer et al., 2005). This is despite evidence that children are capable of expressing their views on their learning environments (Dockett & Perry, 1999). Given their ability to articulate their

experiences, it is critical to examine transitions from children's perspectives to gain a more comprehensive understanding of their transitional experiences.

The purpose of this study was to explore how preschool children perceive and experience classroom transitions within the same childcare centre, specifically their transitions from the Toddler Room to the Junior Preschool Room (JPS), and from JPS to the Senior Preschool Room (SPS). By highlighting children's voices, this research aims to provide a deeper understanding of how young children navigate and interpret these classroom transitions. Although the original focus was to examine the transition process itself, methodological and practical limitations redirected the emphasis toward understanding how children make sense of and engage with their new preschool setting.

This study underscores the importance of incorporating children's perspectives into discussions about early learning environments. By centering children's voices, it challenges adult-centric narratives and provides insights that can inform more responsive and child-centered approaches in early childhood education. Despite the significance of classroom transitions in childcare settings, limited research has examined such transitions through the perspectives of children. By addressing this gap, this study aimed to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of transitions and advocate for child-centered approaches that enhance early years experiences.

Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in the sociology of childhood (Prout & James, 1997), a framework that positions children as competent social actors and active participants in constructing their experiences. This perspective challenges traditional notions of childhood as a passive stage of development, instead recognizing children as social actors who shape their own experiences and

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influence those around them (Prout & James, 1997). Childhood, in this view, is a social construct shaped by interactions with peers, educators, and environments, emphasizing that children play a key role in constructing their lived realities (Prout, 2002).

Through this lens, children are not merely recipients of educational norms but actively navigate, interpret, and respond to their classroom experiences (Barnikis, 2015; Luttrell, 2010). While adults may focus on structural aspects of transitions, children highlight the emotional, social, and playful dimensions of their experiences (Christensen & Prout, 2002; Luttrell, 2010). By recognizing children as experts in their own lives, this framework challenges adult-centric views and calls for prioritizing children's voices in research and practice. In response, this study closely attended to children's verbal and non-verbal expressions and incorporated flexible methods that accommodated childrens' preferences for how they wanted to participate or share their thoughts.

Studies employing this framework reveal that children possess sophisticated understandings of their social environments. In this study, children demonstrated nuanced awareness of classroom routines and peer relationships, even when they were not directly prompted to discuss these areas, providing valuable insights into issues that directly affect them (Barnikis, 2015; Mirkhil, 2010). The sociology of childhood framework, as a foundation for documenting children's perspectives, treats children as competent commentators on their lives rather than passive subjects of research (Christensen & Prout, 2002; Prout, 2002). Actively listening to children's voices and incorporating their perspectives into research and practice allows early learning and childcare settings to better support children and create environments that reflect their needs and experiences.

However, despite its strengths, the sociology of childhood perspective is not without tensions and limitations. One key challenge is the assumption that all children can and do exercise agency in similar ways. While this framework emphasizes children's voices, it does not always account for the varying degrees of power and autonomy children have in different social and cultural contexts (Spyrou, 2011). For instance, young children in institutional settings, such as preschools, may still experience adult-imposed structures that shape their ability to freely express their perspectives.

To address these limitations and add interpretive depth, this study also draws from relational and interpretive perspectives that emphasize meaning-making as a co-constructed process between children and adults (Christensen & Prout, 2002). This complementary view recognizes that children's perspectives emerge not in isolation but through their interactions with others, including researchers. Such perspectives help account for ambiguity, silence, or even contradiction in children's responses, and reinforce the need for ethical attentiveness when interpreting children's voices (Spyrou, 2011).

By combining the sociology of childhood with relational approaches, the study positions children as capable informants while acknowledging the social, cultural, and methodological complexities of working with young participants. This integrated approach supports a more nuanced understanding of how young children perceive and navigate their learning environments, and contributes to ongoing discussions about children's agency, voice, and participation in research.

Methods

Participants

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Seven preschool children attending a university-based early learning and childcare centre in southern Ontario participated in the study. To protect their identities, pseudonyms were assigned. Their ages at the time of the study were as follows:

- Jarvis (male, 32 months)
- Peyton (male, 32 months)
- Jack (male, 42 months)
- Saul (male, 44 months)
- Marie (female, 44 months)
- Sarah (female, 45 months)
- Michelle (female, 46 months)

Participants were selected through convenience sampling, based on their availability in the setting on the day of data collection. The primary inclusion criterion was current enrollment in a preschool classroom at the centre.

To ensure ethical engagement with young participants, informed consent was obtained from parents and assent was sought from each child. Children's assent was solicited in age-appropriate and informal ways to support their autonomy and comfort in participating. I approached each child individually in their classroom and explained the study in simple language, using visuals where helpful, to gauge interest and ensure understanding. Children were informed that participation was voluntary and that they could stop at any time without consequence. This process was grounded in the view that ethical research with children should recognize their evolving capacities and right to choose whether or not to participate. Challenges included interpreting children's verbal and non-verbal cues of consent or hesitation, which required attentiveness and sensitivity. This aligns with broader scholarship on ethical

participation, such as Gallagher et al. (2010), who argue that informed consent in school-based research with children must be flexible, responsive, and negotiated within context.

Setting

The study took place in a university-based early learning and childcare centre that follows a play-based curriculum. Classrooms in this centre were structured by developmental stage:

- Junior Preschool Room (Jarvis and Peyton): A smaller classroom for younger preschoolers who had recently transitioned from the toddler room.
- Senior Preschool Room (Jack, Saul, Marie, Sarah, and Michelle): A larger classroom with older preschoolers and a greater variety of activities.

Both classrooms included learning centres for dramatic play, art, reading, and sensory activities. Daily routines incorporated group time, snacks, outdoor play, and transitions. According to the staff, they promote child-led learning within consistent routines.

Data Collection

Data were collected during free play to support natural interactions. The study initially planned for individual interviews, but due to classroom logistics, different formats were used:

- Individual interviews: Conducted with Jarvis and Peyton.
- Small group interviews: Conducted with Jack and Saul together, and with Marie, Sarah, and Michelle in a group of three.

The semi-structured interview format allowed flexibility, enabling children to elaborate on their responses while ensuring key topics were covered. The questions were designed to be open-ended, simple, and developmentally appropriate to encourage engagement. The following questions guided the interviews:

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1. Can you tell me about the preschool room?
2. What is it like being in the preschool room?
3. What do you do in the preschool room?
4. What do you like about the preschool room?
5. What do you like to do?
6. What is your favorite thing to do?
7. What do you not like about the preschool room?
8. What is the most difficult thing to do?

To support discussions, photographs of the preschool and toddler rooms' daily routines were introduced during two initial interviews with Jarvis and Peyton. The intent was to provide visual prompts that might help children articulate their experiences. However, the photographs unexpectedly hindered the interview process, as the children became highly engaged with the images themselves rather than responding to the interview questions. This shift in focus made it difficult to maintain the structure of the interview while still capturing meaningful responses related to the research question. As a result, photographs were removed from subsequent interviews, allowing for more focused discussions.

After each interview, children were invited to lead a classroom tour. Only Jarvis and Peyton opted to participate. The tours were intended to empower children to highlight meaningful spaces, but low participation prompted reflection on how researcher presence may have influenced children's choices.

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis, ensuring accuracy in capturing children's perspectives.

Data Analysis

Given the limited dataset, manual coding was chosen as the most effective approach for managing and analyzing the data. Thematic analysis was conducted through manual coding to identify recurring patterns in children's responses, with key themes emerging around dispositions, perceptions of activities, routines and rules, and transitional experiences.

As the sole researcher, I independently conducted all coding and analysis. To enhance the rigor of the analysis, I engaged in multiple rounds of coding, carefully reviewing transcripts to ensure that emerging themes accurately reflected the children's perspectives.

I assigned codes based on verbal and non-verbal cues and refined them through multiple rounds of review. I categorized children's responses as positive, negative, or ambivalent, with ambivalence assigned when children expressed uncertainty (e.g., saying *"*I don't know*"* or responding with long pauses). I was cautious in interpreting silence, considering Bucknall's (2014) assertion that participant silence may indicate either a reluctance to answer or a misunderstanding of the question. By analyzing responses alongside non-verbal cues, I aimed to ensure that children's perspectives were captured as accurately as possible.

Findings

The interviews with preschool children revealed their perceptions of the preschool room. Four themes emerged through this analysis, as summarized below.

Disposition Toward the Classroom

This category captured children's overall feelings about the preschool room. Responses ranged from *positive* (*"*It's just fun, not even boring*,"* – Jack) to *ambivalent*, where some children hesitated or expressed uncertainty ("I don't know," – Jarvis). Notably, none of the children expressed explicitly negative feelings about the preschool room.

Perceptions of Activities

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This theme reflected children's attitudes toward specific classroom activities. *Positive perceptions* were frequently associated with play, as children enthusiastically shared their favorite activities ("Playing puzzles with my friends," – Saul; "Playing with Goldy fish," – Sarah). *Ambivalent perceptions* emerged when children were unsure about particular activities, such as Peyton's long pause when asked about nap time or Sarah's mixed response about art ("Art is difficult... but I like art."). Although rare, *negative perceptions* were present, as seen when Sarah and Michelle expressed dislike for playdough because it "always makes the playdough so dry."

Routines and Rules

This theme captured children's understanding of classroom expectations and behaviors. Several children spontaneously referenced rules, such as Michelle's explanation that "Before you eat snack, you have to wash your hands." Similarly, Sarah demonstrated an awareness of cleanup responsibilities when she stated, "I tidy up everything." These responses suggest that adapting to the preschool room involved an understanding of social norms and routines.

Transitional Experiences

This category examined children's reflections on past and future transitions. Many children noted similarities between the toddler and preschool rooms, while some expressed a preference for the preschool room ("I like this room better," – Saul). Two children also demonstrated awareness of future transitions to kindergarten, with Michelle stating, "I go to big school," and Sarah adding, "We going to go to the same new school."

Together, these findings offered insight into how children engage with and make meaning of their classroom environments, while also reflecting the limitations of the research design in capturing the full scope of transitional experiences. A deeper analysis of dispositions

toward the classroom and perceptions of activities examined whether children expressed *positive, negative,* or *ambivalent dispositions* toward their experiences.

Dispositions Towards the Preschool Room

Ambivalent Dispositions

When asked to describe their thoughts and feelings about the preschool room, most children expressed uncertainty. Jarvis responded, "I don't know," while Jack said, "We don't know." Peyton and Marie responded with long pauses, indicating hesitation or uncertainty.

Positive Dispositions

Most references to the preschool room were positive. Saul was the only child who described the preschool as "good" when asked an open-ended question about his experience. However, when children were asked the close-ended question, "Do you like being in the preschool room?" all responses were positive.

Negative Dispositions

None of the children expressed explicitly negative feelings about the preschool room.

Perceptions of Activities

Ambivalent Perceptions

Some children expressed uncertainty about specific activities. For example, when asked if there was anything he didn't like to do in the preschool room, Peyton responded with a long pause. Marie also paused when asked if there was anything she liked or disliked about the preschool room.

Children also showed uncertainty about specific classroom activities. Jarvis responded, "I don't know," when asked about yoga and tidy-up time. Peyton responded with a long pause when asked about nap time and playing with water.

Sarah provided a particularly mixed response about art. When asked, "What's so difficult to do in the classroom?" she replied, "Art." However, when asked why, she said, "Because I don't know why," but then added, "I like art." Due to this contradiction, her perception of art was classified as ambivalent. Exploring why certain classroom activities evoke such mixed responses could offer valuable insights into children's experiences related to preschool activities.

Positive Perceptions

When asked if there was anything they did not like about the preschool room, most children indicated that they liked everything about it. Jack stated, "It's [the preschool room] just fun, not even boring," while Saul added, "Not even boring, it's always fun."

The children were invited to share their favorite activities. The majority of their responses were connected to play, as shown below:

- Jarvis – puzzles, story time, reading;
- Peyton – painting, pretend play with blocks, snack and lunch, end-of-day pickup time;
- Jack – playing, painting, dollhouse, puzzles ("play puzzles with my friends");
- Saul – playing, the dice activity (a board game), puzzles ("doing puzzles with my friends");
- Sarah – playing with friends, "playing with Goldy fish," dollhouse, singing, having a snack;
- Michelle – fish, singing.

Additionally, Jarvis associated going outside with positive feelings, and Peyton expressed a positive perception of group time.

Negative Perceptions

There were only two references to negative feelings toward specific activities. Sarah stated, “We don’t like play at playdough,” while Michelle nodded in agreement. When asked why, Sarah explained, “Because it always makes the playdough so dry, so that’s why we don’t like it.”

Routines and expectations

Classroom rules and routines were mentioned in half of the interviews. Responses reflected children’s understanding of expected behaviors within the classroom’s social environment.

- Sarah responded, “I tidy up everything,” when asked what was difficult to do in the classroom.
- Michelle said, “Before you eat snack, you have to wash your hands,” when asked about snack time.
- Jarvis also mentioned classroom routines when looking at photographs of preschool activities. He described the sequence of activities by saying, “Next time we go to… do we go to washroom, we go eat snack, and then…”
- During the group interview with Marie, Michelle, and Sarah, Sarah walked away from the interview. The researcher then patted the chair Sarah had been sitting in and asked Michelle if she wanted to sit there, to which Michelle responded, “That’s Sarah’s spot,” illustrating an awareness of classroom expectations.

Transitional experiences

Children perceived the preschool and toddler rooms as similar, noting that they engaged in the same activities in both settings. Most children said they liked everything about the toddler room as well.

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However, some children expressed a preference for the preschool room over the toddler room. Saul stated, “I like this room better,” and Jack echoed, “I like this room better too.” They had clear understandings about how the preschool room was different from the toddler room in terms of physical surroundings. When asked why, they explained that the preschool room was “more fun” and “bigger.”

Two children demonstrated awareness of their future transition to another setting. They said that they would not be in the preschool room as they grew older. Michelle said, “I go to big school,” and Sarah added, “We going to go to the same new school.”

Together, these findings reveal that preschoolers can articulate nuanced views of their classroom environments. Their responses shed light on emotional attachments, social dynamics, and adaptive strategies, all of which provide valuable insight into how young children experience early education settings.

Discussion

The children in this study overwhelmingly expressed positive feelings about their new preschool learning environment. All participants indicated that they liked being in the preschool room, a finding that echoes earlier research by Dockett and Perry (1999), which reported similarly positive dispositions among children entering school environments.

A central theme contributing to this positivity was play. As a researcher, it became apparent that play served as more than mere recreation; it was a medium through which children expressed agency, formed peer relationships, and engaged meaningfully with their surroundings. With five participants specifically naming play-related activities as favorites, the alignment between children’s enjoyment and the centre’s play-based curriculum appeared strong. This

suggests that developmentally appropriate pedagogies may help ease transitions and foster enthusiasm for learning environments.

Equally important were social relationships. When children described classroom life, they frequently referenced shared play and cooperative routines with peers. These responses underscore the role of friendships in promoting a sense of security and belonging, particularly during times of change. This insight is supported by prior literature emphasizing the importance of peer connections during transitions (Dockett & Perry, 1999; Mirkhil, 2010).

The uniformly positive feedback suggests that the transition practices employed by the centre may have been effective. The absence of overt negative experiences and the children's ease in discussing routines, activities, and friendships may point to their resilience and adaptability. While the research centers on children's voices, a more comprehensive understanding of transition effectiveness would benefit from triangulation with educator and parent perspectives. In addition, future research might also incorporate analysis of pedagogical and environmental supports deployed by educators during transition processes.

Beyond their general enjoyment of the preschool room, the children's perceptions included an awareness of classroom routines. Although they were not directly asked about classroom expectations, discussions about expectations emerged in their responses. Their emphasis on routines suggests that adapting to the preschool room involved understanding and following classroom expectations. This finding is consistent with studies by Dockett and Perry (1999) and Yeo and Clarke (2005), which found that children in school settings reported a strong awareness of conventional rules.

Additionally, children compared the physical and social climates of the toddler and preschool rooms. Jack and Saul noted that the preschool room was "more fun" and "bigger,"

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demonstrating their ability to distinguish differences between the two settings. Michelle's statement about "going to big school" further suggested an awareness of her eventual transition to a larger learning environment. Their discussions about the physical and social aspects of the preschool room indicate that these features play a significant role in their daily experiences. These findings align with Mirkhil (2010) and Yeo and Clarke (2005), who found that children in their studies could distinguish the physical differences between kindergarten and primary school. In Mirkhil's (2010) research, children's reflections on their transitions showed an awareness of their shift to school, mirroring the current study's findings, where two children explicitly recognized their upcoming transition to a "big" or "new" school.

While most children expressed positive sentiments, a few also revealed ambivalent dispositions toward the preschool room and its activities. This complexity suggests that children's experiences are not uniformly positive and may warrant further exploration. Future research could investigate the reasons behind these mixed responses, potentially uncovering nuanced insights into how young children experience early learning environments.

In sum, this study affirms that young children possess the capacity to express thoughtful, reflective views about their learning environments. Their responses offer insights into what matters to them—play, relationships, routines—and how they navigate change. These insights underscore the value of positioning children as central informants in research and practice related to early childhood education.

Methodological Considerations

The original aim of this study was to examine how children embrace changes imposed by classroom transitions, specifically, their perceptions of moving from a toddler room to a preschool room. However, due to the complexities of studying transitions, the small scale of the

study, and my inexperience as a researcher, the research question ultimately went unanswered. This may also be attributed to the study's measures, as the interview questions provided insight into children's experiences in their new classroom rather than their actual transition process. Nevertheless, the study generated a deeper understanding of how children adjusted to and experienced the preschool environment.

To minimize adult power dynamics during data collection, I employed strategies such as walking around the preschool rooms and asking children if they would like to speak with me, rather than having educators direct them to participate. Additionally, I incorporated child-led tours as a method to allow children greater control over the research process. However, only two children chose to participate in these tours. While Christensen (2004) emphasized the importance of interviewers not dominating conversations, my inexperience led me to ask multiple questions before children had the opportunity to formulate responses. This may have unintentionally influenced their answers or limited the depth of their responses.

An area of the data collection process that deserves closer reflection is the classroom tour activity. Initially, I expected the classroom tours to provide an opportunity for children to guide me through the space and elaborate on their preferences in a more naturalistic, self-directed manner. This method was intended to support child agency and reduce adult-imposed structure. However, in practice, only two children opted to participate in the tour. The others declined, which may reflect differences in comfort, interest, or even power dynamics present in the classroom setting. This outcome prompted reflection on whether prior researcher presence, such as walking around the classroom, may have unintentionally made the tour activity seem redundant to the children. It also underscored the importance of offering multiple avenues for

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participation and interpreting children's non-participation as meaningful in its own right. These insights ultimately contributed to the adaptive nature of the research design.

The sociology of childhood framework influenced my approach to data analysis, encouraging me to prioritize children's words in order to authentically capture their experiences. As an early childhood educator, I found it challenging to separate my professional background from my role as a researcher. During the initial stages of coding, I had to be mindful of not imposing adult interpretations onto the data. To mitigate this, I read the transcripts multiple times and employed various coding strategies to ensure that the children's voices remained at the center of the analysis. Incorporating additional perspectives, such as the perceptions of educators and caregivers, may help deepen future analysis by providing context for how children's views are formed and interpreted within their social environments.

Conclusion

Research consistently emphasizes the importance of including children's voices in studies of early learning transitions (Mirkhil, 2010; Yeo & Clarke, 2005). This involves not only understanding their experiences but also positioning children as active participants in the research process. While this small-scale study lacks generalizability, it offers a meaningful contribution by foregrounding the nuanced perspectives shared by young children.

The findings illustrate children's ability to articulate their thoughts and feelings about their preschool environments. Participants shared thoughtful reflections on the enjoyment of classroom activities, the value of peer relationships, and their awareness of daily routines and expectations. These accounts affirm that children are capable commentators on their lived experiences and that their perspectives offer valuable guidance for shaping responsive and meaningful early childhood education practices.

Although the original research question regarding children's experiences of classroom transitions remained only partially answered, the study nonetheless yielded rich insights into how children engage with their current preschool spaces. The lack of distress or dissatisfaction expressed by participants may indicate that transitions were well supported through developmentally appropriate practices, such as play-based learning. The research also reinforced the importance of using flexible, child-centered methodologies that accommodate young children's diverse modes of communication.

These insights carry significant implications for practice, research, and policy. For educators, the study highlights the value of intentionally creating space for children to share their thoughts about routines, activities, and relationships. For researchers, it underscores the need for study designs that are methodologically responsive to young children's developmental and communicative capacities. For policymakers, it emphasizes the importance of grounding program and policy development in the lived realities and voices of children themselves.

Future research could adopt longitudinal approaches to explore how children's views evolve across multiple transitions and over time. Additionally, incorporating non-verbal and multimodal methods, such as drawing, role-play, or storytelling, could provide children with alternative avenues to express their experiences. Using research tools that invite children to engage with immediate, tangible experiences can support more meaningful and participatory expression.

Despite its limitations, this study demonstrates that young children can meaningfully express their views, and that centering those views can support the development of more inclusive, responsive, and developmentally appropriate early learning environments.

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