The project described in this paper investigated the needs and concerns identified by parents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds as their children started school in Sydney, Australia. Six groups of parents from Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, Samoan, Turkish and Vietnamese language backgrounds were interviewed about what was important for them to know and/or do as their children started school. In particular, parents were asked to identify information which would have been helpful for them, and that should be available to parents with children starting school. The data obtained were compared with data derived from Australian parents whose first language is English. The results indicate that there are some issues which seem to be of concern to most parents, regardless of their cultural or language background, such as parents’ desire for children to be happy and confident at school, as well as some more specific issues for some groups.

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Starting school in Australia is “a bit safer, a lot easier and more relaxing”: Issues for parents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds

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Abstract
The project described in this paper investigated the needs and concerns identified by parents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds as their children started school in Sydney, Australia. Six groups of parents from Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, Samoan, Turkish and Vietnamese language backgrounds were interviewed about what was important for them to know and/or do as their children started school. In particular, parents were asked to identify information which would have been helpful for them, and that should be available to parents with children starting school. The data obtained were compared with data derived from Australian parents whose first language is English. The results indicate that there are some issues which seem to be of concern to most parents, regardless of their cultural or language background—such as parents’ desire for children to be happy and confident at school—as well as some more specific issues for some groups.

Background
In New South Wales (NSW), Australia, the four-term school year commences in late January, and finishes in early December. The age by which children are legally required to start school is six years. However, children are eligible to start school at the beginning of the school year if they turn five by July 31, in that same year. As there is only one annual intake of students, children starting school can vary in age from four-and-a-half to six years. The first year of school, Kindergarten, involves a full day program. Depending on their location, individual schools may have enrolments from 10 to over 900 students. Many of these schools have diverse student populations, with some city schools reporting up to 98% of their students having culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. The language of instruction in all NSW schools is English.

Introduction
The transition to school is an important time in the life of the child, the family and the school community. The ease with which this transition is accomplished has a long term impact on children’s school success and family involvement with the school (Alexander & Entwisle, 1988; Luster & McAdoo, 1996). Children who experience early school success are reported to exhibit higher levels of social competence and academic achievement than those who experience difficulty starting school (Early et al., 1999).

A sense of belonging to the school community is an important contributor to how well children and families adjust to school. Osterman (2000, p. 359) notes that within the school community, “students who experience acceptance are more highly motivated and engaged in learning and more committed to school”. There are clear indications that some children and families do not feel ‘connected’ to the school community—rather they experience alienation at school. There are many potential reasons for this, including differences in home and school culture (Toomey, 1989), and expectations of home and school (Baker et al., 1999). Children who experience similar environments and expectations at home and school are likely to find the transition to school, as well as school in general, an easier process (Morrison et al., 1997).
The converse also holds: that is, that children who find school unfamiliar and unrelated to their home contexts tend to experience difficulty, confusion and anxiety during the transition.

Studies of parents’ and teachers’ beliefs about children’s readiness for school identify differences in expectations and suggest that these can set up situations where children may be regarded by educators as ‘unready’ for school, and where children experience confusion as a result of these home-school inconsistencies (Bernhard et al., 1998; Pelletier, 2002; Piotrkowski et al., 2001).

Pelletier (2002) has reported differences in expectations of a transition to school program from different groups of parents living in suburban Toronto, Canada. In general, she found that parents with a non-English-speaking-background were more likely than parents with an English-speaking-background to give priority to academic goals for their children as they started school. A similar finding in a different location has been reported by Greenfield et al. (2000). In contrast, Piotrkowski et al. (2001) have reported consistent agreement among parents of Black and Hispanic children (many from non-English speaking backgrounds) in a high-need community in the US, about what children should be able to do and know when they start school, suggesting that language background is only one factor contributing to expectations.

Parents are not only interested in their children’s education (Bastiani, 1995), but also exert a significant influence on their children’s learning. There are consistent research findings that children whose parents are more involved in school demonstrate higher academic performance (Epstein, 1991; Funkhouser et al., 1998). Yet, in many situations there are barriers to such involvement (Jones et al., 2001). In some instances, this can be related to the lack of cultural awareness, or the unavailability of linguistically appropriate or culturally relevant information for families (Aronson, 1995; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991).

Parent involvement can take many forms. Pelletier (2002) notes that one of the important aspects of parental involvement is parents’ capacity to connect with schools—the sense of being a valued part of the school community. Such connection can be difficult if parents have no real understanding of what school is like. In instances where parents’ understanding of school is based on their own experience—particularly if that has occurred in different contexts, such as a different country—tensions can arise when the expectations of school and parents differ. Tensions can also arise when parents who do not speak English cannot access information about school and school expectations in their home language. Further problems can be experienced if parents believe that they are unable to help their children prepare for and participate in school.

Clearly, starting school—and succeeding at school—is affected by many factors. These relate not only to the individual child, but also to the family and the school context. Pianta et al. (1999) have described an ecological model, which regards the child and family as participants in multiple interactions and relationships that shape the transition experience. Rather than focus on the child as the unit of study in transition, this model considers the entire ecology in which the child operates in an effort to understand the experiences, interactions and relationships that underpin transition to school. The model suggests that the contexts in which the transition to school occurs play a major role in determining the nature of that transition. One crucial aspect of context is the cultural and language background of families as children enter school.

Given the importance of the transition to school and the impact of context upon this, one of the elements included in the Starting School Research Project for analysis was the socio-
cultural background of children, families and educators. One of the questions posed through this project related to the information that families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds access about school, what they want to know and ways in which this can be communicated effectively. This paper reports on an investigation of this question.

Method
The aims of this investigation were to:
1. Ascertain the concerns and issues of parents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds about children’s transition to school; and
2. Respond to these concerns and issues by making available relevant and requested information in a variety of community languages.

The methodology adopted throughout the Starting School Research Project (Dockett & Perry, 2001) has involved extensive collaboration and consultation with stakeholders in the transition to school. This project maintained this approach across the following aspects:

- The NSW Department of Education and Training identified six major language groups: Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, Samoan, Turkish and Vietnamese. These language groups were chosen either because they were strongly represented in NSW schools, or there were recent significant increases in the numbers of children attending school with these linguistic backgrounds.

- Three Sydney suburban elementary schools were identified as suitable locations for the project. School A had 900+ students with 97% of them from non-English-speaking backgrounds. School B had approximately 300 students, 95% of whom had non-English-speaking backgrounds. School C was a small school, with 135 children enrolled. Of these, 89% had non-English-speaking backgrounds. The student population of each school was diverse. As one example, approximately 30% of the students attending School C had Arabic, Chinese or Vietnamese language backgrounds. Eighteen other language backgrounds were represented in the school.

- Separate focus group interviews were conducted with parents and children from each of these language groups. The interviews canvassed issues such as:
  - What should parents do to help get children ready for school?
  - What do children need to start school?
  - What do parents need to know when their children start school?
  - Is there anything you didn’t know but would have liked to know about school?
  - What would parents like to know, or like the school to do, as children start school?
  - What do children think is important as they start school?

In this paper, only data from parent interviews is reported.

Each interview was conducted by a member of the research team on the school site, with the aid of an interpreter. Group size varied, but overall approximately 10 parents from each language group were interviewed. In some instances, the interpreter conducted the entire interview, explaining both the researcher’s questions and the interviewees’ responses, and in other cases, a combination of English and home language was used, according to the preference of the interviewees. In most instances, parents gave permission for these interviews to be audio-taped. A combination of transcripts and researcher notes form the data used in this paper. (The data was also used to produce ‘parent brochures’ in each of the
languages outlining what parents might do to help prepare their children and themselves for the transition to school. The development of these brochures is the subject of a later paper.)

Responses were analysed in terms of the following categories that have been identified in previous research about what matters as children start school (Perry et al., 2000):

1. **Knowledge**—ideas, facts or concepts that need to be known in order to start school, such as knowing numbers and letters, name and phone number.
2. **Adjustment**—issues of social adjustment to the school context, for example knowing how to interact with a large group of children, or responding appropriately to the teacher.
3. **Skills**—discrete actions, such as tying shoelaces, holding pencils appropriately and toileting independently.
4. **Disposition**—attitudes to school, and feelings about school and learning.
5. **Rules**—the expectations of behaviour and action that are expressed as rules.
6. **Physical**—physical attributes or characteristics as children start school, such as their age and general health.
7. **Family issues**—issues about family interactions with school, family life to support school, as well as changes to family life brought about by children starting school.
8. **Educational environment**—issues about what happens at school, and the nature of the school environment.

The issues identified by the specific groups were then compared with the overall findings of the Starting School Research Project.

**Results and discussion**
Many of the identified categories were raised by all of the parent groups. Specific examples of issues raised are reported in Table 1 (What should parents do to help get children ready for school?) and Table 2 (What do children need to start school?).

**Insert Tables 1 and 2 about here**

While many of the same issues were raised across groups, there were also some differences in the relative importance of these issues across groups. For example, all groups indicated that physical issues were important as they considered their child starting school. The Samoan parents mentioned this more often than other parent groups. In contrast, the Chinese-speaking parents mentioned the knowledge they thought their children needed more than the other groups.

When thinking about their children starting school, parents in all groups focused on physical issues, knowledge, adjustment and skills. All groups emphasised the importance of children being able to manage food and toileting at school, with parents in the Chinese and Arabic-speaking groups highlighting this more than the other groups. The Samoan parents were most concerned about issues of adjustment, often mentioning the difficulty some children had in interacting in what were perceived to be appropriate ways with teachers.

Each of the parent groups indicated that they had the responsibility to prepare children for eating, talking and toileting at school. These may seem disparate aspects of starting school, but they all relate to children ‘fitting in’ to school, something that has been raised by parents in other studies (Dockett & Perry, 1999). Knowing what to eat, when to eat it (at recess and at lunch) and being able to manage lunchboxes, plastic wrap and drink bottles were all mentioned in discussion. Issues of hygiene were also raised, particularly in the context of washing hands before lunch and after using the toilet. There was concern from parents that...
Eating at school was a consistent topic for all groups of parents. Parents from the Chinese-speaking group indicated that they needed to help children understand differences between home and school in relation to food. At home, meal times were described as occasions for sharing food and interacting socially with family and friends. However, at school parents did not want children sharing food. One parent from a Chinese-speaking background explained that if children expected to share food at lunchtimes, parents would feel obliged to send enough food for all to share. Another parent indicated that she was worried about how much her daughter ate and drank at school, and wanted to be sure that what was sent was eaten. Parents in the Arabic language group also expressed concerns about children eating and sharing food at school. While there was the concern about children eating foods that were prohibited to Muslims, there was also a desire from these parents to help their children feel ‘the same’ as other children. One mother indicated that she had managed this situation by explaining to her daughter not that she should not eat certain meat because of their religion, but that some food ‘had germs’ and was to be avoided because of this. In each of the interviews parents conveyed the message that children needed to know how to manage mealtimes at school, and that one essential element of this was telling children not to share food.

The importance of children knowing how to talk with teachers was also raised by all groups of parents. This encompassed many aspects, such as having sufficient English to make requests, and to answer the teacher, as well as being confident enough to seek help. Parents in the Samoan group emphasised the different language expectations of home and school and described their role as helping children to move between the two. Several groups wanted teachers to realise that children often understood more English than they could speak, and that children could be shy in speaking in English with unfamiliar adults. In some groups, parents were conscious that they felt uncomfortable approaching teachers and speaking English, and that this, in turn, increased children’s level of discomfort. There was consensus that parents needed to provide positive models for children, both in speaking English when appropriate, and in approaching teachers. There were also indications that this could be difficult for parents.

Parents wanted teachers to be patient with children who needed to have things repeated, and to recognise that children often get confused when they can only use English at school. Parents recognised that teachers sometimes were frustrated when children didn’t seem to understand, but were adamant that teachers should not judge children who were having difficulty moving between languages as incompetent. The role of the Community Language Teacher was emphasised often by parents. These teachers are employed by the NSW Department of Education and Training to liaise with communities and to help children maintain their home language. They provide pivotal connections between home and school. Parents wanted to know if there was a Community Language Teacher who spoke their language at school, and if so, were keen to use this person as an intermediary with the school. Where no Community Language teacher was available, parents wanted information about how to access interpreting and translating services.

One common message from all groups of parents was the importance of establishing their own networks, so that they could provide mutual support, share information and provide contexts where their children could interact and get to know each other before they started school. They recognised that parents experienced a range of feelings as children started school, and talked about the importance of a social network to support them at this time of
change. These networks also provided access to information about the school, what happens at school and what is expected of them and their children. Such relationships acted as resources to support families and children during the transition to school (Pianta and Kraft-Sayre, 2003).

Many parents indicated that they often do not understand Australian schools. Parents from three groups said that they seemed to have different expectations of schools and teachers from English-speaking parents. Specifically, these parents described how they expected children to respect teachers and had difficulty understanding some of the ways in which other children and parents interacted with teachers. One Arabic-speaking parent commented that teachers in Australia “were nicer but not nearly as effective” as teachers in her home country. A parent from the Turkish group described schooling in Australia as “a bit safer, and a lot easier and more relaxing” than in Turkey. The general message was that teachers did not seem to engender the same respect as they recalled from their own experience, but that this also meant that teachers tended to have more positive interactions with children.

In all groups, parents were concerned about the quality of the education experienced by their children. School was described as the best place to learn, and parents indicated that they expected to enrol their child at school as soon as possible. Several groups saw no reason to keep a child out of school, even if they were to be the youngest in the group. Despite this, parents did emphasise the importance of social as well as academic development, and regarded friends and siblings as important in helping children adjust to school. Parents were aware of the difficulties faced by children in adjusting to school when home and school were very different.

**Comparison with other results of the Starting School Research Project**

Earlier results of the Starting School Research Project have used the strength of parent response to rank the relative importance of the eight categories (Perry et al., 2000). These data (obtained from over 600?? responses from English speaking parents to a survey conducted in NSW in 1998-1999) ranked the adjustment category as most important and the knowledge category as least important.

The ranking for the knowledge category is clearly different for the parents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds interviewed in the current study who saw school as a place of learning, and indicated that the more children could learn, the better. Starting school with some academic knowledge both reflected some of their own school experiences and expectations, and was regarded as important in terms of children making favourable impressions with teachers. Pelletier (2002) reported similar results for the knowledge category from the culturally and linguistically diverse parents of her Toronto study.

The lesser importance paid to adjustment by the parents in the present study does not suggest that these parents were not interested in their child settling in and adjusting to school. Rather, parents expected that children would adjust as they attended school—it was something that parents often did not feel they could help children with, either because they did not think they had a good knowledge of the school, or because they saw this as part of the responsibility of the school. An exception to this was noted in the Samoan group, who highlighted their concern that school and home were so different that this often caused anxiety among children. The Samoan parents indicated that they saw it as part of their parental responsibility to ease their child’s adjustment to school, for example, by helping the children learn how to concentrate.
As well as identifying the categories of responses from parents, the 1998-1999 survey asked parents to indicate, from a series of activities, those that they believed parents should undertake in order to help their children prepare for school, and activities that parents believed children should have done before starting school. A summary of these data are reported in Tables 3 and 4 (Dockett & Perry, 2003).

**Insert Tables 3 and 4 about here**

These tables can be compared with the responses from the culturally and linguistically diverse parent groups listed in Table 1 and Table 2 of this paper.

While knowledge issues were raised more often by parents in the present study, there was agreement among the parents from both studies that learning and using standard English was an important aspect of children’s preparation for school. This has also been reported in previous research (Piotrkowski et al., 2001). While fluency in the child’s home language was seen as important, it was fluency with English that was seen to be most needed by children at school. There were some calls from parents in the present study for teachers to recognise how difficult it could be for children to operate in more than one language, and that time was required for children to understand and respond to teaching and learning experiences conducted in English.

Some of the activities mentioned by the parents in response to the general survey did not rate any mention by parents in the present study. There are many possible reasons for this, some of which could relate to parents’ educational experiences in other countries and their expectations of school generally. What is important is that parents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds see that they often need access to different information from parents whose first language is English and who have probably attended school in Australia or other English-speaking countries.

Other activities regarded as important by parents in the present study were raised in the general parent survey, but the specifics of the concern varied. For example, in the general survey, many parents noted that they were concerned about children eating lunch at school. There were comments about not being sure if children actually ate, what they ate and whether or not teachers checked that children had washed their hands. Similar concerns were raised by parents in the present study, but the reasons for concern often reflected cultural concerns as well as hygiene concerns.

**Conclusion**

The project reported in this paper was based on the recognition that parental involvement in school is a critical factor in promoting children’s success at school. For families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, connecting with the school can be difficult if there is little information available in the relevant language. It cannot be assumed the information requested by, and available to, English-speaking parents is the same as that required by parents for whom English is an additional language.

Parents’ perceptions of themselves and their ability to help their children can be affected by the ways in which they connect with the school. This in turn, can influence children’s perceptions of school and their own perceptions of themselves as learners. This project investigated the concerns and issues relevant to children and parents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.
Parents in this study have highlighted the importance of having access to information about school, and to people at school who spoke their home language. The importance of the Community Language Teacher was emphasised. These teachers provided a vital link between families and school and were able to recognise and respond appropriately to culturally sensitive situations and to share information in ways that were meaningful and relevant.

References


**Tables**

**Table 1. What should parents do to help children get ready for school**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category of response</th>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Number of groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Physical             | Prepare children for eating at school  
                        | Know that children get tired  
                        | Help children concentrate | 6 |
| Disposition          | Recognise friends/siblings as important for children  
                        | Think of school as positive  
                        | Realise that children can be very quiet and scared to ask for help | 6 |
| Knowledge            | Know when to enrol children  
                        | Know if there is someone at school who speaks the same language  
                        | Know about the uniform  
                        | Know what happens at school  
                        | Teach children address and phone number | 6 |
| Educational environment | Talk with teachers  
                        | Learn about school from the children | 6 |
| Adjustment           | Help children manage the difference between home and school  
                        | Know children change when they start school  
                        | Help children get used to routines  
                        | Prepare children for talking at school | 6 |
| Family               | Help children at home  
                        | Form a network for own support and children’s support | 2 |
| Skills               | Toileting at school | 6 |
| Rules                |                     | 0 |

**Table 2. What do children need to start school? Parent perspectives.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category of response</th>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Number of groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Physical             | Be old enough  
                        | Know how to manage lunch  
                        | Know not to share food, drinks  
                        | Wear the school uniform | 6 |
| Knowledge            | Know/speak English  
                        | Know words and alphabet  
                        | Recognise print  
                        | Know address and phone number  
                        | Write their name | 6 |
| Adjustment           | Know why they are going to school  
                        | Know how to respond to the teacher/ask for help  
                        | Know home and school are different | 6 |
| Disposition          | Get along with others socially, know how to make friends | 5 |
| Skills               | Know how to manage their lunch box, straw etc  
                        | Know to wash hands/toilet  
                        | Know how to toilet themselves | 6 |
| Rules                | Learn the rules | 1 |
| Educational environment |                     | 0 |
| Family               |                     | 0 |
Table 3. Most desirable activities for parents/guardians to have done before children start school (Dockett & Perry, 2003)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Parent Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>talked with the child about school</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>played with the child</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>read books to the child</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>taught the child to be aware of strangers</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>visited the chosen school</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Most desirable activities for children to have done before starting school (Dockett & Perry, 2003)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Parent Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>learned Standard English</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>visited the school</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>been exposed to lots of books</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gained fluency in their home language</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>talked with adults about school</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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