

## **“Crying and Chaos” – Starting School Experiences of Teachers in the United Arab Emirates (UAE)**

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# “Crying and Chaos” – Starting School Experiences of Teachers in the United Arab Emirates (UAE)

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## ABSTRACT

The transition to full time schooling can be considered as the most important academic move that children make. Cross-cultural research demonstrates that a positive start to school leads to a more successful school career, academically and socially. Therefore, understanding the viewpoints of teachers about the first days in school is essential in understanding what contributes to a successful transition. This study focused on teacher experiences and perspectives of children starting school in the private school system in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Ten teachers were interviewed using semi structured interviews. Thematic analysis revealed two themes: ‘A New Order’ and ‘Talking not Crying’, along with associated sub-themes. The findings indicated that the focus of the first few days at school was on establishing routines and order, which would indicate successful transition. Crying rather than talking is seen as a barrier to the establishment of the new order and, therefore, is seen as a hindrance to a successful transition. Consideration of cultural factors in how teachers view transition is given with suggestions for best practice in the context, specifically in relation to transition preparation and how to target hard to reach groups. Areas of focus and directions for future research are highlighted.

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Starting school for the first time is an emotional experience for parents, teachers, and children alike. Transition can be defined as movement from one environment or context to another, with a corresponding change in identity; people “change their role in their community’s structure” (Rogoff, 2003 p. 150). Children experience many transitions during their lives, and in educational terms, these include daily transitions between home and school or from one place or activity to another. Vertical transitions include moving from one age group to another or from home to school for the first time. This first transition, which is seen as a process over time from the first visit to final settling in (Broström, 2013) is more significant than later transitions between classes or schools. Transition involves both continuity and change. When parents and staff form good relationships, children settle into the new environment quickly, make friends, form relationships with adults and continue learning, the transition can be seen to have been successful (Broström, 2013). When effective, transition can support or increase children’s confidence (Peters, 2010).

The theoretical framework of transition research is firmly ecological, emerging from Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory, which we draw on in this article, (Bronfenbrenner, 1986) and more recently, the Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition (Rimm-Kauffman & Pianta, 2000). This perspective views the child starting school as part of a family or system, where all the members contribute to the transition experience and are affected by it, together with staff and children at the school, and others in the wider family and community.

Changes and development have been identified at multiple different levels during transition. For example, Griebel and Neisel (2009) describe changes at three levels. These are: the individual level for the child and parents, such as changes in identity (Pianta & Cox, 1999); the interactive level, for example, changes in roles and relationships for the child and family; and the contextual level, for example, a more structured, formal learning environment and curriculum, new travel arrangements, and changes to communication between home and the educational institution (Fabian, 2002). These can be seen to have been negotiated successfully if the child has a positive sense of well-being and is able to cope with the requirements of school.

Fabian (2002) refers to three types of discontinuities which children experience when moving into a formal school setting: physical, social, and philosophical. Physical discontinuities refer to differences in physical spaces between home or preschool and the new school. Having to learn the language and expectations of school, making friends, mixing with a wider group, having interactions with older children in the school community and learning the social rules are all part of the social discontinuities which children experience (Fabian, 2002). Philosophical discontinuities include a focus on more formal work and oral instruction, a move towards splitting play and work and a more formal fixed timetable (Fabian, 2002). Broström (2013) highlights two further potential discontinuities, in communication (between parents, pre-school and school staff) and in children’s expectations of school, although these can be mitigated by transition activities before school starts. Peters (2000) argues that discontinuities between pre-school experiences and school, in terms of the changing environment and differences in curriculum and learning can be unsettling but are also often positive for those who are ready for a challenge and a change. She also suggests that early difficulties in settling in do not always predict later negative school experiences: children may have forgotten about them within their first term. These discontinuities may be exacerbated by pressure on the early school years to adopt more formal approaches to teaching in readiness for the later school years (O’Sullivan & Ring, 2018; Kay, 2018).

Yeboah (2002) also identifies that the language and culture of the home can often be different to that of the school and this, combined with a change of environment, can play a role in the transition to school. Indeed, schools can be seen as a ‘specialised culture reflecting typical beliefs of the local culture about the best ways to educate’ (Brooker, 2008. p. 61). For many children, there is a tension or mismatch between the culture of the home and that of school: even when the same language is spoken, there may be significant differences in the way language is used or the meanings attributed to words or phrases (Brooker, 2008).

## SUCCESSFUL TRANSITIONS

A successful transition results from more than just the individual child’s readiness for school. School readiness has been defined as how ready children are for starting school socially, physically and academically (Nursery Resources, 2019). It develops from the child’s experiences in their early years. UNICEF view successful transitions as arising from a combination of the

child's individual readiness for school, the ability and readiness of schools and early years settings to respond to individual needs, and family readiness to support their child in school and through the transition process (Britto, 2012). Research has demonstrated that a successful start to school is correlated with many positive later academic and social outcomes, and it is therefore appropriate to focus on understanding what helps to make a successful transition experience (Melhuish, et al., 2015).

The success of the transition then does not rest solely on the child and their school readiness, but also on how well prepared and adaptable the adults and contexts in their life are for these changes. Up to 10% of children may experience a negative transition (Brooker, 2008). A review of studies of children's biological stress response showed this can result in elevated stress hormone levels for up to six months for some children, particularly if they are temperamentally more shy or fearful (Parent, et al., 2019). The quality of the teacher-child relationship has the potential to moderate this biological response.

Strategies supporting a successful transition include: established links between schools and pre-schools, open days and visits to the new classroom and meeting staff and children, information sessions, and forming good relationships with families (O'Connor, 2018; Donkin, 2014); becoming familiar with the setting and routines before starting (O'Connor, 2018); continuity between the pre-school and school curriculum and pedagogy (Fabian & Dunlop, 2007; Donkin, 2014); making the transition with friends and being grouped with them in class (Fabian & Dunlop 2007); shorter days or a flexible start initially (Fabian & Dunlop, 2007; O'Connor, 2018); continued good communication (Brooker, 2008; O'Connor, 2018); and listening to children and encouraging independence (O'Connor, 2018).

## TEACHER AND PARENT VIEWS ON TRANSITION

Ecological perspectives suggest that the experiences of every child starting school are unique as each child is operating within their own ecological system. However, stakeholder views regarding transition show a great deal of commonality (Dockett & Perry 2004). Teachers and parents have conceptions of which features of the first year of school are important in determining a successful transition. Dockett and Perry's (2004) findings showed a clear difference between what parents felt was important and the views of teachers. In general, parents placed more emphasis on academic factors such as making progress and having appropriate content knowledge. Teachers were more focused on children developing social skills, adapting to school, making friends, and knowing school routines. This is a common theme within the literature. Atkinson, Takriti and Elhoweris' (2020) study found that teachers value social aspects of transition more than academic development. Lin et al. (2003) also reported that teachers see social skills and competence as vital for children starting school.

Differing expectations between home and school can hinder a successful transition; this is especially likely in international schools where the teacher cannot assume that children share the same language or cultural expectations around learning and pedagogy. Britto and Limlingen (2012) highlighted the importance of researching this area cross-culturally.

## STUDY CONTEXT

The current study was conducted in Al Ain, in the Abu Dhabi Emirate of the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The population of the UAE is predominantly expatriate, with only 11% UAE nationals (Global Median Insight, 2019). The school system in the UAE includes both state and private schools. Private schools are fee paying and are open to both UAE nationals and expatriates. The state system is free, but only offers places to UAE national children. Within the private school system, approximately half the children are expatriates and half are UAE nationals. The teachers in private schools are usually expatriates with English as their first language. Teaching in private schools is conducted in English. The current study was conducted within this private school system.

Discontinuities in transition facing children and families in the UAE entering the private school system include mixing with a much wider social group with children from multiple cultural backgrounds. Additionally, in the UAE, expatriate families are less likely than families in the UK to use informal 'home based' childcare with the extended family as, by consequence of having

moved overseas, most do not have extended family to rely on for this. In 2014, there were 497 nurseries in the UAE, catering for around 35,000 children (Nursery Statistics, 2020). Figures from 2009 indicate that 90% of nursery users in Dubai were expatriates (Bennett, 2009). Although this data is somewhat dated, and based on Dubai, it does indicate that more expatriate children than UAE national children attend some form of childcare outside of the home before school. However, it is relatively common for both expatriates and UAE nationals to have live-in maids who may play a significant role in childcare, either in place of or in addition to formal childcare settings.

The aim of this study was to investigate the experiences of teachers in the UAE working with children starting school for the first time, using qualitative methods to generate in-depth data (Lerner & Tolan 2016). The setting of private schools in the UAE is a unique one where the children in the class are made up of two broad groups: nationals of the country and expatriate children. Further, these children are taught predominantly by Western teachers. Understanding transition in this very unusual setting adds a dimension to the literature which has not been addressed previously. This has the potential to impact policy and practice in the UAE and to highlight potential lines of research around other non-traditional starting school settings, such as those involving refugee children or those from asylum seeking families.

Teachers working in two British-curriculum private schools with similar transition practices took part. Both schools did not offer home visits before school entry. Rather, they ran sessions in the summer term before the children started school the following autumn where children were invited to spend around an hour in the learning environment with their caregivers to experience the classroom and outside area. These sessions must coordinate with current pupil timetables to ensure the environment is relatively empty and calm. Parents are also invited to a meeting with the staff and receive information relating to practical aspects of starting school. In the first term, parents can choose to collect their children at lunchtime or at the end of the school day, if considered appropriate for individual children and if it fits with parents' working schedules, to allow for a staggered start. For most children, therefore, their experience with the setting is relatively limited before starting school.

## METHOD

### PARTICIPANTS

The three private schools in Al Ain offering the British curriculum were contacted to request permission for their early years teachers to take part. Two of the three schools responded. As the research question was related to teachers working with children who were starting school for the first time, only those teachers working in Foundation Stage One (FS1) were invited to participate in the study. Children enter FS1 in the September before their fourth birthday. Teachers were given an information sheet containing all the details of the study and asked to give consent for an audio recorded interview. All ten teachers working in FS1 settings consented to take part.

Participants were all female expatriate teachers whose first language was English. Details of the sample are shown in [Table 1](#). This is due to UAEU regulations which prevent males from

P	NATIONALITY	AGE	N. YEARS TEACHING	N. YEARS TEACHING IN UAE
1	UK	45	23	10
2	UK	47	24	16
3	South Africa	34	11	5
4	Ireland	28	6	4
5	UK	37	10	7
6	UK	35	13	11
7	South Africa	42	18	15
8	UK	54	30	20
9	USA	30	7	4
10	UK	43	20	15

**Table 1** Participant  
Demographics.

teaching in FS1, FS2 or Year 1. Age of participants ranged from 28 to 54 years. The number of years of teaching experience ranged from 6 to 30 years and all had a minimum of 4 years teaching experience in the UAE.

## MATERIALS AND PROCEDURE

The study received ethical approval from the Social Sciences Ethics Committee at the United Arab Emirates University (ERS-2017-5692). Interviews were conducted privately and lasted between 11 and 29 minutes; they were all conducted in English. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, removing all identifiable features.

The interviews were semi-structured: set questions were asked, but participants were encouraged to expand and elaborate. The questions related to experiences of the first days in school, both good and bad. A full list of the questions is provided in Appendix A.

## ANALYSIS

This research sought to theorise teacher expectations by utilising the Ecological Systems Approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1986) to understand teacher expectations around transition to school as constituted by interactions between at the microsystem level, between child and teacher, and at the mesosystem level, between teacher and parents. In addition, using an international perspective, we were interested in how these interact and are shaped by macrosystem levels, for example, government policies, regulations, and societal values.

Following the aim to explore experiences of teachers in the UAE working with children starting school for the first time, and using qualitative methods to generate in-depth data, thematic analysis was conducted on transcriptions formed from recordings of personal interviews with these participants (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that thematic analysis is a flexible method which captures meaning within interview data. To capture themes around thoughts, feelings, and expectations, the interpretation of data was informed by a phenomenological framework. This framework assumes that interview data reflects a reality for participants while allowing us to interpret how on the ground experiences and expectations interact with, and are shaped by, macro levels outlined in the Ecological approach. As recent research has used Thematic Analysis to explore transition to school experience (Litkowski & Kruger, 2017; Machovcová, 2017), the steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) were employed. The final two overarching, in-depth themes around teacher experiences of transition were: 'A New Order'; and 'Talking not Crying'. Braun and Clark (2012) argue that two overarching themes are sufficient to capture the main units of meaning in the data. The analysis below is organized under these two themes and presents sub themes within each one.

## RESULTS

### THEME 1 – THE NEW ORDER

This overarching theme expressed that, while initial disorderliness was expected, it was suggestive of a 'bad day', hindering transition and indicating a settling-in period (Sub-Theme 1 – Organised Chaos). In contrast, orderliness in space and time (through Sub-Theme 2 – Routine and Rules) was a necessary requirement for a successful transition, and therefore, a main aim for the teachers was to transition the children into this 'new order' as soon as possible.

#### Sub-theme: Organised chaos as 'settling in'

Extract 1:

*"Organized chaos. That's the best word I can explain it, is organized chaos because that's what it feels like. Like when you see it happening, it just looks like it completely chaos and there's no control....whereas it actually isn't that way. You know, we know exactly what we're doing and where we're going and how things...but it just feels crazy because you've got 20–25 children starting and this one's screaming... You know, so it feels absolutely chaotic... it's just crazy. But it's a system of crazy, do you know what I mean?" (Interviewee 6)*



Here, interviewee 6 attempts to explain the experience as a feeling similar to “organised chaos”; this inner feeling is juxtaposed with the appearance of chaos, characterised by children “screaming”, visibly and audibly unwilling to be separated from parents, and numerous, lively descriptions of “escaping” children and a lack of a flowing, directional movement of children. However, it is clearly pointed out that while things may appear disorganised, this is to be expected and part of a system of change and transition that will lead, eventually, to a new orderly system. Here then, the value of orderliness is presented as a means to correct ‘a system of crazy’.

Extract 2:

*“So, yeah. It’s just getting them used to being in the room really, that’s a big thing. And where the toilet is. So, yeah. That’s literally it. Like one little girl when she started, and they were playing outside... So that’s a big thing as well, getting used to how to play outside in our little gardens. She was trying to crawl under the fence. Yeah. She was like, “I’m going. I had enough.” So I was like, “Oh my god.” So, yeah. It’s just getting them used to being in the room really, that’s a big thing. And where the toilet is. So, yeah. That’s literally it.” (Interviewee 9).*

Following on, interviewee 9 explains that the reason for the ‘chaos’ is the lack of familiarity with the geographical rules of the new school space, for example, not knowing where the toilet is or where space boundaries lie. In this extract, the solution to creating order is encouraging the children to learn the rules and boundaries as soon as possible. Both extracts also demonstrate the emotional distress experienced by teachers during this ‘chaotic’ phase of the transition, (“it just feels crazy”; “oh my god”).

Interestingly, other researchers have found themes that depicted the early learning environment as ‘organised chaos’, for example Somerville and Green (2011). This research sees the depiction of ‘organized chaos’ as a way to understand the lived experience of “pedagogical encounters”. However, while previous research viewed the experience as a constructive means of enabling ways of being and knowing for alternative and non-conventional learners or early careers teachers, our research found that this experience is seen as a necessary but temporary one, that must give way to orderliness.

## Sub-Theme 2: Routines and rules

To ensure the learning space becomes an orderly environment for everyone, teachers repeatedly talk of using repetitive schedules around clothing, feeding, playing space and time.

Extract 3:

*“And over and over the same thing and you have to introduce everything. In the morning, we do—first, we do this. Second if it doesn’t have to change, just to stay the same all the time until they get used to it” (Interviewee 2)*

Extract 4:

*“Just be consistent, do the same things over and over. Be consistent with the parents. They’ll hate us in the beginning really” (Interviewee 10).*

Repetition is a tool to enable the children to ‘get used to’ the space and how to use the things in it (“we have to literally in the first two weeks teach them how they use all the pens, the glue and scissors” – Interviewee 8). In other extracts caregivers (as in extract 4 and 7) and domestic settings are depicted as responsible for the initial disorderly settling, as binary to a successful teaching setting. Many of the teachers we interviewed told us that caregivers also need to be taught, using similar methods, which can lead initially to negative feelings towards teachers.

Wubbels (2011) argues that focusing on managing a classroom establishes an orderly environment so that students can engage in learning that is effective and meaningful. Macro contexts such as geographical location are crucial: for example, research has found that in Southeast Asia, China, and Japan, classrooms seem to have stronger expectations around the need for orderliness than Western contexts. Some have argued that this may reflect cultural values with Western countries being more individualistic with less hierarchical power differential

between learner and teacher than countries in Asia (Hofstede, 1997). This contextual account allows the UAE context to be seen as one where upholding orderliness- produced through relatively rigid rules and routines, reflecting societal expectations around teacher-learner relations, and rules/routine bounding learning environments as a normative standard is valued.

## THEME 2: 'TALKING NOT CRYING'

Talking not crying was an overwhelmingly dominant theme which all interviewees drew on. Crying is seen as normative and expected in the first settling-in period (Sub-Theme 1) and often explained through micro level influencers, such as temperament. Conversely, within this overarching theme, talking is seen to be a desirable and productive form of communication marking a successful transition (sub theme 1).

### Sub-Theme 1: Crying as settling/unsettling

Extract 5:

*"Quite often what happens is there'll be one person crying who's really upset and it'll be like a dominoes effect. Another one will start and then another one will start and then another one will start" (Interviewee 1)*

Extract 6:

*"You get into the building and there are 50 children crying and...like what is going on?" (Interviewee 9).*

In Extracts 5 and 6, crying children are depicted as being out of control ("what is going on?"), crying is associated with interactive social 'disorder' and therefore seen as being contagious. The crying child is understood to be part of settling-in, a necessary process that needs to be swiftly moved through. In addition, crying is also seen as problematic for both the (crying) child and other children, as 'unsettling'. Caregivers are seen as a potential barrier to settling in, with crying children unwilling to leave parents:

Extract 7:

*"They usually can like be screaming coming in and [we] really have to take them off the parents. And parents on the whole are really good. But you have to kind of say to the parents, say if I take them you have to just go, because if the parents stay around they know they're there and they get more upset" (Interviewee 3).*

Here, the interviewee expects parents to physically leave their children to prevent them getting "more upset". The fact that some parents would require persuasion is to be expected and expressed by the teacher to the parent as an act of kindness, speeding up the transition from the unsettled, crying child to the settled, talking child.

### Sub-Theme 2: Talking is a successful transition

Talking is characterized as being expected to emerge during transition as a more highly valued means to communicate. In Extract 8, our interviewee describes a 'success story' of a child who was shy and who became more outgoing, beginning to use talking instead of crying. Indeed, as seen in extract 8, the teachers told us that not talking was something to be on the lookout for to ensure an intervention is carried out. Talking was widely seen as the key to socialising, whilst not talking or shyness is a barrier to successful transitioning, preventing the child both clearly communicating their needs (Extract 9) and playing with other children (seen as critical to a successful transition).

Extract 8:

*"I have a little boy this year who was super quiet. In the first day and he just sat at a table, like me, the whole day. It was really horrible...but you can't like them force them to play. But then, so I asked his mum and then the next day I was able to get out toys that I know he'd like most...so then he started playing the next day. And then he was talking to me and everything" (Interviewee 3).*



*"If they don't communicate with me their needs, I can't modify my practice to help them. So I'm always encouraging them to speak their needs, no matter what".*  
(Interviewee 10)

Some children settle into school more easily than others. For many children, the first few days, weeks and even months of school can be an emotional time: the transition is much anticipated, but the associated changes can bring about stress and anxiety (Durmusoglu & Erbay, 2013). Many children communicate their distress through crying in this new stressful situation. Research suggests that there are conflicting values around young children crying in classroom settings with crying seen as a means to creativity and freedom, or as antithetical to control in the classroom (Hsueh & Tobin, 2003). Within this group, crying was clearly represented as indicative of lack of control and ineffective communication.

Crying is the earliest form of communication we see in children. Soltis (2004) noted that an infant's crying functions to gain care and close reassurance from caregivers. Owings and Zeifman (2004) also highlight the power of crying to motivate caregiving. They suggest that human crying elicits a rapid response in adults, even in comparison to other loud, alarming noises. It is, in fact, a sound that cannot be ignored. Therefore, it is an extremely effective form of communication.

It is to be expected that children starting school will experience some level of stress and anxiety within the first few days and weeks, and crying can be seen as an expected demonstration of this. In fact, Durmusoglu and Erbay (2013) found that 95% of pre-school teachers, in their USA sample, acknowledged that crying was the most common behavioural response used by children to cope with the stress of starting school. The behaviour of crying often occurs when the child is left by the caregiver in the new environment. Thus, it can be viewed as a highly adaptive, communicative effort to re-establish the physical closeness of the familiar attachment figure.

Reio, et al. (2002) categorised crying as an anxiety behaviour in kindergarten aged children. He identified the importance of the teacher's role, stating "teachers are expected to respond in a sensitive and receptive manner with interactions that will both facilitate children's play and help guide the children's social and emotional development" (p 27). However, more recent research has demonstrated that teachers place increasing importance on children being emotionally ready for starting school, with a view to reducing crying behaviour. Ring et al. (2016) found that teachers placed great emphasis on children being socially and emotionally ready for school, being able to follow routines, being independent and, crucially, having good communication skills. Similarly, studies of teacher expectations in the UAE revealed a similar pattern of importance being placed on new starters being emotionally mature (Takriti, Elhoweris & Atkinson, 2018; Takriti, Atkinson & Elhoweris, 2019; Takriti, 2019; Atkinson, Takriti & Elhoweris, 2020). Parker and Neuharth-Pritchett (2006) and O'Kane and Hayes (2013) found that teachers perceived that early years' provision is becoming more academic and there is a need to focus more on academic skills alongside social competence. Perhaps teachers perceive emotional behaviours such as crying to be a barrier to academic progression in children.

Having said this, it appears that viewing crying as a normative response to the stress of beginning school is not universal cross-culturally. Many examples in the literature demonstrate different conceptualisations of crying according to culture. It appears that for those more collectivist cultures, crying is seen as being a threat to group wellbeing and is, therefore, not expected or encouraged as an acceptable behaviour for children beginning school by either parents or teachers. For example, Cekaite and Burdelski (2021) in a study looking at responses to crying in Swedish and Japanese preschools highlighted that crying is situated within a cultural framework. In this case it was noted that the responses of the adults within the setting can significantly influence the ongoing behaviour. In Sweden, crying when starting school was much more likely than in Japan and was accepted as normal responsive behaviour. Further, Li and Lau (2019) noted that in China, public displays of emotion, such as crying, are discouraged within society. They commented that crying in school transition times in China is not common.

It seems, therefore, that the macrosystem in which a child operates can have a profound impact on their experiences of starting school. In Russia, Moore (2021) noted that teachers

viewed children crying in class negatively and would be likely to draw attention to the child's "negative behaviour" as likely to scare other children. Through this the wellbeing of the group is made the focus of attention and children are discouraged from harming this.

Ahn (2016) also highlighted the importance culture plays when viewing crying in younger children. Through observation of 3–5-year-olds in a Korean preschool, it was noted that children were encouraged to resist the urge to cry. One teacher, in this study described crying as shameful and more confined to younger children and as a negative emotion in this preschool situation.

All of the teachers in this study were originally from individualistic cultures and were working in UK curriculum schools in the UAE. It seems likely that this is what is driving their perception of crying as a normal, adaptive behaviour. It might be expected that those who had been working in the UAE for longer might have had a different, changing view of crying in the early days having altered their viewpoint in line with the more collectivist culture of the UAE. However, these questions remain unanswered as no trends emerged from the data to address these. Given the small number of participants, this is not surprising and may be an interesting future area of research.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Using a qualitative approach, the current study found that for teachers working in Al Ain, in private schools, the responses were largely centered around two themes: 'A New Order' and 'Talking not Crying'. Crying, in this context was seen as an entirely adaptive method of attention seeking communication and considered a problem to be overcome in the establishment of the new order, which is seen as signaling successful transition.

In relation to an ecological perspective, it is important to note that every child's experience is unique as only they are living their dynamic ecology. However, in the light of the current study, there are some factors which can be considered. The child's ecosystem consists of five levels: Microsystem; Mesosystem; Exosystem; Macrosystem; and Chronosystem. Examining the potential implications of the current study across some of these systems could be useful in reviewing transitions policy and practice.

The microsystem consists of all those people and settings with whom the child has direct contact. In this context this would include, but not be limited to, parents, teachers, caregivers in the nursery, school, and home settings. It could be suggested that the level of the microsystem is the one with the most relevance to transitioning to school. Research has guided the development of transition practices and many settings follow such guidelines, putting in place practices at the microsystem level such as enabling children to meet their key worker and have time to form a relationship with them (O'Conner, 2018). Within an international educational setting, there is a tendency for teachers to move schools more often as they and their families move for work. As such, it can be very difficult to facilitate relationship building between those children who will transition into a school and the teaching staff they will have in the following term. Expertise and experience gained in teaching online necessitated by widespread lockdowns during the Covid 19 pandemic could be used to familiarise children with the school environment and staff via recorded story times, school tours etc.

The mesosystem relates to the interaction between those people in the microsystem. In the case of transitioning, the relationships and interactions between teachers and parents are most important. A positive relationship can facilitate smooth transitions (O'Connor, 2018). In a survey of 1602 teachers in Greece, Besi and Sakellariou (2019) found that respect and trust between teachers, children and parents was seen as vital, with 81.2% of participants going on to say that this support allowed for a better transition for children from KG to primary school. There is a plethora of research which evidences the positive impact of activities aimed at aiding transition. These activities most often take the form of stay and play sessions, information sessions for parents and carers, staggered starts to school with children attending for increasingly lengthening times building up to full days, and home visits by teachers. For example, Carida (2011) found that children's social and communicative skills in the early days were enhanced with the implementation of a transition program in a Greek school. Also, in a study examining parent and teacher views alongside cognitive assessments of over 4,900 children, Cook and Coley (2017) noted that there was a positive impact of transition activities on transition behaviour in children.

In Al Ain, there is much variability in how often parents meet teachers. Demands of parental work or family preference can mean that even young children travel to school by bus or are brought to school by nannies or drivers. This can make it harder to build a positive relationship with parents of the kind which could be built through daily interactions. The schools concerned do attempt to build relationships with parents through the information 'stay and play' sessions and, once school starts, through a daily diary taken home by children. In the schools in this study, there were some transition activities. However, it is unclear whether these were sufficient to maximize the positivity of transition. However, it is not likely that these stay and play sessions were realistic experiences of school for the children. Firstly, the children were invited in small groups so as not to overwhelm them with large numbers, but then on the first day of school, far more children would be present. In an expatriate community, teachers often change schools and the teachers who take the stay and play sessions in the summer term may well not be those who are present the following September when the children start school.

Although the focus of transition policy would be at the microsystem and mesosystem levels, the importance of the exosystem cannot be overlooked in this context. The exosystem includes environments and organisations with which the child does not directly engage, so for example, parental work settings. The UAE is largely populated by expatriates who come to the UAE on work visas. Work settings can be very demanding and inflexible in terms of time. Families in the UAE, like everywhere else, differ according to whether one or more parents work outside the home. What the vast majority of expat families share is a lack of childcare support by extended family, such as grandparents. This lack of support and high work expectations can make it difficult for parents to be able to fit in with good practice identified in the literature, such as having shorter days or staggered starts (O'Connor, 2018). It is suggested that, to facilitate a smooth transition for children in schools in the UAE, more flexible parental working arrangements are necessary.

Also, at the exosystem level, O'Connor (2018) identified that strong links with pre-schools would be ideal, to make transition as seamless as possible for children. Within Al Ain, nurseries do not act as 'feeders' for particular schools. In addition, many children do not attend nursery/pre-school at all and are, exclusively, cared for at home by parents or nannies. As such, in this context, forming strong links with pre-school settings would not be feasible. Similarly, children may not be entering school with their friends, which can act as a form of social support (Fabian & Dunlop, 2007). However, it could be suggested that schools identify where children are coming into school from the same pre-school and group them into the same classes, to facilitate a smoother transition for these children.

The macrosystem is of great importance in the current study. The UAE is a unique setting, in that 89% of the population is expatriate and come from a wide range of different cultures. The schools which were involved in the study had approximately 60% expatriate and 40% UAE national children. In the interviews, the teachers did not highlight any differences in transitioning experiences related to nationality or culture. However, it is likely that cultural background of parents would influence their expectations for starting school and have an impact on their children's experiences and behaviours.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on every sphere of life, education included. It has demonstrated how the chronosystem, which relates to events and happenings in time can impact education. Children transitioning into school during this unique period could be facing a very different transition, and special attention should be paid to this. However, COVID-19 has highlighted the availability and accessibility of technology: this technology could be used to facilitate transitions. For example, video messages could be sent to children from their new teachers, welcoming them to school. Also, virtual tours of the new classroom and facilities could be used to familiarize children and families with the school setting and with the new social distancing guidelines. Dockett and Perry (2004) state that being aware of routines and rules also enables positive transitions. These newer technologies could be used to facilitate this.

Research which has highlighted a cultural aspect to the conceptualization of the behaviour of crying is of importance here. The evidence seems to suggest that there is a difference between Western, more individualised, cultures and those Eastern, more collectivist cultures (Cekaite & Burdelski, 2021; Li & Lau, 2019). The current context is relatively unique in that within the UAE private schools, there is a mix of cultures, with children coming from both collectivist and

individualistic cultures. There is a lot to consider here, with areas for future research including whether parents, teachers, and children themselves change their opinions and values when they become part of a multi-cultural society such as the UAE. Thinking specifically about school environments, further research could look at what form these changes may take and how these experiences influence the children and their experiences of starting school.

## **LIMITATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

The participants in the current study were expatriate Western teachers who were teaching outside of their own culture. Further, the children they were welcoming into their classes were drawn from both UAE nationals and expatriate children. These children form a very specific population and findings from this study are specific to this setting. However, this study could be used to shed light on the transitioning experiences for other similar groups of children such as refugees, asylum seekers and those who are living away from their usual place of residence. The study involved a relatively small number of participants, and it would be useful to use these findings as a base from which to explore issues such as perceptions of transitioning and potential changes in these views as teachers spend more time working overseas in different cultures.

In terms of practical recommendations to facilitate positive transitioning for young children of various cultures, it seems clear that crying and chaos are not inevitable patterns in transitioning. Previous evidence points to preparation for transition being key in facilitating smooth, low stress starting school experiences. There are barriers to such programs, however, especially in countries where expatriates are working, as these groups have limited access to family support which would often be relied on in the UK, for example to facilitate staggered starts to school for working parents. Evidence is clear that a good relationship between teachers and both parents and children is very helpful in settling children in (Zulfiqar et al., 2018). With the Covid-19 pandemic, the practice of using technology in education became much more prevalent. Teachers could consider using online meetings prior to school starting so that children and parents can start to form a bond with the teacher.

Starting school will remain a stressful experience, to some degree, for children, due to the changing circumstances and demands thereof. This study has highlighted the viewpoint of one specific group of teachers, which can be used to extrapolate some recommendations for practice to minimize the stress for children and facilitate as successful a start to school as possible. The picture which has emerged is one of a culturally specific position and future research directions would be to examine whether crying is seen in the same way, not only between different geographical settings, but also between the different cultural groups living within them, taking a temporal dimension into account.

## **APPENDIX A**

### **INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. Can you tell me about your experiences of teaching in early years here in the UAE?
2. Can you describe a typical first day at school for children in your class?
3. What tends to go well and what are the challenges on the first day?
4. What are the biggest challenges that children face in their first term at school?
5. How can these challenges be overcome?
6. What skills do you expect children to arrive at school with?
7. What can parents do to help prepare children for school?
8. What do you think influences children the most starting school?
9. Can you describe the typical picture of a child starting school here, what things develop the most in the first few weeks?
10. Thinking back to your own experiences of school, or of school in your own country, what do you think is different for children starting school in the UAE?
11. How do you think your own experiences impact on your expectations of children who are starting school in the UAE?

12. Can you give an example of a child who has had a great start to school this year? What made it good?
13. Can you give an example of a child who has not had a great start to school this year? What made it less than satisfactory?
14. Reflecting on your own practice, what do you think that you do well and not so well in supporting children starting school?
15. What factors do you think are most important for children who are beginning school?

## DATA ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT

Data has not been made accessible for this publication. Participants were not asked to give consent for their data to be made widely available.

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The authors have no competing interests to declare.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Author 1 served as the PI on the project, led the research including conceptualization, design, data analysis and paper preparation.

Author 2 made considerable contribution to all sections of the paper, with the exception of data analysis.

Author 3 was responsible, with Author 1 for data analysis and preparation of the results section.

Authors 4 and 5 were involved in conceptualization and design of the study, the completion of all data collection and assisted in writing the methodology section.

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