

**“It will be hard because I will have to learn lots of English”: Experiences of  
education for children newly arrived in Australia**

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### **Abstract**

Educational experiences during childhood are critically important for development, but migrant children often experience unique challenges. To ameliorate these, extra training in English language - such as provided by the Intensive English language program in South Australia (IELP) - is frequently offered to children taking on English as an additional language (EAL). The present study aimed to examine the experience of transition into mainstream classes for children in the IELP, particularly in relation to their overall wellbeing. As such, the study utilised interviews conducted with newly arrived children in Australia aged five to 13 who were enrolled in an IELP, with interviews conducted both pre and post transition into mainstream primary school classes. The findings indicate that most children felt anxious prior to transition, especially regarding speaking English, but were less concerned about this once entering their new class. Making friends was considered to be difficult, but easier when there were children with whom they were familiar from other contexts, or if there was another child in the class with a shared cultural or linguistic background.

**Keywords:** migrant studies, education, participatory research, transition,

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## Introduction

In Australia, approximately 8.3% of children aged between 0 and 17 years are born overseas; that is, nearly 420,000 children (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013a). Many of these children will begin school in Australia with little to no English language skills, and for some, experiences of displacement and trauma. Given that school will form both a large part of children's daily lives, as well as shape their future opportunities, the experiences that children have while at school are critically important to their psychological wellbeing and development (Cox, 2012). This paper considers the process of transitioning into mainstream education for this cohort of children (with 'mainstream' education here referring to the education given to all students in Australia, as differentiated from the intensive English education which many newly arrived children will experience upon their arrival in the country).

For children newly arrived into a country such as Australia, the process of entering mainstream education can provide important opportunities for developing positive social and emotional wellbeing. However, to date, the majority of research from disciplines such as sociolinguistics that consider the education of newly arrived students has focused on language acquisition (e.g., Ollif and Couch, 2005; Valdes, 2010). Such research has posited that it is the learning of English (in the case of English-speaking countries), which will provide children taking on English as an additional language (EAL) with sufficient social and cultural capital to 'fit in' to the dominant or majority group in their resettlement country, thereby facilitating peer relationships and academic achievement (Woods, 2009).

However, while there is clearly an important place for research focusing on best-practice pedagogy in relation to the language education of newly arrived children such research frequently fails to provide insight into the broader social context in which this cohort of young people find themselves at school. For example, there is evidence to suggest that children from marginalized racial or ethnic backgrounds may find themselves in educational contexts where they experience racism (Woods, 2009; Riggs & Due, 2011). Indeed, research from disciplines such as anthropology and psychology has suggested that where the focus is solely on language development, the attribution of 'blame' for difficulties in developing friendships typically falls on newly arrived children taking on EAL themselves – for example,

that they were not successful enough at learning English, making it hard to form friendships (Woods, 2009; Closs, Stead, Arshad, & Norris, 2001). As such, research which focuses solely on EAL development in the education of newly arrived children runs the risk of overlooking a range of other factors that may impact the wellbeing of children with migrant or refugee backgrounds, including lack of social support (Correa-Velez, Giffore, & Barnett, 2010), uncertain sense of belonging and identity (Correa-Velez, Giffore, & Barnett, 2010; Due & Riggs, 2009), and exclusion from friendships with Australian-born peers (Due & Riggs, 2012; Riggs & Due, 2011).

Given the focus on English language development, there remains a lack of research documenting children's subjective wellbeing in relation to transition into mainstream education within the Australian education system, and this is particularly the case for primary-school aged children. As such, this paper examines how children who are newly arrived in Australia cope with their transition into mainstream education, focusing on children between five and 13 years of age. This project uses a participatory research methodology, designed to give the children in the study a voice in terms of their own experiences of entering mainstream education in Australia (Gifford, Bakopanos, Kaplan, & Correa-Velez, 2007). Before discussing the project in more detail, however, we first examine the literature concerning wellbeing and transition into mainstream classes for newly arrived children.

It is important to note here that the terms 'refugee' and 'migrant' carry different connotations and meanings. The children in the current study were primarily migrants (that is, they arrived on migrant visas with families who typically chose Australia as a destination), however many had experienced traumas similar to those experienced by many refugee children, including living in multiple countries, poverty, and no prior formal education. As such, while this paper focuses on migrant children, it also recognises that much of the literature in this area considers both migrant and refugee young people, and that the experiences of these two cohorts may be similar. Hence, the phrases "migrant or refugee" and "newly arrived" children are used as appropriate.

### ***Literature review concerning transition and wellbeing for newly arrived children at school***

For all children, transition into a new classroom can be a challenging period, involving new friends, a loss of previously established connections, and new and unknown circumstances with different norms, rules and expectations (Fabian & Dunlop, 2006). Definitions of what it means to effectively transition can vary depending on the context of the transition. This is demonstrated in a study of young children's transitions from preschool into the first year of schooling in New South Wales, Australia, in which Dockett and Perry (2004) found that parents and teachers differed in what they considered to be important in the transition process. While teachers' primary focus was on the child's ability to function in the classroom (including socially), parents placed more emphasis on their demonstrations of knowledge (Dockett & Perry, 2004). In contrast to this, Fisher (2009) found that five year-old children placed greatest emphasis on their friendships when talking about their transitioning from preschool to school.

Though many of the above experiences may overlap, children newly arrived to Australia are likely to have these experiences complicated by difficulties with language, cultural differences, unfamiliarity with the schooling system, and potentially racism (Woods, 2009). However, there remains little research in this area that focuses on migrant children. This lack of research is problematic in light of research suggesting that more attention needs to be paid to children's subjective wellbeing (Ben-Arieh, 2005, 2006; Fattore, Mason, & Watson, 2005).

Much of the research that does exist on the transition experiences children taking on EAL has focused on older children and adolescents in relation to English language development, and has suggested that difficulties in learning English can significantly affect an individual's experience of adjustment to their new school (Olliff & Couch, 2005; Sanagavarapu, 2010). However, more critical research and theory has suggested that there is not in fact a straightforward relationship between English language acquisition and wellbeing at school. For example, Miller's (2000) study of English language acquisition in refugee adolescents suggests that difficulties with English are particularly problematic because of the considerable role that language often plays in self-representation. Without knowledge of the dominant language, and/or how to use it within their new context, Miller suggests that an individual will be unable to represent him or herself in a way in which they can be 'heard' or

recognised by others, and that as such, the balance of power falls in the hands of those who already speak the language. This is reinforced by Pierce (1995), who points out that the belief that, if given the opportunity, migrants will easily and willingly learn English is problematic in its lack of recognition of the context in which language is learnt; a context that is often imbued with differential power relations. This context is frequently complicated further where families maintain the language of their country of origin within the home, either in order to consciously preserve that linguistic background and their culture, or because family members are unable to speak English (Dodds et al., 2010; Sanagavarapu, 2010).

Given these issues in relation to learning English, friendships with children from similar cultural or linguistic backgrounds appear to be an important contributor to social support for newly arrived children and adolescents adjusting to a new school and culture (Hek, 2005; Kao & Joyner, 2004; Sanagavarapu, 2010). However, despite the advantages gained through such friendships, research also suggests that making social connections with those from the dominant group is important for the transitions of young newly arrived children in terms of their sense of belonging within the community more broadly (Barrett, Sonderegger, & Xenos, 2003; Jackson & Cartmel, 2010). Thus while friendships with those from similar cultural backgrounds help individuals feel more comfortable while they transition, friendships within the majority group are more likely to give individuals the sense that they are ‘fitting in’ (Hek, 2005).

Finally in terms of previous research, the transitional experiences of newly arrived children into mainstream schools are impacted by a number of institutional features within schools. In particular, numerous studies have emphasised the importance of individual teachers in improving and facilitating transitions to mainstream education for newly arrived students (Christie & Sidhu, 2002; Pugh, Every, & Hattam, 2012). Indeed, some have suggested that individual teachers may play a more significant role than the school community more broadly in shaping a child’s experiences (Christie & Sidhu). In addition, children with either refugee or migrant backgrounds entering school in Australia are likely to have experienced differing amounts of formal schooling and have different levels of literacy (in any language) than their Australian-born peers (Christie & Sidhu). Even with new arrival programs in place this heterogeneity can cause difficulties. For example, frequently used

concepts dependent on familiarity with the school system and culture may seem basic to some students, but may be difficult to grasp for others for who are unfamiliar with them (Dooley, 2009).

As such, previous literature points to a number of areas which could offer further support for children as they transition in order to ensure that students develop or maintain positive psychological well-being. In particular, peer and teacher relationships appear to be important in children's sense of 'doing well' at school, and previous literature suggests that facilitating the development of friendships is likely to help students feel like they 'fit in' to their new community (Morrice, 2007).

### ***Intensive English Language Centres (IELC) in South Australia***

Australia is a country arguably characterised by diversity. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), in June 2011 an estimated 27% of the resident population were born overseas (or approximately 6 million people) (ABS, 2011). Of those, most came from England and New Zealand, however in terms of non-English speaking countries, China accounted for 1.8%, India 1.5%, Vietnam and Italy both 0.9% (ABS, 2012). The current research was conducted in Adelaide in South Australia, a State which roughly matches these statistics, with 26.7% of the population of the State born overseas, and 14.4% of the population speaking a language other than English at home (ABS, 2013b).

The implementation of Intensive English Language Centres (IELCs) is a major component of the attempt at improving transitions into formal education for newly arrived children in South Australian primary schools. As noted previously, the primary emphasis in these centres is on the acquisition of English for social interaction, cultural training, and academic English language skills, provided by specialist teachers for between 6 months and a year (DECD, 2012). One of the primary differences between IELCs compared to institutions in other Australian States and Territories is the location of these centres within mainstream school grounds. The aim of this is for children to become more familiar with the physical location of the school they will most likely attend, enable opportunities to make friends, and aid newly arrived children to adjust to their new identity as a student within that school (DECD, 2012). Children are eligible to be enrolled in an IELC if they have been in Australia

for less than 12 months (18 months for children in Reception transitioning to year one). All students within the IELC class are from non-English speaking backgrounds.

There are currently 15 IELCs in South Australia, situated within public schools in both metropolitan and rural areas across the state (DECD, 2012). While the majority of classes are shared solely with IELC students, some schools integrate IELC classes with mainstream classes for subjects deemed appropriate, such as sports and games (Due & Riggs, 2009).

This research therefore aims to consider the factors which impact upon the transition experience for children newly arrived in Australia, with a particular focus on those factors which may affect their well-being. In addition, the research aims to provide a number of recommendations or suggestions in relation to the education of newly arrived children, with a particular focus on providing support during the transition period.

## **Method**

The current project utilised a number of child-led research methods designed to ensure the project emphasised working *with* rather than *on* children. This methodology is considered particularly useful given that the focus of this project was on examining children's experiences of transition and subjective wellbeing, rather than a top-down consideration of the impact of children's literacy on its own. Initially, the project involved the second author (who was initially unknown to the children) spending a total of one day a week for a term in classrooms with the children in order to establish rapport and trust (Gifford, Bakopanos, Kaplan, & Correa-Velez, 2007; Paris, 2011). Following this initial period of rapport and trust building, participants were given disposable cameras and instructed to take photos of things around the school that were important to them. Photo elicitation was used given its previous identification as useful and flexible in encouraging children to talk about their experiences, particularly those taking on EAL (Berman, Ford-Gilboe, Moutrey, & Cekic, 2001; Cappello, 2005; Gifford et al., 2007; Riggs & Due, 2010; Svensson, Ekblad, & Ascher, 2009). Once developed, these photos were used in interviews as prompts for children to talk about their experiences of school.

Interviews were conducted in conjunction with a professional interpreter (also initially unknown to the children) where necessary, and took place in the term prior to transition from the IELC, and were repeated during the children's first term in their new mainstream class. Interviews were designed to gain insight into the broad experiences of newly arrived children in their transition into mainstream classes, in line with the areas identified by the literature as important in this process. Two different interview schedules were developed; one for children in lower primary school classes and one for children in middle and upper primary school. Specifically, the interviews included open-ended questions concerning ethnic identity (based on Phinney 1992), peer relationships and experiences at school and within the broader community based on questions included in the Australian Health and Wellbeing Survey (Bond, Thomas, Toumbourou, Patton, & Catalano, 2000), discrimination (based on Verkuyten, 1998), self-efficacy (see Bandura, 1990; Smith, Walker, Fields, Brookins, & Seay, 1999), and transition (for example, what help have you had with going into a mainstream class?). All questions were developed or adjusted by the researchers in conjunction with the Department of Education and Child Development (DECD), from whom ethics approval was also obtained.

Participants in the study included a total of 15 children (seven female and eight male) aged between five and 13 years at the beginning of data collection. Nine were in lower primary school classes (Reception to year two) and six were in middle to upper primary school classes (year three to year seven). Participants' migrated from eight different countries of origin, including: Pakistan, Nepal, China, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Columbia and India. Many spoke multiple languages, reflecting a number of moves prior to coming to Australia, with languages of origin including Urdu, Punjabi, Nepali, Mandarin, Bengali, Indonesian (Bahasa Indonesia), Spanish, Hindi and Gujarati. The language/s in which they had previously received education was unknown as, given ethical restrictions, the project did not have clearance to examine the experiences of participants prior to their arrival in Australia. The majority of students (12) had experienced continuous schooling in their previous country or countries, two had experienced disrupted learning, and one was entering reception (first year of education) for the first time. No participants in the study had migrated on a humanitarian visa, meaning that the participants can all broadly be classed as migrants rather than refugees, although anecdotal information indicated that a number of students had likely

had some experiences similar to those of many refugees, including living in multiple countries, some experiences of trauma, and little prior formal education. As such, this paper refers to ‘migrant or refugee students’ and ‘newly arrived students’, although the authors acknowledge that those who fall within these categories are heterogeneous, with widely varied experiences and identities.

Participants transitioned to six different transition schools around Adelaide, South Australia. Seven transitioned to a mainstream class in the same school as the IELC, and eight transitioned to classes in different schools. At the time of the second interview, post-transition, all students were in primary school except for one, who transitioned into the first year of high school.

Interview transcripts were analysed using inductive thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). This approach allows the data to guide what the researcher considers to be important within a particular area of study, rather than attempting to fit the data into a predetermined theoretical framework. An inductive approach is also useful when conducting child-led research since it enables the research to focus on the areas of importance for children, which may be different than what is expected by the researcher (Fabian & Dunlop, 2006).

## **Results**

The ranges of responses from children regarding their transitional experiences varied in length, but generally were fairly short, as is to be expected from children of the studied age bracket. All children were allocated pseudonyms in order to protect their identity, and the excerpts of data presented below have not been ‘corrected’ for English expression. Excerpts were taken from all participants’ interviews, and therefore span the whole age range of participants in the study. One participant, “Hermosa”, first transitioned into a class on the same school, and then subsequently into a class at a different school, and her post transition excerpts have therefore been labelled according to which interview they are taken from (same school/ different school).

### *Pre-transition*

From the data collected before children changed classes (that is, whilst they were still in an Intensive English Language Class), three primary themes were identified: (a) Going to school is a positive experience, (b) Friendships are both important and difficult to make, and (c) children expect the move into a new class to be difficult.

#### *Going to school is a positive experience*

For most of the participants, going to school had more positive than negative connotations. Most children stated that they liked going to school, and liked being in their classroom. Children felt good when they were gaining knowledge at school, and commonly made statements such as: “I like to learn about things” (Dai), or that they like to “do some work” (Layak). This was particularly the case for students who felt they had abilities in a particular subject, exemplified in the following interaction:

Interviewer:           What do you like to learn?  
Meng:                    Maths, because I always be very good at that.  
Interviewer:            Are you very good at maths?  
Meng:                    Then I will get smart.

As would be expected, different individuals perceived particular classes as being more or less difficult, and this in turn affected how much they enjoyed that subject and consequently how they perceived their day at school when they had that subject. This means that participants identified days at school to be more enjoyable when they had a particular favourite subject. For example, sports and art were mostly considered to be fun and easy subjects, as seen in the following excerpts: “I like to play soccer” (Baheera); “Interviewer: what about learning sport? Layak: Easy”; “Interviewer: What about learning painting? Meng: 30% is hard. Interviewer: So it’s mostly easy? Meng: Yes”. Significantly, both of these subjects are not reliant on language, and have been noted in previous literature to be important in allowing children newly arrived to Australia to experience success and in encouraging social connections (RHRC, 2007).

More often than not children indicated that they felt positive about school, and supported by other students and teachers. In particular, children frequently indicated that they could ask their teachers for help if they need to, as expressed by Meng : “If I got something I need to talk to them [teachers] about then I talk to them.”

Children both valued and utilised the opportunity to learn within the context of the IELC. This was demonstrated particularly well by Meng, who when asked why he was having a great day, excitedly stated:

- Meng: Because I am very happy and I am happy for many more stuff.  
Interviewer: What are you happy about?  
Meng: About, know more many stuff.  
Interviewer: So what sort of things?  
Meng: Many stuff, and many and many and it gets more and more and more.

Perhaps the most positively perceived aspect of going to school was that school facilitated the opportunity to spend time with friends. Many children stated that they like going to school for reasons based around friendships, such as is seen in the following excerpts: “I like my friends and I like to play” (Jagan); “I like to play on the oval. I like to run around and play running on the grass. I like to run fast with [Name]” (Ikshan); “Because at school I can play with others” (Meng).

In consensus with research emphasising the importance of friendships in enhancing children’s well-being (Wentzel et al., 2004), easing the transition into primary school (Boulton et al., 2011), and increasing children’s enjoyment of school (Tomada et al., 2005), the children in this study evidently drew support from friendships with their peers. Children’s expectation of support from their teachers upon encountering difficulties also matched previous research stressing the importance of child-teacher relationships (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004), and the significance of the teacher’s role within school experiences of children newly arrived to Australia (Christie & Sidhu, 2002; Pugh, Every, & Hattam, 2012).

### *Friendships are important and difficult to make*

While many participants placed great emphasis on their friendships, and generally reported enjoyment at school as partially revolving around existing friendships (as stated in the previous section), the majority nonetheless indicated that making *new* friends in the school environment was a difficult task: “[making friends is] really hard” (Baheera); “[making friends is] 60% is hard” (Meng). The perceived source of these difficulties in initially forming friendships varied. One child felt that communication with other people was hard, and this made it difficult to establish connections, especially meaningful ones:

- Interviewer: is it easy to make friends?  
Dee: umm, yes, but it is hard to make good friends.  
Interviewer: Why is that?  
Dee: Just to talk to people is hard, well, but they just come and go.

Another participant, Meng, attributed his difficulties to a lack of interest from the people he was trying to make friends with, due to friend networks already being established: “Because some friends, some people just not want new friends because they’ve already got lots of friends. They think already ok” (Meng). As such, it appeared that because other children already had friends, the opportunities for him to form mutually beneficial friendships were perceived as being lower.

Though it is worth noting that the children made no indication that any of the above difficulties stemmed directly from racial or ethnic differences, the process of making friends for children newly arrived to Australia in an IELC was nonetheless, as in other studies (Miller, 2000; Riggs & Due, 2010), regarded as a difficult process.

### *Children expect the move into a new class to be difficult*

In line with the theme of difficulties in making friendships, most of the children also expressed negative anticipation for the change in class that they were about to experience, especially if they were moving to a new school. Participants frequently spoke of being nervous about their new class or school:

- Afifah: It is hard. I feel nervous.

Interviewer: And Are you looking forward to going to a new class next year?

Grace: No.

Baheera : I don't want to go out there.

Interviewer: You don't want to go?

Baheera: Yeah, I want to just stay here

The primary reason for this was connected to their perceived ability to make friends in an unknown environment:

Interviewer: Why do you feel nervous? Is there anything, any one thing you can tell me?

Afifah: To make friends.

Children spoke about the possibility of transition being easier if they had established friendships (such as if they were moving school with another student from the IELP that they were already friends with): "Yes, if I was being brave. Or if my friends were there. Or if I know my teacher and I like them. That would make it easier" (Grace). Where this was the case, it appeared that children's fears that they wouldn't know anyone were moderated somewhat, as in the following extract:

Interviewer: I wonder if... they might have a big oval for you to play soccer on. Do you reckon? Maybe, that would be good wouldn't it?

Baheera: Hahaha yeah, If I had friends.

Interviewer: yeah. You'll make some friends.

Baheera: yeah, even [name]'s coming with me.

Interviewer: oh is he? Ah that's good, that's really good.

Baheera: we will play together.

Thus the children included in the study were concerned about, and conscious of, the friends they would have when they entered the new class, and spoke of a lack of friends as being a likely difficulty in the process of changing classes. While this theme was particularly prominent for children who were moving to a new school, anxieties about changing classes were also present for some of the children who were changing to a mainstream class in the

same school: “Interviewer: And are you going into a new class next year? Ikshan: No, no, I don’t want to”.

Another perceived difficulty of moving into mainstream classes involved the expectation that upon entering their new class they would be required to speak more English than before, and that this would add to their difficulties making friends. For example, this expectation is seen in the below extract from Jagan who was transitioning into a class on the same site:

Jagan: It will be hard because I will have to learn lots of English, and to make friends.  
This will be hard. And I will have to talk.  
Interviewer: And is that harder than now, in your class?  
Jagan: Yes it is, because they will know English in the mainstream.

As such, the need to use English in the mainstream classroom, and use it correctly, was portrayed as more consequential than it was in the IELP, as also exemplified in the following statement from Grace: “Interviewer: Why aren’t you looking forward to it? Grace: Because I will miss my old class and I want to be with my friends. And because the English might be hard...”

These extracts highlight the idea that language use is always context bound, and the children in the study became uncertain of their abilities when they were changing contexts (Miller, 1999). This uncertainty was evident both for the children who were entering a mainstream class on the same grounds, as well as for those going to a different school. Some children also linked their fears regarding their ability to speak English with potential academic difficulties within the new classroom. For example, one participant going to a different school stated that she was nervous about her change to a new school because: “umm they are too big. They will know things that I don’t know, and English” (Dai).

However, these disadvantages were not depicted as a permanent or fixed state, and some children suggested that their difficulties could be reduced through other factors, such as teachers, parents, prior visits to the school, and friendships: “Mum and dad, my teachers help me and I get to visit the school” (Baheera). Another participant similarly, when asked whether there was anything that could make it easier for her, answered: “Yes, if I was being brave. Or if my friends were there. Or if I know my teacher and I like them. That would make it easier” (Grace).

As might be predicted by previous research, the children in this study expressed anxiety regarding their transition to a mainstream class, particularly in response to fears that they would lose their current social support network and that their ability to effectively communicate within the context of the new class would be limited. These findings reiterate the importance of social networks and friendships in the transitions of children into school (Boulton et al., 2011; Hek, 2005; Peters, 2003).

### ***Post transition***

Through analysis of the interviews conducted after the children had moved into their new class, three primary themes were identified: (a) newly arrived children continued to view school positively, (b) the transition process is hard, and (c) friendships have a strong influence on perceptions of transition. Interestingly, children's emphasis on English language capabilities that had been present in the pre transition interviews became much less prominent after they had changed classrooms.

### *Children newly arrived to Australia view school positively*

Perceptions of school following transition largely remained positive, both for children who stayed at the same school, and those that moved to a new school. Most children felt that their new peers were friendly and supportive, stating things like: "My classmates are really nice" (Dai), and "I have lots of fun at school, and everyone be's nice to me, and they be friends with me" (Hermosa, different school). Similarly to the pre-transition interviews, the children's positive experiences in school were motivated by a combination of what they were learning, and their ability to play with their friends, as seen in the following statement from Jagan, who transitioned into the same school: "[this was a great day] Because I do PE and I like it. And also I learn Italian. It is great when I learn Italian. Also I see [name] in the yard and he is my friend, from in my old class. And that makes me happy" (Jagan).

As seen in the pre-transition interviews, children again showed preferences for particular subjects, which were identified as making their time at school more enjoyable.

Interestingly, children who transitioned into a new school frequently identified music as their favourite subject:

- Interviewer: What's your favourite subject?  
Dai: Music  
Interviewer: Music? What do you do in music?  
Dai: Like sometimes we've got choir (Yep) and like the teacher was teaching us how to play ukulele.

Again, it is worth noting that, as for sport and art in the pre transition interviews, music is a subject which does not rely upon the use of English and is thus a subject in which newly arrived children may be able to succeed to the same level as all students within their class (RHRC, 2007).

#### *The transition process is hard*

Despite an overall positive attitude to school itself, the children included in the study were not positive about every aspect of the transition process. As might be expected from the literature regarding school transitions for both migrant and non-migrant children, many children felt anxious on their first day (Fabian & Dunlop, 2006), regardless of which classroom they were entering, as demonstrated in the following interaction with a girl that transitioned into a new school:

- Interviewer: And can you tell me how you felt?  
Baheera: um scared  
Interviewer: you were a bit scared?  
Baheera: Yeah  
Interviewer: Why were you scared? What were you thinking?  
Baheera: Because it was a new school and everybody was new.

Many children also missed their old class, especially their friends, particularly when in a new school: "Interviewer: What do you miss about it? Chanakya: umm.... the playground and my

friends”. Some noted that the schoolwork that was expected of them was more difficult than it had been in the IELP, as stated by Grace, who transitioned to the same school:

- Grace: but I miss the old days when I was back in my old class though.
- Interviewer: Why do you say that?
- Grace: Because in the new class there is division and multiplication and it is very hard.

However, despite these difficulties, the participants generally felt positive about the possibilities the new class would afford, for example: “I feel a little bit shy. But I was happy that I could maybe make some new friends. And I was excited as well about it and learning new things (Hermosa, same school)”. Any personal difficulties in adjusting to the new class did not appear to negatively alter participants’ overall perceptions of school, which was portrayed as an inherently good place.

#### *Friendships have a strong influence on transition*

Despite these overall positive feelings towards school, the actual day-to-day experiences of children varied, often in relation to the presence of their friends, or lack thereof. Particularly when children had one or two primary friendships, the absence of these friends could significantly alter the outcome of the day. This is seen in the following excerpt from Baheera, who had previously identified that her transition would be made easier due to changing schools with another student from her IELP class, Chanakya:

- Interviewer (using smiley faces): Did you have a great day or an ok day or a poor day or a bad day?
- Baheera: Bad day.
- Interviewer: Awww, bad day? Do you know... can you remember why?
- Baheera: Um that’s caus um caus Chanakya wasn’t here and I couldn’t get to play with anybody. I was bored.

As such, it appeared that for many of the children, making friends in their new school was a slow process. The theme of friendship was so prominent post-transition that, for ease of analysis, the experiences of children making friends following transition was divided into three sub-themes: (a) Making friends is difficult, especially with people from the mainstream

class, (b) Familiarity provides a strong foundation for friendship, and (c) Shared culture and/or linguistic background provides a good starting point for friendship. These are discussed below.

### *Making friends is difficult*

Consistent with their hesitations prior to changing classes, most students maintained that it was difficult to make new friends in their new classroom: “Sometimes it’s hard [to make new friends]” (Hermosa, different school), and:

- Interviewer: Ok. Um so do you play with [name] at recess or lunchtime sometimes?  
Baheera: No, because he plays with his friends.  
Interviewer: He plays with his friends?  
Baheera: Yeah.  
Interviewer: Ok. So do you think that you would one day be friends with them? Or you’re not sure?  
Baheera: Not sure.  
Interviewer: No? Ok. Would you like to be?  
Baheera: Yeah.

However, one primary difference between the children’s views before and after transition related to perceptions of how language would increase this difficulty. As mentioned previously, prior to transition English proficiency posed a major concern for children, whereas after transition language was not frequently mentioned. Instead, some children found that making friends with others was more complicated than simply being able to communicate, as articulated by the following participant who transitioned to a different school:

- Interviewer: So do you think it’s easy to make friends or hard to make new friends?  
Chanakya: Hard  
Interviewer: Hard to make new friends? Ok. So do you know why that is or you’re not sure why?  
Chanakya: Not sure.  
Interviewer: Do you think that it’s easy to talk to other people or hard to talk to other people?  
Chanakya: Easy.

Another participant who transitioned to a class in the same school as the IELC described a scenario in which he found it difficult to gauge the nature of his new friendships, suggesting that there is a difference between friends and good friends:

- Jagan: It is really, really, really hard to make new friends.
- Interviewer: Why do you say that?
- Jagan: Because new friends can be bad and they don't want to play with you, and first I can have a good time with them but then in it is bad.
- Interviewer: So you played with them first and then stopped?
- Jagan: Yes at first I thought I would play with them but then I play with my old friends again. Some days the new friends want to play with me, and some days they don't.

As suggested by much of the existing literature, the process of making friends for children newly arrived to Australia can be difficult to navigate, and can be complicated by a range of factors, with language and cultural differences being just some of them (Christie & Sidhu, 2002; Due & Riggs, 2009; Miller, 1999; Riggs & Due, 2010).

It should be noted here, that while the children in the current study were directly asked about experiences of racism and discrimination, they rarely indicated feeling discriminated against, despite indicating that it was hard to make friends. Interestingly, no participant indicated that they have experienced teasing or “people being mean” on the basis of their cultural, ethnic, or linguistic background, even at transition schools. We would suggest that this may relate somewhat to the development of social capital, whereby children have developed enough social resources during their time in the IELC to be aware of the social norms and expectations of school in Australia. This is a point we take up further in the Discussion.

### *Familiarity provides a strong foundation for friendship*

One thing that significantly improved children's perceptions of their transition involved knowing someone before entering the mainstream class. Most commonly this familiarity was established through previous shared enrolment in an IELC, with a typical response to the question of ‘have you made friends in your new class?’ being given by a

participant who moved to a class at the same school: “Just my old friends from there from last year. And some are in different classes now but I still play with them” (Jagan). In other cases friendships based on familiarity initially occurred through circumstances outside school, such as living in the same building, or sharing an independent language class, as described by Dai, a participant who transitioned to a different school:

- Interviewer: So how did you meet her?  
Dai: Umm like in a language school.  
Interviewer: Ahhh, so there is a language school somewhere else other than here?  
Dai: Umm, it’s in the city.  
Interviewer: In the city? And do you go there like some nights after school or on the weekends?  
Dai: umm no, I go there when I first came to Australia.

It might be argued that dependence on pre-established friendships may hinder an individual’s ability to make new friends within the dominant culture, but the few examples that were present in the data did not support this, and instead suggested that these friendships encouraged other friendships, or at least increased contact through play. For some children such as Keka, knowing other students functioned as a ‘foot in the door’ that allowed her to meet other children through their friend:

- Interviewer: And so you play with friends from in your old class?  
Keka: Yes, I like to play with [Name].  
Interviewer: What about new friends? Have you met anybody new?  
Keka: Umm, in class they sometimes help me. And I see them in the yard and [Name] plays with them sometimes, so we play together sometimes.

Consistent with the work of Jackson and Cartmel (2010), knowing someone from outside of the context of their new class clearly provided support for many of the children included in this study. This established connection was most common for children who transitioned to a mainstream class at the same school, and who therefore maintained connections with their previous friends.

### *Shared cultural and/or linguistic background provides a good starting point for friendship*

For children newly arrived into a new country and into a new school, shared cultural and linguistic backgrounds can be a binding factor (Riggs & Due, 2010), and children frequently described forming friendships with others from their previous country: “Interviewer: So you met them in your new class? Dai: no no no. Shui’s my Chinese friend.” This was particularly evident for children who transitioned to schools separate from the IELC, who stated that such friendships made the transition easier: “I met them now, but I have played with them at recess. We play hide and seek and on the wooden playground. I see them before as well. They are from my country” (Eranga).

While ease of communication resulting from shared language was cited as one reason for these friendships, for some children there was also the sense that culture itself was inherently an obvious reason for them to be friends and play with one another. That is, while the ability to communicate was obviously advantageous, there was also a sense that children recognised a shared cultural identity and sought out friendships on the basis of this recognition of a degree of similarity above and beyond a shared language. For example, one participant stated “It’s like, easy to have, um, [name], because he’s, he could speak my language and he’s in, like, he’s from my culture” (Baheera).

The development of friendships based on shared cultural backgrounds is not surprising in light of previous research on the transitions of newly arrived children into mainstream schools, which emphasises the positive impact that can result from the presence of other students from similar backgrounds (Hek, 2005; Miller, 1999; Sanagavarapu, 2010). Interestingly however, this theme was less common for children who went to the same school, and therefore came into contact with more familiar peers. In this sense social support for children newly arrived to Australia might be viewed as partially circumstantial. However, it is important to note that in almost all cases, friendships were formed with others who were not part of the dominant group, with only one student stating they were friends with someone born in Australia.

### *Notions of ethnicity amongst students newly arrived to Australia*

The final theme identified in the analysis across both the pre and post transition interviews centred on the way in which newly arrived children discussed their ethnic and national identities. It is worth noting that in the timeframe under consideration in the study, the children's identification with their ethnicity did not seem to be affected by their transition into mainstream schooling. When asked, many participants stated that they liked coming from their previous country, or missed living there. This was most frequently spoken about in relation to the presence of family members who were still there: "because I can speak to my Grandma and my family is there (Hermosa, same school)", "Interviewer: What do you like about being Baheera? Baheera: Um. My own family, and a good friend, and I live in Pakistan", "Um... my other family is there" (Afifah), and:

Interviewer: And do you like being from Indonesia?

Grace: Yes, I like it lots and lots.

Interviewer: What do you like about it?

Grace: I have my family there.

This focus on social relationships is also seen in the ways that many children discussed their friendships with others from their culture, focussing more on the social utility of their connection (we are from the same culture therefore we play together) than the more abstract meaning behind their connection, such as why they were friends: "I also see a new boy in my classroom but I don't know his name. He is from India too so we play together and he is from my country. We play tennis together" (Ikshan). This conceptualisation of ethnic identity in younger children links in with literature suggesting that younger children are likely to focus on overtly defining features like language and origin when describing ethnicity, and develop a more multidimensional conception as they reach adolescence and adulthood (Rogers et al., 2012). For the children involved in this study, cultural and linguistic background appeared to be valued primarily for its association with social support, a finding which is to be expected given the literature concerning the impact of such support, or lack thereof, for children newly arrived in Australia (Correa-Velez et al., 2010).

## Discussion

The current project sought to provide insight into the experiences of children newly arrived in South Australia as they transitioned from an IELC into a mainstream class, at the same or a different school. For the participants of this project, the period of transition carried with it a number of unique challenges, including making and maintaining friends, fears about not knowing English well enough, and learning a variety of different subjects, all within the context of adjusting to a new culture with an often reduced social support network.

The results of the project indicated that friendships were strongly emphasised by the children at all stages of the transition. This supports previous literature that stresses the importance of friendships for all children entering into formal schooling (Jackson 2010, Peters, 2003, Fisher, 2009). However, much of the existing literature concerning newly arrived children transitioning into mainstream classes indicate that these students are likely to face additional social vulnerability (Correa-Velez et al., 2010), and in the current study this was evident in participants' concerns around making friends, together with the comfort provided by the knowledge that a friend was transitioning alongside them. Further supporting previous research was the finding that both participants who were transitioning to a new school and those staying at the same site described friendships with others who shared similar cultural and/or linguistic backgrounds (Hek, 2005; Sanagavarapu, 2010).

However, it is important to note that participants who stayed at the same school were more likely to form friendships with people they already knew or recognised from the IELC rather than indicating that a shared cultural background was important. Research suggests that connections established prior to beginning in a new class can reduce the anxiety and stresses associated with transition, and are greatly beneficial both for immediate companionship and in some circumstances for helping children meet others (Jackson & Cartmel, 2010). As such it is feasible that, for children transitioning to the same school, previous connections remain important after transition, whilst for those going to a new school a shared cultural background provides a point of connection.

While it is not within the scope of this study to explore this further, the possibility is raised as to whether familiarity may be an effective way of reducing the social stress of transitions. This finding is particularly significant in light of the overall difficulties participants experienced making new friends, and because friendships formed through knowing other students were found in some cases to lead to opportunities to extend their social circle and make new friends. Due to the relatively small sample size used in this study, the extent of the above-mentioned differences across groups remains unclear, but warrants further attention in terms of the practical implications of the possibility for schools to help students establish connections to other students prior to transition.

Indeed, given the finding that the participants did not report experiencing racism or discrimination, we would suggest that the IELC provided children with enough social capital (Morrice, 2007; Arriaza, 2003, Grieshaber & Miller, 2010) to ‘pass’ within mainstream education after their transition. Allowing newly arrived children to participate in subjects which are likely to be valued by other students (including sports and art) therefore likely assists in the development of social capital (that is, the ability for students to understand and negotiate social norms and barriers – in this case, within the context of schools), and thus in facilitating students’ ability to ‘fit in’ to the school environment. This finding is in accordance with previous research concerning the development of social capital for marginalised children at school, which indicates that social capital is an important resource in facilitating peer relationships (Arriaza, 2003; Morrice, 2007). We would suggest, however, that the onus must not only be on children who are newly arrived in Australia to do the ‘work’ of making friends, but also on children born in Australia to build bridges to students with migrant or refugee backgrounds (Morrice, 2007). Given the focus of children in this study on subjects that do not rely on English, such connections might well be established on shared interests such as music, art or sport (RHRC, 2007); all subjects in which migrant or refugee students may have equal or greater skills than students born in Australia (see Grieshaber & Miller, 2010). It is also worth noting that the issue of ‘fitting in’ to school may well be mediated by age, and future research could examine this in more detail in relation to migrant students (and see Blatchford, Baines, & Pellegrini, 2003 for some work concerning the impact of age on friendships in general, including in relation to preferences for different schoolyard activities).

The contributions made by difficulties with English language to children's negative experiences during transition into mainstream schooling have received much attention in previous research (Amigó, 2009; Olliff & Couch, 2005; Sanagavarapu, 2010). In concurrence with this research, many of the participants in this study expressed anxiety regarding their need to use English upon entering their new classroom. Interestingly, however, this anxiety was less evident when participants were interviewed after entering their new class, suggesting that children's expectations differed from the reality they experienced. One interpretation of this would suggest that attendance within the IELC successfully equipped the participants with the ability to function within the context of the mainstream class. However, it is also plausible that given that participants favoured subjects that are centred on skills that do not require English language skills, children were able to carve out 'niches' for themselves in these areas and rely less on English than they thought they would have to (Keddie, 2011).

In addition to the choice of subjects that were non English-centric, friendships formed within school were often made and expressed through the process of activity and play rather than in conversation. These findings provide some support to the work of authors who argue that currently too much emphasis is placed on the acquisition of English, whilst necessary changes to other contextual factors within the school environment are overlooked (Amigó, 2009; Christie & Sidhu, 2002; Due & Riggs, 2009). Children enjoyed subjects more when they felt they had abilities in that subject, and this more commonly occurred when their abilities in English were not in focus. This taken in the context of the findings of some researchers that suggest children more easily learn English when they feel confident to make mistakes (Due & Riggs, 2009; Hatoss & Sheely, 2009) provides further support for the notion that individual transitions would benefit from increased positive focus on the skills children have, rather than the language and cultural knowledge which they do not have (Amigó, 2009; Christie & Sidhu, 2002; Due & Riggs, 2009).

As indicated, the participants of this study resoundingly viewed school positively, and this positive attitude to school was returned as a theme both prior to and post transition. Such positive engagement with school occurred despite other difficulties concerning friendship and concerns about English. While the purpose of this study was not to ascertain why children experience the transition to mainstream schools in a particular way, there are a number of

possibilities that may underlie the positivity present in their talk. For example, it is feasible that social desirability may be playing a role in children's appreciation of school. This may be in response to the views of their parents, or in a bid to be identified with their new peers, or because they were sensible to the position of the second author and interviewer as an adult within the school environment. Future research could therefore usefully examine children's experiences of transition in more detail, with a focus on the predictors of successful transitions.

A further consideration concerns the participants' response to questions regarding their ethnicity. As discussed, conceptions of ethnic identity have been implicated in adolescent migrants' experiences of adjustment to school within a new culture, with the optimum approach in most circumstances being that of an integrated identity (Phinney et al., 2001). However, due to the younger age group of children in the current study, ethnic identity appeared to be more ambiguous. In particular, ethnic identity appeared to be important to the participants of this study in so far as it afforded social connections to be established, or was linked with social support networks such as family. However, to suggest that participants defined themselves in terms of their membership within a particular ethnic group would require significant deviation from the data. Participants' responses were in alignment with research suggesting children in middle primary school focus more on concrete aspects of ethnic identity, such as language, rather than on the more abstract and multifaceted conceptions that are thought to develop during adolescence (Corenblum & Armstrong, 2012; Rogers et al., 2012). While ethnic identity (or cultural similarities) appeared to play a role in the development of some relationships within the context of school, more research is required to ascertain the extent to which ethnic identity may impact upon transition experiences.

The generalisability of the findings in this study is limited in two ways as a result of the sample utilised. Firstly, both IELC schools from which participants were selected were situated in central Adelaide. It is possible that metropolitan schools with IELC's differ from their more suburban counterparts in fundamental ways, and that migrant students newly arrived in these areas may subsequently be dealing with a range of different issues during transition, including living in higher socio-economic areas. Secondly, the sample did not include any children who arrived on humanitarian visas, and thus the findings may not be applicable to children arriving in humanitarian visas in Australia. Though it is likely that many

experiences may be shared between those on humanitarian and those on other visas (Riggs & Due, 2011), children from refugee backgrounds specifically may face further challenges when entering a new schooling system in a new country. These challenges may be in relation to both their past experiences and the way they are received by the host nation (Riggs & Due, 2011), and consequently create the possibility that individuals with refugee backgrounds may have different overall experiences of transition (Christie & Sidhu, 2002). As such, the results should not be taken to be representative of students from refugee backgrounds.

Another limitation of the study involves the time period in which the transitions were studied. Interviews were necessarily and intentionally conducted close to when children initially made the transition in order to gain a clear insight into how transition is being experienced. However, because there is no tangible or concrete time when a transitional period is over, continued study of the participants following the second interview would likely provide further insight into the factors that most significantly affect children newly arrived to Australia throughout the process of transition into mainstream schooling. Finally, the study is limited in its lack of data concerning the experiences of children prior to arriving in Australia. For ethical reasons, the interview questions were as unobtrusive as possible, particularly given that data collection took place on school sites, and thus questions were not asked about prior experiences. As such, future research could usefully consider issues such as the impact of prior language of instruction on children's transition experiences.

Finally, given the small sample size of this qualitative research, the study did not have the capacity to examine any differences in the participants that occurred on the basis of age. Further research with a more quantitative design could examine differences in ages in relation to experiences of education, in order to investigate targeted and age-appropriate interventions to assist newly arrived children in Australia.

### ***Conclusion, and suggestions for best practice in relation to transition***

To conclude, we would like to offer some suggestions for best-practice in relation to the transition into mainstream education in a resettlement country for newly arrived children. Our research has indicated that transitioning into a mainstream primary school class from an

IELC class can be a difficult process for newly arrived children, particularly in regards to establishing friendships. Consequently, the process of transition has the potential to impact negatively on both current and future indicators of wellbeing. Given this finding, it is important to ensure that children have the opportunity to build friendships at new schools through areas that they enjoy, such as sport or art. In addition, ‘whole school’ cultures (Hek 2005; Ofsted, 2003; Rutter, 2006), which place an onus on mainstream children to also do the ‘work’ of building friendships can help to ensure that power differentials between mainstream students and newly arrived students can be broken down. Of course, we also recognise that it is not an *a priori* fact that all children newly arrived to Australia will place significant emphasis on friendships, and thus ensuring that this cohort of children are given opportunities to participate on their own terms within the school are important. For example, this may involve sharing information about their cultural or linguistic background (such as food or language or celebrations), or participating in activities they feel they are good at, ensuring that students have the opportunity to build friendships, but also reject relationships should they wish to do so. As noted earlier, focusing on such activities would have the added benefit of reducing students’ anxiety concerning their upcoming transition, whereby the focus of the transition became more about their strengths and less about their English language competency.

Our research also demonstrated that having the opportunity to stay in the school in which their IELC is situated appeared to deliver some advantages compared to children who transitioned to a new school. Specifically, children staying in the same school are able to maintain extra social support by carrying with them familiar associations from within the context of the IELC and into their mainstream class. This finding would indicate that wherever possible policy should reflect this benefit by assisting children to stay at the same school. For the participants in the current study, transport to and from school was a problem for many families who did not have personal cars, and at the beginning of the project, children were eligible to be bussed to and from school. Over the course of the project, the policy changed and this became more restrictive, however more IELCs were opened up in a hope that these would offer families the choice of a centre near their home. It is not within the scope of this paper to comment on these changes, however it should be noted that it would be of benefit if

policies could be tested with regard to the effect they have on the number of children remaining at the same school during their transition to mainstream education.

Despite the challenges faced by students transitioning into mainstream education, the positivity that remained present in children's talk of these transitions suggests that, overall, children newly arrived in Australia value school and will do their best to make the most of their changing situation. It is important that schools match this enthusiasm by creating an environment that fosters as smooth a transition as possible into mainstream classes.

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