DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 439 811 PS 028 425

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TITLE	Starting School: Perspectives from Australia.
PUB DATE	1999-04-00
NOTE	10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Montreal, Quebec, Canada, April 19-23, 1999).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Comparative Analysis; *Elementary School Students; Elementary School Teachers; Emotional Development; Foreign Countries; *Parent Attitudes; Parents; Primary Education; School Attitudes; *School Readiness; Social Development; *Student Adjustment; *Student Attitudes; *Teacher Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS	Australia; Transitional Activities

ABSTRACT

Noting that the transition to school is one of the major challenges children face in early childhood, this study examined the perceptions of Australian parents, teachers, and children in various phases of school attendance regarding what was involved in children starting school. Data were collected by means of questionnaires given to teachers interested in or working with beginning students, and to parents of children just starting or ready to start school; and focus group interviews with beginning students. A grounded theory approach was used in coding the responses. Findings indicated that the prime concern for parents and teachers was individual social adjustment. Parents mentioned issues related to the educational environment, family concerns, rules, and physical development more often than teachers, whereas teachers mentioned issues related to skills and knowledge demonstration more often than parents. Children were most concerned with learning school rules and their feelings about school or learning. They were adamant that they needed to know the school rules to function well within the school and stay out of trouble. Children could also describe the consequences for breaking the rules. Almost all the children were very positive about their experiences in starting school, and described those experiences in terms of their own and their family members' disposition toward school. The findings suggest that parents, teachers, and children are all actively involved in the transition process and have different perceptions and expectations about what is important. In planning effective transition programs, these different perspectives must be taken into account. (Contains 21 references.) (KB)

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ED 439 811

Starting school: Perspectives from Australia

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Paper presented at AERA Annual Meeting, Montreal, April, 1999

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Introduction

In Australia, the compulsory school commencement age is 6 years. However, most children start school when they are between 4.5 and 5.5 years old. As there is no systematic screening process for children starting school, the only data teachers in the first year of school have about the children are those obtained from parents, educators in prior-to-school settings, if any, and their own observations. What beliefs and expectations about children starting school affect these data?

Starting school represents a critical period in the life of young children. The transition to school has been recognised as "*one of the major challenges children have to face in their early childhood years*" (Victorian Department of School Education, 1992, p. 44). This transition presents challenges for all concerned, as parents, teachers and children manage the rapid changes, uncertainties and tensions which can accompany the move from prior-to-school environments to school settings (Margetts, 1997). Parents and early childhood educators in school and prior-to-school settings want to make the transition to formal schooling as smooth as possible and, to this end, engage in a range of actions and interactions designed to help prepare children for school. Underpinning these are sets of beliefs about what will facilitate the transition to school and what it means to be *ready for school*. The study reported in this paper explores the beliefs of those different groups and adds to the literature in this area by considering the perspectives of the children involved in the transition to school, something which has not been attempted systematically in previous studies (Davies & North, 1990; Griffin & Harvey, 1995).

Much of the research relating to children's transition to school has focused on the expectations of teachers and parents (for example, Davies & North, 1990; Hains, Fowler, Schwartz, Kottwitz and Rosenkoetter, 1989; Lewit and Baker, 1995). While parents and teachers share some common expectations, there are differences between these groups as well as some within group differences for teachers, depending on whether they work in prior-to-school or school settings. Hains et al. (1989) reported that teachers in the first year of school and preschool teachers had different expectations of what is required for children to make a successful transition to school. Preschool teachers had a strong emphasis

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on skills, whereas Kindergarten teachers focused on children's ability to function within a classroom environment.

Just as teachers in various settings may have different expectations about what is important for children starting school, so too do parents and teachers. Lewit and Baker (1995) report that the majority (more than 75%) of teachers involved in their study indicated that being physically healthy, rested and well nourished was essential, while parents were much more likely than teachers to report that academic skills were important in order for children to be considered ready to start school. Both groups reported that communication skills, enthusiasm and social skills such as being able to take turns were important.

Children starting school bring with them a wide array of experiences and understandings. Because of these, they experience the transition to school in different ways. Rimm-Kaufman, Cox and Pianta (1998) describe these differences as a qualitative shift along several dimensions. Considering the experiences that make up transition, a multi-dimensional shift suggests that different children will experience it in different ways, as they adjust to the different contexts, people and experiences. Despite this growing recognition that the starting school experiences of children will differ, there have been few attempts to investigate these experiences from the perspective of those children (for example, Christensen, 1998; Dockett, Clyde & Perry, 1998). From those which have considered children's perspectives, a different picture of what is important has emerged.

In a series of pilot studies undertaken in 1997 and 1998, the authors, and other members of the UWS Macarthur Starting School Project team, undertook a series of focus group interviews (interviews (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell & Alexander, 1995) with groups of parents, teachers in prior-to-school settings, teachers in school settings and children who had just started school, children who were about to start school, and children who had been at school for some time. Using grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), a number of categories of responses were created, reflecting the issues which were reported by parents, teachers and children as important to consider when children started school.

Both teachers and parents indicated that *social adjustment* to the school setting was the most important aspect to consider, followed by the child's *disposition* towards school and learning, and then the requisite *skills* to operate in a school setting. Parents, but not teachers, also indicated that it was important for children to demonstrate some *knowledge* (such as reading or writing their name) before starting school (Dockett, Perry & Tracey, 1997). On the other hand, the overwhelming response from children interviewed was that it was important to know the *rules* which pertain at school. Some 76% of all responses from the children in the pilot studies stressed the rules category, with very few mentioning knowledge (10%) and skills (7%) (Perry, Dockett & Tracey, 1998a).

The study reported in this paper extends the pilot study as it explores the perceptions of larger numbers of parents and teachers, from diverse geographic and socio-economic backgrounds across NSW, about what is important for children starting school and compares these perceptions with those of children who had recently started school.

Method

The study aimed to elicit data from different groups of people about their perceptions of what was involved in children starting school and to explore issues of how school readiness was achieved and/or demonstrated. Data were collected for this study using two approaches–a comprehensive questionnaire for parents and teachers and a series of focus group interviews for the children.

Questionnaire: From the pilot study, extensive questionnaires were developed and distributed in 15 locations within the state of New South Wales, Australia. These locations represented a cross-section of locations based on the variables of geography, socio-economic status, cultural diversity and special

needs of children and were identified using a stratified purposeful sampling technique (Gall, Borg & Gall, 1996; Miles & Huberman, 1994). A similar approach has been used in other evaluation studies of transition programs (Jang, 1995; Saurino & Saurino, 1995; Schuster & Hemmeter, 1995). Of particular importance in this study is the coverage of a wide range of social contexts which are relevant to the Australian environment.

After obtaining the necessary permissions, school principals and coordinators/directors of early childhood settings were asked to distribute questionnaires and reply paid envelopes to a small number of teachers who had interest in, or experience working with, children starting school, and parents who had a child who had started school in 1998, or would do so in 1999. The aim here was to get the questionnaires to those who had a direct interest in the area and to get as broad a response as possible. A total of 1290 questionnaires were distributed across the different locations. The analysis for this paper is based on a return of 436 (34%) questionnaires and specifically considers the responses to the question "List the first 5 things that come into your mind when you think about a / your child starting school".

Focus group interviews: The data reported in this paper were collected from 50 children aged between four-and-a-half and five-and-a-half years of age. The children were interviewed in small focus groups comprising three subjects. Interviews were conducted in 1998 at two schools, within four weeks of children starting at that school. Both schools were located in the south-western region of Sydney. One was a private girls school and the other a public co-educational school. Each interview followed a standard format, using open-ended questions and some prompts, if required. The children were asked to describe what happened when they started school and to explore their experiences and reactions. As well, they were encouraged to pursue areas of their own interest in relation to the topic.

Coding of responses: The coding, for both the survey question and the focus group interviews, is a significant component of the method used in this study. A grounded theory approach was used to nominate categories of response based on the frequency with which the responses occurred, the source of the responses–that is, indicated by different groups of respondents–and the strength of responses–that is, categories were derived from responses that were not only mentioned frequently, but also by many respondents (Cocklin, 1992). A similar approach in the pilot study data reported elsewhere (Dockett et al., 1997) resulted in the establishment of five categories: knowledge; adjustment; skill; disposition and rules along with some mention of physical attributes of children. Other categories emerging from the present analysis which did not emerge from the pilot study were 'family issues' and 'educational environment'. A description of each category, with examples from respondents, is given in Table 1.

The final list of categories was developed by the research team using an iterative process which clarified the categories to be used and the ways in which responses could be coded. Two raters were trained on the categories and their application and they coded each response independently. There was a high level of agreement in this initial coding, resulting in inter-rater reliability measures of 94.4% on the survey question and 96.3% for the children's comments in the focus group interviews. Any discrepancies in coding were discussed and most were resolved. Any categorisations that remained unresolved were coded as "other" and not included in the analyses.

Results

Category	*Description*	*Example*
Knowledge	Ideas, facts or concepts that needed to be known in order to enter school.	• knows name, phone number
Adjustment	Social adjustment to the school context, including interpersonal and organisational adjustment.	• separates easily from parent • can talk to children and adults • can operate as part of a group • follows directions
Skill	Small units of action that could be observed or inferred from observable behaviour.	• identifies own possessions • toilets independently • can tie shoelaces • cuts out adequately • pays attention for 10 minutes
Disposition	Children's attitudes towards, or feelings about, school or learning	• excited about school • willing to have a go • nervous about school • scared to go
Rules	Fitting in with the school and school expectations.	• wearing a uniform • coping with discipline • lining up
Physical	Physical attributes, needs or characteristics of children. Also includes issues about safety, health and age.	• tiredness • immunisation • older or younger than 5 • playground safety • washing hands • big kids
Family issues	Issues related to family functioning or involvement with the school.	• parent-school communication • parent's role • homework • what will the teacher be like? • cost
Educational environment	Changes in environment, concern about the nature of that environment.	• is it the right school? • class size • supervision • quality of education provided • school preparation for new children? • individual/special needs

Table 1. Categories of responses.

Teachers and parents: Responses were received from 217 teachers and 219 parents. As respondents were asked to list 5 responses to the question asked, there were potentially 2180 responses in total. The actual number of responses was 1936: 939 from parents and 997 from teachers. In calculating the percentage frequencies, these actual totals have been used.

The teacher respondents were drawn from a variety of educational settings, as can be seen from Table 2.

Educational setting	*Frequency*	*Percentage*
Government primary school	112	51.6
Catholic primary school	48	22.1
Independent primary school	9	4.1
Preschool	23	10.6
Long day care	19	8.8
Other	6	2.8
Total	217	100

Table 2. Educational setting of teacher respondents.

Forty-four (20%) of the parent respondents had children who were due to start school in the year after the survey was administered (1999), while 165 (75%) had a child who had commenced school in the current year (1998). Ten parents did not report this information about their focus child.

Children: A total of 321 codable responses were obtained from the 50 children interviewed. Percentages referred to below are of this number. The frequency of responses, for parents, teachers and children, coded according to the derived categories of response, are presented in Table 3.

Category	*Parent responses*		*Teacher responses*		*Child responses*	
	number	percentage (of 939)	number	percentage (of 997)	number	percentage (of 321)
Knowledge	14	1.5	43	4.3	38	11.8
Social adjustment	320	34.0	383	38.0	38	11.8
Skills	48	5.1	123	12.0	5	1.6
Disposition	123	13.0	120	12.0	103	32.1
Rules	44	4.7	23	2.3	106	33.0
Physical	112	11.9	74	7.4	29	9.0
Family issues	49	5.2	23	2.3	1	0.03
Educational environment	160	17.0	92	9.2	1	0.03

Table 3. Frequency of responses in each category for parents, teachers and children

Analysis and discussion

The results given above are in congruence with both the pilot study data reported elsewhere (Dockett et al, 1997; Perry, Dockett & Tracey, 1998a; 1998b) and with those of previous studies which consider children's transition to school. The pilot study indicated that the prime concerns for both parents and teachers were issues categorised as *Social Adjustment*, particularly, but not only for the children starting school. This is clearly replicated here, in keeping with the results of Hains et al (1989). On the other hand, the children's largest response categories were *Rules* and *Disposition*.

There are substantial differences of emphasis between the parents and teachers, on the one hand, and the children on the other, concerning the categories of Social Adjustment, Disposition and Rules. Social Adjustment is the modal category for both parents and teachers, with key areas of individual adjustment–for the child, the parent and the teacher–and organisational adjustment–fitting in with a large group of people in an unfamiliar organisational context–being explored. For teachers, it was of considerable importance that children *demonstrate their ability to adjust to the school context by fit[ting] into the group, listening and taking turns, sitting still* and *making their needs known.* Similarly, parents were keen to have their children become part of the group and not stand out as different or uncooperative. While it was not their major category of response, some children were quite clear about what constituted social adjustment in the school context:

- *I thought I'd get new friends*
- *You play special things, get lollies if you're good...*
- *I didn't cry at all!*
- *I knew my Mum would pick me up in the afternoon*
- *[some kids cried] ...cause they didn't know what they had to do*

However, the major proportion of the children's comments can be categorised in terms of Disposition and Rules. Almost all of the children interviewed were very positive about their starting school experiences and were keen to describe their experiences in terms of their own and their family members' disposition towards school·

- *I like school.*
- *[I was] happy but my brother felt sad [because he] didn't want me to go to school.*
- *Mum and Dad [were] excited, my whole family felt excited. They wanted to know whose class I was in.*
- *My Mum likes this school.*
- *I like talking with the big kids.*
- *I thought it was gonna be fun, then I thought it was gonna be sad and then I thought it was gonna be fun again.*

In addition to describing their feelings, some children articulated the reasons for these. One girl reported that her first day at school [was] *good. I had a pink cupcake. I felt special. I did lots of new things, not like what I did in little school*. Another described a complex array of feelings: *I felt a bit scared, I felt good, I wasn't shy, excited about going to school*; while yet another said that she was *happy, happy, [but] a bit scared that I wouldn't know where my stuff was*. One other child was clear about the reason for her feelings about school: *I don't like school, I don't get to sleep in*.

While not the most common response category for either parents or teachers, Disposition, particularly of the children, was mentioned quite often. Comments from parents about their children being *excited to go to school* and from teachers about children *being happy, confident* and *willing to have a go* indicate that similar issues concern both groups.

The most popular category for children's responses was Rules. Children were adamant that they needed to know the school rules in order to function well within the school and, in particular, to keep out of trouble. It seems possible that the Rules category may be the children's method for describing what has been categorised as Social Adjustment–particularly, organisational adjustment–for the adults. That is, the children seemed to be suggesting that you 'fitted in' to the school by knowing, and obeying, the rules:

- *You have to know to sit down or stand up if the teacher says. You have to listen to the teacher.*
- *You have to put your hat away and then your bag and then you have to come and sit on the floor and when the teacher calls out your name you have to say 'here' and you have to sit and stay sitting down.*
- *We have to line up at the assembly areas.*
- *The teacher doesn't want us talking when she is talking.*
- *Don't be naughty, don't pick flowers and don't pick someone else's lunch up.*

For children, a critical part of getting ready for school was to find out about these rules and the major difficulty children expressed about starting school was that they did not know the rules. When asked what they would tell one of their friends who was about to start school, all children cited lists of rules, such as those above. There was no mention of questioning the rules. Rather there was an assumption that when they came to school, children were required to follow the rules. The consequences of not doing so, for some children, were severe. One girl described these: *If you be naughty they might kick you out of the school, or call your Mum*. Her friend verified this, noting that *there is a lady in the office who knows how to ring Mum*. Other consequences of rule breaking listed by children included: *you get into trouble*; *sit on the naughty chair*; *have to go and visit the office*; *you have to go up and see Mrs M. or the principal*; and *sometimes you have to go to a different class if you're naughty*. After less than a month in the school environment, most children were clear not only about the rules of the school, but also about the consequences of breaking these rules.

Rules were mentioned less frequently by parents and teachers. Several comments were made about children *wearing uniforms*, *needing consistent rules and discipline* and *coming/going to school to get some*

discipline. While there were relatively few overt mentions of responses fitting into this category, many of the comments coded as social adjustment-organisational contained an implicit commitment to children knowing and obeying the rules. As indicated elsewhere (Perry et al, 1998b), adults may interpret many of the rules and routines as promoting adjustment to an organisational context, whereas children often regard them as rules imposed upon them.

Several children indicated that some knowledge was required in order to start school. Comments referred to *knowing how to count properly, knowing your name* and *knowing how to read*. While this knowledge was reflected in comments from parents and teachers, the rate of response in this category was much less for the adults than the children. Further, teachers mentioned the category of Knowledge significantly more often than parents ($r = 9.57178$, $p < .01$)), indicating that teachers regarded it as more important for children to demonstrate such knowledge than parents. The children's focus on knowledge suggests also that it is important for them. Part of the explanation for this may be the children's own expectations about the reasons for going to school. A range of comments from the children suggest that they know why they are attending school and that it has to do with the development of their knowledge:

- *Learn how to read, speak a different language, play with toys and write in books and make your own stories up.*
- *And they tell you how to read and write.*
- *If you don't go you don't learn.*

Factors relating to physical attributes, age, health and safety were mentioned most frequently by parents. Comments such as *Will she be safe?; He might be bullied; I worry about her washing her hands, soap doesn't seem to be a priority in schools*; *Five days really tires them out*; *How will she go keeping her fluids up?* and *Will he eat healthy lunches?* indicate an awareness that children need to be physically able to manage the school day. Most responses in this category came from parents whose children had already started school, suggesting that these were ongoing concerns, sometimes even more prevalent once children started school.

Children also mentioned issues in this category. Of interest for them was the idea that they were *big kids* and that *only big kids can go to big school*. Several commented on the importance of being aged five, and others on becoming big through such things as *eating vegetables*. One child noted that it was important to *eat breakfast every morning so you have enough energy to play*. A strong focus for some children in terms of physical issues, related to interactions with the other children at school, notably the *big kids*.

> *School is really fun and I think I'm going to like it, but always when the big kids aren't around. Because when they come closer they make me close my eyes cause they make me get a bit more scared. I like the big kids, but I don't like the bad kids. Cause they get into trouble.*
>
> *I just play down here with the other kids in Kindergarten. Cause I don't like the big kids to hurt me. They can hurt! They can get you. You get in and then the others get you. They get the ball and then I get in the middle and can't get it ... They think I'm a toy, but I'm not, I'm a kid. They think they can play with me, but I don't want to play with them.*

Of the adult respondents, more teachers than parents mentioned skills as something that came to mind when they thought about children starting school. The types of skills mentioned by both parents and teachers were similar, with the most frequent being the children's ability to *toilet themselves independently*, *dress themselves* and *care for their own things*. The stronger teacher focus on skills suggests that they value children who are independent and accept responsibility for their own actions and possessions. In some ways, this also relates to social adjustment in that teachers support and encourage actions that enhance individual children to function as part of a group, and part of that means operating without the

constant attention of the teacher. On the few occasions that children mentioned skills, they referred to activities such as *packing all the things*, *getting dressed* and *doing up shoelaces*.

Issues coded as Educational Environment were referred to more frequently by parents than teachers, and on only one occasion by a child. Parents were most likely to ask questions such as *What will he/she be learning?* and to consider the impact on their children of the organisation of the school day.

Concerns for or about family were expressed by a small percentage of both parents and teachers. From teachers came comments about the importance of considering family background and establishing family-school communication. From parents came pragmatic issues such as concerns about homework, the interaction between home and school–*Will I be able to help at school?*–and matters of organising the family in order to get children to school and to meet the expectations of the school. Some parents expressed joy at not needing to pay for pre-school or child care fees, whereas others noted that they needed to pay for uniforms, pocket money and before and after school care.

Conclusion

Each of the groups of parents, teachers and children mentioned a range of issues when considering what was relevant to young children starting school. In some instances, the same issues were raised by two or even all three groups. Of prime concern for both parents and teachers, as children started school, was their social adjustment. This, and the subsequent focus on dispositions, suggests that parents and teachers have a similar focus when helping children make the transition to school. However, other categories of responses suggested a difference in focus between these adult participants in children's transition to school, with parents mentioning issues related to the educational environment, family concerns, rules and physical development more often than teachers, and teachers mentioning issues related to skills and knowledge more often than parents.

In contrast to the adult participants, children who were asked to recall their own experiences starting school highlighted the rules that relate to the school context. They were not only able to recite an extensive array of rules, but also to describe some of the consequences that followed the breaking of these rules. As mentioned in the analysis, it is quite feasible that the children's focus on rules is their interpretation of the social adjustment category favoured by the adults. It may be that knowing the rules helps the children adjust to the environment. Knowing the rules at least means knowing what to do, as well as what not to do. While this presents a fairly negative view of the institutional nature of schools, it does also reflect children's efforts to find a level of comfort and familiarity–if there are rules, then there is predicability; if there is predicability, then you are much more likely to know what will happen.

Almost as strong as the focus on rules from children was the emphasis on disposition. For children, liking school, wanting to be there and being excited about going to school were often reported sentiments. For many children, liking school involved having friends and being with those friends. Parents and teachers also mentioned the importance of children wanting to go to school.

The results of this investigation suggest very strongly that we cannot assume that all the participants in children's transition to school are focussed on the same things. Parents, teachers and children are all actively involved in the process and all have different perceptions and expectations about what is important. If we are to develop effective transition programs, where the focus is on developing a meaningful partnership between teachers, parents and children, we must take these into account. We cannot ignore any of these perspectives and expectations, or assume that some are more or less important than others.

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