

## Voices of first graders: exploratory study on starting school during post-pandemic period

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### ABSTRACT

The involvement of children's aspirations is an essential part of educational research that encourages effective learning and well-being among children. Thus, this study aims to promote children's aspirations of starting schools during the post-pandemic situation. It implemented a face-to-face and online interview involving 63 first graders of primary school level aged seven years, consisting of 24 male and 39 female, by adhering to the prevailing health protocols. The thematic analysis generated two significant findings, including children's perspectives and their preferences for either face-to-face learning or online learning. With regards to children's perspectives, this research suggests that children prefer to learn with their teachers and friends at school. Based on the findings, further research is required to explore the responses of children, parents, and teachers to obtain comprehensive data.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The number of international literatures highlighting the urgency of children's experiences in the first grade, as a basis for success in the later years of primary school has marked a significant growth in recent years [1]–[8]. The phenomenon implies that the first grade is a substantial period for the next grades. Starting school is also an important experience for children and their families. However, various research findings also proved the first day of school as potential event that might cause stress to children and parents [9].

The transition from preschool to first grade is believed as the key process to children's growth. Children who have access to preschool education have a higher opportunity to success, especially in passing the first grade period [7], [10], [11]. During the first grade, children's learning outcomes are highly correlated with their preschool experiences and the types of schools they have attended [12]. The study about the transition process is considered essential for understanding children's experiences and well-being. Although the highlight related to transition to school and school readiness is no longer a new phenomenon, various studies reveal that many children are not prepared to receive adequate supports for a positive school transition period [13], [14].

During March 2020 to June 2022, Indonesian government dealt with the second wave of COVID-19 by reintroducing the school-from-home policy through the implementation of distance learning patterns and strategies (Circular Letter No. 4 of 2020). The condition had led to a shift in children's learning and playing settings since they started to stay at home for 24 hours. Starting in July 2022, Indonesia marked the COVID-19 post-pandemic period, in which children started to divert to the hybrid learning phase. This kind of transition

learning program requires evaluation, especially for children who are embarking the early schooling phase. Therefore, further analysis is required to understand children's experiences when starting primary school, considering the importance of school transition and children development in general.

This research was organized in Central Java province, Indonesia. Cultural factors that influenced service provision and other aspects of the transition experiences are later included. Regarding a number of linguistic and anthropological studies, cultural discontinuity of children's experiences between home and school in diverse cultural contexts may contribute a particular impact to the period of starting school [15]–[17].

This research enriches theoretical and empirical studies on the concept of school transition experienced by children in Central Java, Indonesia during the post-pandemic period. Previous study [18] only discusses the transition process during the pre-pandemic period. This research also serves as an evaluation material for the government, schools, teachers, and parents in responding to the upcoming transition period, especially during the post-pandemic era. During the post-pandemic, hybrid learning implemented three models, including face-to-face learning, online-based learning, and computer-based learning [19].

During the pandemic, primary schools in Central Java implemented asynchronous learning mostly using WhatsApp application in which the learning activity only covered assignments distributed through the parents' WhatsApp group. WhatsApp is the application most used in online learning in kindergarten. However, using this application, teachers rarely organized face-to-face sessions since they only relied on video-based explanation and messaging during learning periods. The implementation of online learning model using WhatsApp. WhatsApp has good usability it has rated by teachers and students [20]. The use of WhatsApp Group as a learning media in school is common [21]. In this scenario, teachers provide materials and assignments, while students had to download and learn the learning content through the application. In addition to WhatsApp, teachers normally use Zoom once in a week, considering that the majority of parents are working, while not all students have personal devices.

During the online learning, it is common for parents dominate the activities instead of their children, they serve as facilitators, motivators, supervisors, and guides [22]. Students demonstrate less participation in the learning process due to one-way interaction that posits the students to focus on the screen when doing their tasks or exams online [23]. With the distribution of video-based learning material, teachers rarely provide detailed explanations of the lesson [24].

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 post-pandemic period in July 2022, children started a hybrid learning phase prior to the face-to-face learning. There are three models offered through a hybrid learning, consisting of face-to-face, online-based, and computer-based [19]. A hybrid model enables students to migrate from online to face-to-face class conduct. This model confirms a range of children's adaptive responses related to the learning process and social interaction [25], [26]. Tjandra and Selvanita [27] provided an illustration that most schools in Jakarta (the capital of Indonesia) tend to have a longer attention span and a greater sense of independence when studying face to face compared to online. Research on students' responses and feelings towards hybrid learning in elementary schools reveal students' responses and feelings during the transition from preschool to primary school using a hybrid learning mode post pandemic (partly online and partly face-to-face). This research will involve children as active respondents to obtain fresh and unique data compared to the previous research, which tend to involve adults in the observations (teachers, parents).

Muharikah *et al.* [28] describe the potential for hybrid learning for a better quality education. They reveal that teachers from rural and non-rural areas have the same perspective that online learning provides challenges in learning aspects, such as the teaching, social, and cognitive domains. The limited infrastructure (in rural areas) and the selection of teaching methods (non-rural) will stimulate social and cognitive presence in learning. Teachers from both groups express an optimistic view of implementing hybrid learning in the future and believe in a positive contribution to professional development and providing more inclusive access to better education. In the future, a number of studies recommend massive open online courses (MOOCs) as an innovative learning method that should be continuously developed [29], as a digital technology-based learning potential. MOOCs are an opportunity for community members to take part in learning without being bound by space, time, and presence [30].

"Starting school" is a concept associated with the discussions of "readiness" in terms of physical, social, and cognitive skills that children must possess to meet school requirements [31], [32]. Children's readiness is one of the components of school readiness that focuses on the children's development and abilities. A number of studies have examined the relationship between certain types of preschool experiences and children's subsequent success rates after getting admitted to school [33]–[39]. Numerous research focusing on the quality of child care and the impacts of Head Start and other similar programs are included in this category [40]–[46]. Many literatures deal with the home-school correlation, yet the main highlights only discuss after-school attendance period [45], [47]–[50].

It is believed that children start to witness various positive things at school since the first grade, despite limited research that have proven the transition process. School is perceived as a place that makes them happy,

where they can meet their friends and teachers to learn and play with. School is also a place to study and work (do schoolwork). Children's first impression emphasizes these characteristics and signifies a positive attitude towards school. However, several factors can also trigger children's disliking about school, for instance, bullying, quarrel, and punishments from teachers.

In addition to grow happiness among children, school has a role in its realization. Noddings [51] mentioned "the best home and school" are happy places. A happy school environment is essential to promote effective learning and boost students' talents [52]. Bird and Markle [53] revealed the advantage of a happy school environment to boost students' academic success and enhance their life skills. In contrast, the declining quality of school happiness may lead to the lower academic success, loneliness, stress, depression, and drug addiction [54]. The lack of happiness significantly influences children's personalities, intelligence, thinking skills, creativity, and educational achievement [55].

Research on children's attitudes towards school (happy/unhappy emotions and positive/negative impressions) should analyze these challenges. The lack of happiness at school may cause a major problem in education systems [56], [57]. Attention to students' emotions and impressions should be emphasized since the early childhood and no later than adolescence, considering the children's cognitive and emotional aspects. Regarding these issues, this study aims to describe first-graders' learning interest. It develops when an activity generates positive experiences and emotions [58] and is highly valued [59]. It plays a fundamental role in influencing students' learning behavior and their desires to participate in future learning opportunities. Students learning preference refers to psychological tendencies to specific content, class of objects, events, or ideas over time [58], [60].

This study highlights different learning conditions experienced by Indonesian children, especially during the COVID-19 post-pandemic. However, a number of studies revealed that students experienced boredom during the situation [23]. This research will contribute to providing necessary inputs for the government, education institutions, and parents to ensure fine process of starting school among children. The quality of a school institution should be determined not only based on the accreditation status but also the rate of students' positive impressions and experiences.

## 2. RESEARCH METHOD

### 2.1. Research objectives and research questions

The study is directed to illustrate the first-graders' experiences in starting school during hybrid learning in the post-pandemic situation. It aims to explore the children's attitudes and the children's experiences in starting school during the post-pandemic period. The following research questions were addressed:

- How do children describe their attitudes most of the time when starting hybrid learning? (feelings, impressions, preferences for learning settings and partners)
- How do children describe their experiences in starting online learning during the first grade (liking and disliking)?
- How do children describe their experiences in starting face-to-face learning during the first grade (liking and disliking) at school or classroom?

Clark *et al.* [61] emphasized several methods to record children's aspirations, such as interviews, questionnaires, group work, and participatory games. This current research is designed as basic qualitative research with exploratory study that employs interview for the data collection. A number of previous studies also used an interview approach to describe children's experiences in starting school individually [62]–[66]. The flow chart of the research method Figure 1.

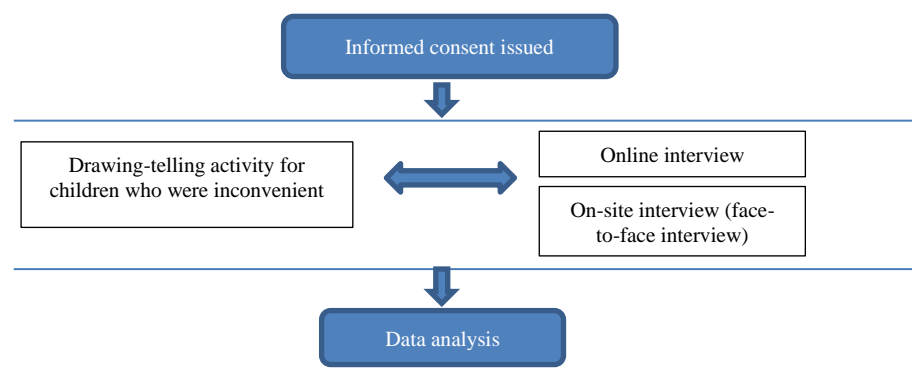


Figure. 1 Flow chart of research methodology

## 2.2. Participants

A total of 63 primary school children, including 24 male and 39 female (year 1, age 7) who were studying hybrid (mixed online and offline) during the post-pandemic period, were involved in this study. Participants lived in suburban and rural areas in Central Java, Indonesia. The distribution of the participants is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants

Male		Female	
n	%	n	%
24	38.095	39	61.90

## 2.3. Data collection

This study took two forms of consent of participation from parents and children. The first consent was related to the children's availability to allow the researchers to inquire about their first-grade experiences through hybrid learning. The second agreement was related to the students' behavior towards hybrid learning activities that was followed up through the interview sessions and relevant activities.

The interview were organized online and on-site to capture the children's experiences in starting primary school during the post-pandemic situation. The questions consisted of: i) How do you think and feel about learning online from home? Can you tell me what makes it fun or boring? ii) Who would you prefer to study with? Do you like studying at home or at school? iii) When learning online from home, what did you like and dislike the most? iv) What activities do you do when learning at school? Which activity do you like and dislike the most? As part of the data collection phase, drawing activity was organized to facilitate these students who were reluctant to orally deliver responses [67]–[71]. The drawings were analyzed using some conversational prompts to explore children's perspectives and reasonings that they put into those visualizations [72], [73]. To begin the activity, parents were allowed to help the children prepare their equipt, including stationeries [74]. The activity employed a brief instruction as: *“Do you have a blank paper and some coloring pencils there? Can you draw a picture to show me your feelings? Can you draw something about your favorite activities when you were learning at home and at school? Once you finish, I will collect your drawings.”*

## 2.4. Interview setting

The data were collected by online and visiting participants' school and home. Researchers were allowed to collect the data according to the parents' consents. Researchers also contacted children via video call platforms.

## 2.5. Timeline, recording, field notes

The research was completed within six months. During the process, the researchers were assisted by trained research assistants to lead the interviews session with two or three children daily based on their availability and their parents' consents. The meetings were set twice, in which the first meeting aimed at gathering the big picture of the children's daily lives and make them familiar with the presence of the researchers, while the second meeting aimed to collect all necessary data through offline and online interviews. The interview session required around 20 to 30 minutes for every child.

This study only managed to cover one interview session due to the strict health protocols post pandemic. Follow-up sessions should be considered for future research to ensure the reliability of the responses. The researchers also used field notes to record the details.

## 2.6. Confidentiality

Parental consents, children's identities, field notes, and interview transcripts were stored safely and only accessible to the researchers. After completing the data collection, the researchers copied the recordings and recorded the interview/conversation points regarding the drawings made by children. To ensure the security of the respondents' data, this research utilized coding for the analysis.

## 2.7. Researchers as instruments

Researchers carefully assessed the information from the children and avoided rush conclusion. Researchers actively engaged with the children to gather their opinions. When the conversation ended, the researchers continued to observe, review, and stimulate further discussions with the children.

## 2.8. Data analysis

It should be noted that the decision of uninvolvement is a freedom of expression [75]. Children's responses from the interview were identified using thematic analysis by examining patterns or themes based

on the organization of the data description [76]. This technique is more complex compared to content analysis that only explores the implicit or explicit meanings of textual materials.

## 2.9. Trustworthiness

To demonstrate trustworthiness (transferability, dependability, credibility), the thematic analysis adopted Guba's theory [77]. In accordance to Silverman [78], the researchers read the entire data set to generate the overall picture of the content through observations, questions, and ideas to increase the credibility of the recursive analysis. An additional measure of credibility was implemented with coding to capture all relevant and representative codes from the whole data.

Research team members met at two critical points during the coding process. The coders consisted of a Master's degree student and an Associate Professor from different university departments who has got expertise in educational theory and child development. This study did not involve direct interaction between participants and coders. During the reflexive approach, coders constantly communicated during the coding process to ensure the coherence of the data. The final procedure of ensuring trustworthiness, credibility, and transferability used the theme descriptions by inviting the readers to examine the data and clarify the relationships between the selected categories in the data set as a whole [78], [79].

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the thematic analysis, this study provides three themes. First theme is attitudes, it includes impression, learning settings, and learning partners preference. Followed by, activities at school during pandemic and face-to-face learning during the post-pandemic. It describes about student's preferences for activities during online and face-to-face learning.

### 3.1. Attitudes

#### 3.1.1. Impressions

Table 2 describes the students' responses to the following question: "How do you think and feel about online school from home? Can you tell me what makes it fun or boring?". Based on the Table 2, some students demonstrated positive and negative attitudes, while the rest gave no responses (impressions and emotions). A positive attitude was reflected as the most response of happiness towards the hybrid learning during the post-pandemic situation.

Table 2. Children's attitudes

Attitudes	
Positive	Happy
Negative	Boring, annoying Displeased Sad
No response	No answer, no response, passive

#### 3.1.2. Learning settings and learning partners

Based on the data on Table 3, 48 out of 63 students preferred studying at school due to the presence of friends, teachers, activities that could improve their skills, and food stalls. A total of 13 students preferred learning from home due to the presence of their family members (parents, siblings), freedom to play, the quiet atmosphere, safety from viruses, and good marks. The rest of the students gave no responses.

The following interview excerpts with children investigated the question "Who would you prefer to study with? Which one do you prefer, learning at school or at home?".

*"At school with teacher. My teacher is kind and caring."* (Pr1, 7 yo, female)

*"At home with my parents. Teacher often scolds me at school because I don't understand the assignments. Mom never scolds me."* (Zav, 7 yo, male)

*"At school with teacher. There are a lot of friends too."* (Aum, 7 yo, female)

*"At home with my parents."* (Ptri, 7 yo, female)

*"At home with my mom."* (Aurl, 7 yo, female)

The interview excerpts describe the students' preferences for learning partners during online learning from home or face-to-face learning at school. Some students were happy studying online from home accompanied by their parents (mothers). The others preferred learning at school, as they could meet teachers and friends.

Table 3. Preferences for learning settings and learning partners

Learning settings	Learning partners
Home	The presence of family members (parents, sibling) Quiet atmosphere Freedom to play Safety from viruses Good marks
School	The presence of teachers The presences of friends The presence of teachers and friends Many activities to improve skills Snacking time

### 3.2. Online learning activities during post-pandemic era

Table 4 describes students' preferences for home-based activities during their participations in online learning. The responses are categorized into the higher and lower interests. It also completed with the reasonings.

Table 4. Preferences for online learning activities during the post-pandemic era

Preferences	Activities
Higher interest	Helping parents Learning with family members (parents, siblings) Positive activities (searching for eels, cycling, watering the flowers) Playing with friends Playing mobile games Playing with pets Online learning with computer Learning new skills Reciting the Koran All activities
Lower interest	A lot of homework, private lessons Boring situation Lack of attention from parents Prohibition from playing outside due to virus Playing undesired activities Napping Household chores (sweeping, babysitting) Doing nothing all day Unpleasing treatment from siblings

Following are a number of students' responses that describe the activities that they like and dislike the most while participating in the online learning from home together with their reasons: "During learning from home, what activities do you like the most? What is the activity that you do not like?"

*"I like playing with my smartphone. It is boring because I cannot meet my friends and my teacher."* (Alv, 7 yo, male)

*"I like reciting the Koran at home, helping mom to sweep the floor, and playing with my sibling. I do not like it when my sibling asks for money to buy snacks."* (Rdt, 7 yo, male)

*"I like playing with my sibling. Home is boring. I do not like it when I fight over the phone with my sibling."* (Khaf, 7 yo, female)

*"I like playing better than studying at home. I like playing games using my dad's phone. Mom is scary. She will scold me if I do not do my homework."* (Kev, 7 yo, male)

Children's responses varied from positive to negative sentiments related to online learning (school-from-home) activities post pandemic. They preferred a number of activities, including playing with gadgets, watching television, playing mobile games, playing with friends, helping parents, getting involved in positive activities (searching for eels, cycling, watering flowers), studying with family members (parents, siblings), learning new skills, learning online with computer, and reciting the Koran. In the other hand, there were several situations that they disliked, including the quiet and boring condition of the house, the unpleasant treatment from relatives (messing around with toys, mischief), the prohibition from playing outside due to the virus, household chores (sweeping, babysitting), lack of attention from parents, too much napping, and the time when they had nothing to do. A total of 18 children liked any kinds of activities at home during online learning.

### 3.3. Face-to-face learning activities during post-pandemic period

Table 5 provides student's response for questions: What activities do you do when learning at school? Which activity do you like and dislike the most? It describes how children responded to the researchers by explaining their liking and disliking about face-to-face learning activities at school post pandemic. The researchers considered that this question could reflect the children's experiences during the transition of the policy when they were still required to implement health protocols.

Table 5. School activities during the post-pandemic

Preferences	Activities
Higher interest	Free plays Art learning (drawing and dancing) Language, math, science learning Physical education Snacking time Learning with friends Extracurricular activities Helping teachers All activities Fun learning with teachers
Lower interest	Lots of tasks and assignments Exhaustion due to long activities Sanctions from the teachers Difficulty in making friends that resulted in unequal treatment Napping Unpleasing experiences (losing belongings, feeling unconfident when doing presentation in front of the class) Noise Art class

The following responses describe the activities that the students liked and disliked during face-to-face learning activities at school post pandemic: "What activities do you have at school? Which activity do you like the most? What is the activity that you do not like the most?"

*"Playing soccer. I do not like quarrelling with friends."* (Arg, 7 yo, male)

*"I like sports and drum band at school. I like gathering with my friends. I do not like having a lot of homework. It makes me sleepy."* (Ary, 7 yo, male)

*"I like drawing. I do not like mischievous friends."* (Njw, 7 yo, female)

*"I like playing with friends at school. We play marbles, hide and seek, and many more. But sometimes I do not like school. I am still sleepy but I have to go to school early."* (Aml, 7 yo, female)

*"I like karawitan (Javanese music) extracurricular at school. I do not like Friday exercise. It is tiring."* (Mn, 7 yo, female)

*"I like playing soccer at school. I do not like school if there are many assignments."* (Alf, 7yo, male)

Based on the analysis of the interview, children generally preferred doing several activities at school, such as sports, free plays during recess, arts (drawing and dancing), thematic learning (language, math, science), snacking time, learning with fun teachers, studying with friends, having extra activities, and helping teachers. A total of nine students chose to not respond to this question. In the other hand, they also experienced some unpleasing moments at school, such as the difficulty in making friends, uncomfortable treatment, lots of tasks and assignments that required long duration of learning, sanctions from the teachers, lack of fun in certain events, noise, napping, art learning, and absence of fun activities during free time. A total of six students chose to not respond to this question.

### 3.4. Discussion

The exploration of children's perspectives during school transition is a relatively new practice, marking only a few research that cover this area of discussion. This study highlights on children's perspectives related to school transition provides valuable overviews on how first graders experience school transition, especially during the hybrid learning amid the post-pandemic situation. Although it does not include certain strategies or activities that work best with them, the research reflects a considerable consistency in its broad findings, especially related to young children's capacities in sharing valid and valuable information, in addition to mentioning some issues that they witness. A number of research explored children's perspectives on different aspects of their everyday lives [80], such as children's experiences in schools [81], children's perspectives on

good school meals [82], children's perspectives on interior decoration of schools [67], children's experiences about bullying [83]–[86], children's experiences about outbreak in their community; chronically ill children's interpretations of their own symptoms [87]–[89], children's experiences about important situations at home, day-care institution, and school [80], [90], as well as how children's participation in learning communities and their hopes for the future [91]. Several research mentioned that children were able to communicate with adults to talk about their lives, experiences, and concerns for people close to them and their immediate environment [92]–[96]. Regarding the studies, the researchers directly spoke with the children and invited them to express their experiences about the respective topics.

Based on the finding, some students demonstrated positive and negative attitudes, while some other gave no responses (impressions and emotions). Parts of the students were happy to experience learn-from-home activities together with their parents. In the other hand, they got unpleasing feeling. Some students were happy to learn at school, as they could meet their teachers and friends to have some activities together. A total of nine students chose to not respond to this question. In the other hand, they experienced some unpleasing moments at school. A total of six students chose to not respond to this question.

### **3.4.1. Attitude (impressions and feelings, preferences for learning settings and learning partners)**

Male and female students demonstrated a balance in conveying positive and negative impressions. A positive impression is indicated by the responses of happiness with the online learning. Both male and female tended to prefer studying at school, as they could meet their teacher and friends. Among female students, their teacher became the driving force for their enthusiasm about school. A small number of children, with the majority of female, chose to study at home, as they could spend more time with their families. The dialog from Ptri (7 yo, female) and Aurl (7 yo, female) are the excerpt of dialogue involving two female students.

Children's sense of well-being and positive engagement in learning depends on positive relationships with their educators. A number of studies in different countries revealed various children-educators relationships. Several projects in Singapore (N=340), Ireland (N=47), and Australia (N=311) found that children were motivated to create impressions of their educators and parents [65], [97], [98]. The conversations from Prl (7yo, female) and Zav (7yo, male) illustrate a goof relationship between children and their educators (teacher and parent) marked by the preference for learning partners. The first dialogue, Prl (7 yo, female) stated her preference for studying at school with her teacher. She considered her teacher as a kind and considerate figure. Meanwhile, Zav (7 yo, male) stated that he preferred studying at home with his parents, as he thought that teacher often scolded him at school, especially when he did not understand the lessons and assignments. On the other hand, he informed that his mother never scolded him.

In South Australia (N=311), a good relationship between students and their educators influenced their experiences at school. Based on studies in Singapore and Australia, children were mostly unhappy, especially when their teachers yelled and shouted at them [65], [98]. Several studies mentioned the substantial roles of the education system (students, teachers, parents, principals, and support staff) in creating a good atmosphere at schools. A happy school is reflected by the positive attitudes among teachers, especially in promoting kindness, enthusiasm, fairness, inspiration, creativity, and the ability to appear as role models for students [99]. School institutions should consider these criteria for teacher recruitment and evaluation (e.g. personalities, attitudes, and ethics) [100], [101].

Various psychological, social, economic, physical, and organizational factors are associated with children's positive experience at "school". Moral qualities, such as gratitude can add value to increasing happiness [102]. Schools that can promote a "supportive community" will offer children a higher rate of satisfaction and motivate them to complete their academic goals [103]–[105]. Creativities and initiatives from school components in providing specific workshops for students, such as games, group sports, an attractive school environment, and good reading materials will elevate happiness at schools [106].

Functioning as learning environments during the pandemic situation, schools and/or home should be able to manifest an ideal conduct of education. A learning environment marks a context that supports the required learning processes to achieve desired learning results. It is important to perceive home as a space that motivates and stimulates children to learn by supporting their learning activities. The basic requirement for a learning space should promote a space that students can sit on [107]. During learning from home, children's interactions with people mark an important feature for the provision of affection, security, encouragement, conversations, and positive role models to help them thrive. A good home learning environment encourages children and young people to have positive attitudes to learning, grow their curiosity, and boost their confidence [108].

### **3.4.2. Several favored activities among children during online learning (school-from-home)**

Children described the activities that they liked and disliked during the school-from-home period. Several favored activities consisted of playing with gadgets, watching television, playing mobile games, free playing with friends, helping parents, doing positive activities, studying with family, learning new skills,



learning online, and reciting the Koran. Meanwhile, the undesired conditions included the quiet and boring atmosphere at home, the unpleasant treatment from relatives, prohibition from playing outside due to the virus, household chores, lack of attention from parents, napping, and free time. A total of 18 children stated that they liked all activities.

The boredom of learning in children was reported, as children spent their time without the companionship of friends. Studying with peers is different from studying with parents. Positive competition between peers encourages children to learn better. In addition, peers have a considerable influence on various children's behaviors [109]. Kim *et al.* [110] revealed that children who received greater affection and emotional support from friends have a better quality of life compared to those who were constantly bullied.

When children play and learn new activities, partners also determine the quality of experiences. In this study, children were inquired about their preferences for learning settings and learning partners. Children tended to choose outdoor activities for their favored learning area to enable them to socialize with their friends. Pranoto and Hong [111] found that Indonesian children preferred learning with their friends. In particular, female also mentioned teachers as their favorite learning partners. It is confirmed that children enjoy social interaction while playing to encourage positive impressions and emotions.

In the online learning or school-from-home context, teachers should enlighten parents on how they can become good learning partners for their children. Parental assistance will facilitate a successful school transition [112]–[119]. Machmudah *et al.* [120] evaluated the distance learning activities during the pandemic in Surabaya, Indonesia and concluded that the approach was no better than face-to-face learning due to the lack of learning interaction and organization. Parents required assistance in preparing their children's readiness for school, in which the guidance could employ learning videos. Kluczniok and Roßbach [121] emphasized the importance of parental supports, involvement, and collaboration with the teachers in optimizing the stimulation given to children during the learning process at home.

Family involvement is an essential support in providing various learning facilities and stimuli for children's development prior to school transition [122]. In order to achieve quality services for early childhood education and care, the involvement of parents and the surrounding community is substantial for designing, implementing, and evaluating these services [123]. After all, parents are the key players who decide whether or not their children should attend preschool services. Cowan *et al.* [124] marked several factors that might hinder children's adaptation during the first year at school, such as authoritative parenting, children autonomy issue, low quality of parental relationships (parent-parent and parents-children relationships), and children's perceptions about the relationships. Other research also focused on several aspects of home environment that might determine the transition to school [124]–[128].

Most likely, children are more interested in activities outside home, which are not related to schoolwork, for instance, playing during leisure. Friendship is related to the quality of children's life since peer influence is considered significant. Lee and Han [129] noted that children who received high-quality support from their peers had fewer social problems and dissatisfaction along with the enhanced feelings of psychological well-being.

Another possibility of school happiness offers a smooth transition to primary school. Previous positive experiences during early childhood education will leave a good impression on children, where a positive school experience promotes happiness. The positive correlation between school experience and happiness confirms the previous findings by considering other variables [130], [131].

This study as research on children's perspectives related to school transition, this study could provide an important statement in determining further school policy. Two studies in the US [45], [132] offer a strong evidence that children's learning outcomes depend on their perspectives about their educators and their schools, suggesting that schools should acknowledge children's points of views and emotions, including their perspectives about school transition. This study encouraged the students to answer the given questions on the broad which had been effectively tested by researchers to elicit children's perspectives [133]. There is an evidence of consistency between children's comments on their experiences based on their drawings [133]. This approach could be adopted regularly throughout the school years to promote the acknowledgments on children's aspirations, to explore the changes of their experiences of schooling gradually [66], [134], and to address any losses of competencies and skills that some children may experience in the first year [62]. Finally, this study encourages all stakeholders to include multiple perspectives, including children's aspirations in the learning process [66].

### 3.4.3. Several favored activities among children at school following the pandemic

Male and female students emphasized different activities during their first day at school. Male tended to favor sports-related activities. Meanwhile, female preferred free play activities with their peers, such as drawing, painting, and dancing. Referring to several conversations with Arg (7 yo, male) and Njw (7 yo, female), both students reflected indifference towards quarrelling and negative treatments from their peers.

Other relevant studies emphasized friendship as an essential factor affecting all samples (male and female). The “Starting School project” in Australia (N=300+), in addition to studies in New Zealand (N=23), Singapore (N = 310 + 340), and Europe (N=48) highlighted the importance of friendship at school [64]–[66], [98], [135]–[137]. A very small ethnographic research project (N=23) in New Zealand found that friendships were important to support children’s school transition [138]. In several countries, children were concerned if they could not start friendships [65] [98], [133]–[137], [139] in addition to being unhappy when they did not have friends [140], [141].

A study in the UK (N=50) discovered a higher rate of happiness among children who started school with friends compared to those who did not. Moreover, they found it easier to settle into a class with long-term friends [142]. A study in Hong Kong study (N=32) mentioned that children were happy when they learned something new and play with their friends. However, the unstructured plays were reduced once they had settled into school even though their peer relationships played a significant role throughout the year [143].

In this research, male mentioned several negative responses related to school following the pandemic, including loads of work and studies. Meanwhile, female mentioned several issues, such as difficulty in starting a friendship, uncomfortable treatment by their friends, and long-term activities. Some children found it hard to deal with the long-term activities and their responsibilities when starting school. Singaporean children (302 out of 340) mentioned long-hour learning as a difficult challenge during their first year, but 40% (142 out of 302) of these children saw school as a place for serious learning [98]. The children also complained about the unavailability of napping time and food at school unlike at the kindergarten [98]. In Singapore, children attended kindergartens for two to four hours daily. In contrast, they had to spend around five hours in the first year of their formal schooling, either in the morning (7.30am–1.00pm) or in the afternoon (1.00pm–6.30pm).

The two dialogues from Mn (7yo, female) and Alf (7yo, male) illustrate something in common. When children started the first day in their first grade, their impressions highlighted tiresome activities at school due to a lot of assignments. This study does not report the differences in the learning duration between preschool and primary school. Children preferred free play to formal activities, as they tended to associate formal learning with school. Kindergarten children in Iceland (N=48) perceived ‘schoolwork’, consisting of reading, writing, and arithmetic. In terms of learning, organization, size, and structure, they saw school as a more serious and difficult period compared to kindergarten [144].

Several studies mentioned that children associated school with formal learning, such as a study in Ireland (N=47) that revealed free play as the dominant activity at school, while the rest of the time was perceived as ‘working’ or ‘listening’ time [97]. The play-work dichotomy also emerged in Australia, in which 83 out of 100 children disliked ‘work’ due to limited choices or interests [65]. Children in Germany [145] and Italy (N=21) saw kindergarten as a place to play and school as a place to learn. Children in the UK (N=70) associated school with ‘work’ and ‘hard work’ [66], while children in New Zealand (N=23) complained about the limited time allocated for play activities at school. Another study revealed that children (N=32) were eager to learn at school, yet they were not fond of the structured lessons and the quantity of homework [143]. A total of 38 out of 340 (14%) Singaporean children complained about more works at school and found it difficult to complete the assignments [98]. In Australia, 31 out of 100 (31%) children said that they liked school when educators let them select their activity preferences, yet 83 (83%) children said that they did not like the assignments given by the teachers, which were considered boring, while they had no other choices [65].

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Based on the findings, some students demonstrated positive and negative attitudes (impressions and emotions). More than half students preferred studying at school due to the presence of friends, teachers, activities that could improve their skills, and food stalls. Children generally preferred doing several activities and experienced some displeasing moments, at school and home. Referring to the previous literatures, this research suggests potential practices regarding the children’s perspectives on school transition, including the exploration of children’s reactions to the changes in their physical environment (e.g. prior to, during, and following the pandemic situation), the provision of assistance to support their adaptation to school norms, the support to encourage them start friendship, the encouragement to establish positive relationships with their new educators and peers, the exploration on how children cope with changes throughout school routines, the provision of support to ensure that children know whom to talk to if they experience bullying during school transition period, the facilitation of formal learning process, the assistance to educate children confidently adapt with their morning routines before going to school, and the involvement of parents as learning partners during the school transition process. Based on this current study, we provide some components of transition for determining relevant school policy. As research on children’s perspectives related to school transition, this study could provide an important statement in determining further school policy as: getting the children prepared, preparing for school and home, and preparing the education system.

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