CONCERNS AND EXPECTATIONS OF BANGLADESHI PARENTS AS THEIR CHILDREN START SCHOOL

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This study aimed to examine views, concerns and expectations of immigrant Bangladeshi parents and children in Sydney concerning transition to kindergarten (the first year of school). This study builds on the previous work of the Starting School Research Project at the University of Western Sydney by:

- deriving data from families and children for whom English is not the first language; and
- exploring the transitional experiences of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) children from prior-to-school to school settings.

Ten parents and four children were interviewed on the topic of transition to school. In particular, parents were asked to indicate their concerns and expectations that would assist schools in meeting the needs of Bangladeshi children and would make transition to school a positive experience for all concerned. The results revealed issues specific to families and children of non-English-speaking background regarding transition to school.

Background

Transition to school is an important event in the lives of children and the adults caring for them (Planta & Cox, 1999; Ramey & Ramey, 1998). Some of the common feelings associated with this key experience for children, families and educators are excitement, anxiety and fear (Dockett & Perry, 2001). Many situational and psychological factors impact on the transition processes (Briggs & Potter, 1999). Children's first experiences with transition and formal schooling can influence their attitudes and achievement throughout their academic life and have implications for their academic success (Alexander & Entwistle, 1988; Hamre & Planta, 2001; McClelland, Morrison & Holmes, 2000). Consequently, it is a vital topic of investigation in early childhood educational research.

Parental concerns and expectations regarding children's transition to school relate to children's social adjustment, their dispositions toward school and learning, skills, knowledge, rules and physical issues (Dockett & Perry, 2004; Perry, Dockett & Howard, 2000). There are both differences and similarities in the expectations and concerns of parents from various backgrounds regarding transition to school (Greenfield, Quiroz & Raaff, 2000; Pelletier, 2002). For example, parents from non-English-speaking backgrounds often emphasise academic goals more than English-speaking parents do (Perry, Dockett & Nicolson, 2002; Pelletier, 2002). Given the cultural and linguistic diversity of Australian school children and their families, it seems appropriate to consider different cultural groups within the broader Australian context. In this study one such group is highlighted.

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978) exemplifies the significance of various sociocultural contexts and the need to explore the perceptions of diverse families in relation to matters concerning children, such as transition to school. As school classes become more diverse, educators need to devise individualised and positive transition programs for promoting academic success in all students. To this end, it is imperative that educators are aware of, and take into account, the needs and expectations of CALD children and parents.

Further, the theoretical constructs of Bronfenbrenner (1979) emphasise the need to understand transition in the context of home, school and community, as well as considering both continuities and changes across contexts such as home, child care and school (Peters, 2000). 'One dimension of context is defined by the language and cultural backgrounds of the participants' (Perry et al., 2002, p. 1). The transitional experiences
of children whose cultural and language experiences are different from the majority could present significant challenges to both the children and their families because of incompatibilities between home and school cultural contexts. Based on the ecological and sociocultural perspectives, this study aimed to explore CALD families' attitudes towards transition to school. Specifically, it aimed to explore the views, issues and expectations of Bangladeshi families and children in relation to this transition.

Method
Participants
Participants in the study were 10 parents and four children from Bengali-speaking Bangladeshi families living in suburban Sydney. Bengali is one of the languages spoken in India and other countries in the Indian subcontinent such as Bangladesh. Bengali-speaking families are a newly-emerging minority language group in NSW (The People of New South Wales, 1996) whose cultural or language needs in relation to transition to school have not been extensively studied.

Children were also included in this study to explore their perspectives and expectations in regard to transition. The importance of including children's perspectives is now well-established (Broström, 2000; Dockett & Perry, 1999a).

Sample description
Bangladeshi children who have just started school and who had attended child care previously were included in this study, as were their parents. Four children (three boys and one girl), aged between four-and-a-half to six years, and 10 Bangladeshi parents (seven mothers and three fathers) living in suburban Sydney participated. A majority of parents have been living in Sydney for more than five years, with the length of residency for selected families ranging from two-and-a-half years to 12 years. All the children were born in Australia, had attended child care in Sydney, and started school in 2003.

Potential participants who met the criteria for selection were recruited with the help of staff from a Migrant Resource Centre (MRC) (purposive sampling) and the research assistant, who is also a community development worker. The people recruited in this way were then used as sources to identify other participants and to refer them to the researcher (snowball sampling) (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000).

Data collection
Translated information about the project, together with consent forms, was mailed to potential participants. Arrangements for child and parent interviews were made over the telephone after receiving written consent for their participation in the study. Assent was also obtained orally from children on the day of the interview. Data was collected, using note-taking in most cases as only four of the 10 adult participants consented to having their interviews audio-taped.

Individual interviews with parents and their children were conducted in their choice of language (English or Bengali). Interviews are considered valuable for collecting first-hand information from participants (Gay, 1992) and enable discussion of the participants' points of view (Cohen et al., 2000). The interviews took place in participants' homes in April/May 2003, not long after the children started school.

The interviews were conducted by the chief investigator with the support of a research assistant recruited through the MRC, using a semi-structured interview schedule with open-ended questions. Where permission was obtained, these interviews were audiorecorded and transcribed in preparation for analysis. The broad topics for the parents' interview included aspirations, expectations, and perceptions on transition to school; the needs and issues relating to transitions between prior-to-school and school settings; and the role of various adult stakeholders in making transition to school positive for children.

The topics for the children's interviews included views and expectations regarding transition between prior-to-school and school settings. In each interview, emphasis was placed on the observance of cultural practices and values, including using traditional greetings such as 'salam alekum' and holding conversations while sitting.

The language of the parent interviews was decided by the parents according to their preferences. A Bengali-speaking community development worker from MRC was recruited to provide an interpreter service if the parents preferred to speak their home language. In such cases, the pattern of interview was a question in English from the chief investigator, interpreted by the Bengali community worker, answered by parents in Bengali or English, and then, if the former, translated into English. This process was repeated for follow-up probes or the next question. Interviews concluded by thanking parents for their participation and by explaining the next steps in the research.
Child interviews followed parent interviews so as to enable children to become familiar with the chief investigator and the research support person. The pattern of child interviews was similar to that for their parents. Each child interview took about 5-10 minutes. Children did not show a lot of enthusiasm in talking to the researchers, and only four children participated in the study. The lack of enthusiasm could perhaps have been because of the age differences between the participants in the conversations. In addition, children would have regarded these conversations as interruptions to their play/home routine. Alternative methods of data collection such as drawings would have been useful in collecting data from children (Dockett & Perry, 2004).

Data analysis

The interview data was translated into English (where needed), transcribed, and analysed qualitatively. The analysis began with the identification of broad constructs or topics. The categories of adjustment, skill, rules, disposition, knowledge, and physical—used in the previous studies—were considered (Perry, Dockett & Howard, 2000). Other categories that emerged from this study were cultural and linguistic issues. The data was coded into the selected categories or constructs (Vierra, Pollock & Golez, 1998). As the interviews with children were brief and yielded few details, child interviews were not considered for further analysis in this study. Therefore the results presented in this paper relate only to parents’ views, concerns and expectations regarding transition to school.

Results and discussion

Transition to school: Parental views and concerns

Children’s entry into school is a phase of major social and emotional adjustments (Broström, 2000; Fabian & Dunlop, 2002; Griebel & Neisel, 2003). The literature on transition to school investigated so far with English-speaking parents has highlighted many concerns and issues such as children’s adjustments, dispositions, knowledge, and physical issues (Brooker, 2002; Dockett & Perry, 2004; Dockett, Perry & Tracey, 1997; Perry, Dockett & Tracey, 1998). The current study extended this work and explored the views of selected CALD parents to see whether they have the same concerns and expectations as English-speaking parents. Bangladeshi parents highlighted the issues of children’s adjustment, physical aspects, rules, etc. raised by English-speaking parents in other studies (Dockett & Perry, 2001). In addition, they raised specific concerns underpinned by linguistic, cultural and/or religious factors (see Table 1). Overall, parents described transition to school as a big event for children. One parent suggested that ‘it [transition to school] is very pressurising for children at those ages’.

Parents in this study were all concerned with their children’s limited or lack of proficiency in English conversational skills and its concomitant impact on their social or emotional adjustments, learning at

<p>| Table 1. Concerns of Bangladeshi parents relating to children’s transition to school |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Number of responses (n=10)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Linguistic factors</td>
<td>Lack of proficiency in English conversational skills</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural/religious factors</td>
<td>Loss of cultural and religious values; no time for prayer</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Concerns about eating certain foods prohibited by religion</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Acceptance by peers/teachers because of differences in skin colour and accent</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjustments</td>
<td>Lack of adjustment in school as a result of not understanding English</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>General adjustment to new environment</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coping with the school demands</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Isolation, bullying and loneliness due to limited conversational skills in English</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skill</td>
<td>Not able to feed on his/her own</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>Academically not prepared</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rules</td>
<td>Following school rules</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>Worried about getting sick</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shy and quiet nature</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Youngest in the class</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational environment</td>
<td>Lack of individual attention at school</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disposition</td>
<td>Losing friends from child care</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fear of unknown</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
school, and relationships with teachers and peers. One parent suggested that:

Anglo-Australian parents do not worry about the English conversational skills of their children, whereas we do. If children can't communicate in English, they may lack confidence, cannot adjust to school, and may not be accepted by peers and teacher as well.

Parents were also concerned about the possibility of their children being isolated, bullied and victimised because of their skin colour, accent and limited English conversational skills (see Table 1). The following quote is an example of their concerns:

Our children speak differently, accent is different, but they [Anglo-Australians] don't need to worry about accent, language. Everything is same at school for them; same language, culture ...

The children's cultural or linguistic capital can be influenced by their skin colour, accent, and proficiency in English (Alexander, 2000; Bourdieu, 1993). Obviously, CALD parents were concerned about their children's emotional wellbeing in school, as children can perceive themselves to be different because of their accent and skin colour and this can lead them to feel less powerful in contexts where English is the dominant language.

In addition, parents were also concerned about the loss of cultural and religious values after being exposed to Western cultural values in school settings.

We would worry about the religious preferences for food and time for prayers; others may not.

It is difficult to maintain our own culture as the cultural atmosphere is different in school. School might affect these values. We don't encourage free mixing of boys with girls.

The concerns expressed by Bangladeshi parents in this study seem to be similar to those reported by parents in Crozier, Davies, Booth and Khatun's study (2003), which expressed concerns about the impact of Western cultural values and Bangladeshi parents' lack of faith that their own cultural values can be maintained in Western school settings.

A few of the Bangladeshi parents highlighted children's personal characteristics as possible issues in their transitions to school. They believed that their children, because of their shy and quiet nature, would lack confidence and be unassertive. Their concerns seem to be undeniable, given the role of children's personal characteristics in adjustment to a new school. When children enter school they are faced with new challenges such as developing a new identity and meeting the school's expectations and demands (Dockett & Perry, 1999b; Fabian & Dunlop, 2002; Margetts, 2000). Margetts (2000) indicates the significance of confidence or assertion in children's adjustments to school. She indicates further that children from particular subgroups of the Australian population could be at risk of not making smooth transitions to school because of a complex interaction of personal characteristics, childcare attendance, and family demographics.

Some parents also mentioned diversity in child-rearing practices as a concern when their children enter kindergarten. For instance, parents commented that they adopt an indulgent approach to child-rearing—which can encourage children's dependency on adult caregivers.

We love our children blindly. In our culture, children depend on adults for everything. We do everything for them. Whereas teachers here expect children to be independent. We don't believe that it is necessary.

Separating from parents, not a problem for Anglo children. They learn to sleep separately from parents from the time they were born. My children sleep in our bed still. Children are with us all the time!

Despite the high value Bangladeshi parents generally place on children's education (Crozier, 2000), parents in this study did not emphasise academic readiness as a major concern. Nor did they mention school rules as a significant issue. This finding is consistent with those of the Starting School Research Project (Dockett & Perry, 2004; Perry et al., 2000) where school rules were seen by parents as having less importance than that given by their children.

A small number of parents mentioned loss of friendships and lack of individual attention in school as matters of concern in children's transitions (see Table 1).

Proficiency in English language before children start school is a matter of concern to many of the Bangladeshi parents. Although children had opportunities to learn English at child care, parents said they did not encourage their children to speak English at home. A lack of cultural or linguistic capital can limit non-English-speaking background children's and parents' confidence and knowledge, as well as their understandings about school and its expectations. As
indicated by Bourdieu and Passerson (1990, cited in Carrington & Luke, 2002), children's ability to succeed in social contexts is influenced by the compatibility or incompatibility between home and school cultural and linguistic practices. Carney and Munsey (1992), in the context of family literacy, noted that NSW schools reflect middle-class, culturally-defined views about literacy learning which can be incongruent with the views of CALD families and children.

Hence, CALD children's transition into a culturally dominating classroom can be a concern. Linguistically and culturally diverse children can find themselves in a vulnerable situation where school contexts are not tailored to meet their specific needs. Effective instructional practices are significant, particularly for students coming from homes where English is not the primary language of communication (Garcia, 1991). For instance, functional communication between the teacher and CALD children and between CALD children and peers is of great importance in school contexts (Garcia, 1991).

From the data collected in this study it appears that the transitional experiences of Bangladeshi— and, perhaps, more generally, CALD—children and families can have greater complexity than might be found for more mainstream cultural groups. There is a need for schools to identify the needs and concerns of CALD children and families as they enter school and to provide them with culturally and linguistically accessible information that addresses these needs and concerns.

**Views on what is important for children to know/have before they start school**

'Starting school represents a major change in the lives of young children' (Dockett, Perry, Howard & Meckley, 1999, p. 1). Parents and caregivers will have a variety of views and expectations regarding the knowledge and skills children need in order to make good adjustments to their new school. The sources for these beliefs are people’s experiences of school and schooling, media and other, perhaps more vicarious, experiences (Dockett & Perry, 2002). The ecological model of starting school (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) focuses on the entire context in which child operates rather than on the child alone. Hence this study also aimed to ascertain what Bangladeshi parents see as important for their children to have or know before they start school and whether they share these expectations with English-speaking parents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Number of responses (n=10)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Linguistic factors</td>
<td>Speak in English or understand English</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skills</td>
<td>Self-help skills: can eat their lunch on their own, go to toilet, look after their belongings, communicate their needs and concerns, can find where things are</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>Age: when they are 5 or 6, they are supposed to go to school</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disposition</td>
<td>Willingness to go to school</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjustment</td>
<td>Being able to be separated from parents</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ability to adjust to big school</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rules</td>
<td>Can understand the expectations and rules of school; school is different from home and that they have home work</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>Knowing alphabet, numbers</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of great importance to the Bangladeshi parents interviewed was that English language is one of the essential components of their children being 'ready for school' (see Table 2). This finding corresponds with their concerns relating to children's proficiency in English conversational skills, as reported in Table 1. English is the dominant language in NSW schools and overrides the other languages spoken by children or families. This can result in CALD children lacking opportunities for social participation (Bourdieu, 1993).

Along with English language, parents also rated self-help skills as important for children as they start school. The specific skills mentioned were feeding and going to the toilet independently, looking after themselves and their belongings, and communicating their needs and difficulties, etc. For example, one parent suggested 'to have food on his own is important, especially when his mother feeds him at home'. This finding is similar to those in other studies, where parents placed some emphasis on self-help skills as an important step towards successful adjustment to school (Perry et al., 2002; Margetts, 1999).
The parents interviewed rated numeracy and literacy knowledge as important for children to have as they started school. Nonetheless, this result lacks strength compared with the emphasis parents placed on the English language and self-help skills. This is an unexpected finding, given the high value Bangladeshi parents place on children's education (Crozier, 2000).

Age is often used as an important criterion in judging children's likely adjustments and achievements in school (Dockett & Perry, 2002; Meisels, 1999). However, few of the Bangladeshi parents interviewed emphasised age as being important. Those who did recognise it as important agreed that children should be five years or more at the time of starting school. This finding corresponds with the results reported elsewhere with English-speaking parents and teachers (Dockett & Perry, 2002).

School rules and children's ability to adjust to school are generally seen to be significant aspects in children's starting school (Dockett & Perry, 2004). But few of the Bangladeshi parents in this study rated them as significant, except in terms of the effect that linguistic skills might have on adjustment.

In summary, the child's English conversational and self-help skills are the matters of most importance to these Bangladeshi parents as their children start school. Interestingly, these findings did not seem to correspond with the socialisation practices adopted by the parents. For instance, parents admitted to promoting dependency in their children through indulgent parenting. Yet they also rated self-help skills as vital in children's transitions to school. This disparity could have been because they knew what the schools and teachers expected. For example, Dockett and Perry (1999b) indicated that teachers tend to emphasise self-help skills as important for children starting school more than parents do. There is also other evidence to indicate differences in teachers' and parents' views of school readiness (Piotrkowski, Botsko & Matthews, 2000). The present findings thus typify the cultural dilemmas immigrant Asian families might face in the socialisation of children, as well as some of the expectations immigrant parents might place on their children as they begin their schooling.

Conclusion

Bangladeshi parents mentioned a range of issues and expectations concerning their children's transition to school. This study showed those concerns and expectations of transition to be influenced by their cultural and linguistic contexts. For immigrant families, language and culture are significant aspects of their context. Yet, with English becoming a globalised and powerful language that is perceived to provide social and cultural capital and the means to gain social and economic power (Singh, 2002), it is not surprising that CALD families will be concerned about their children's transition to contexts where English is the dominant language.

Australian schools are increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse. Placa and Cox (1999, pp. 1-2), suggest that:

The challenges of culture, language family background and processes, and differences in the way families view schools, all of which are formidable even for children entering school today, will be exacerbated by these demographic shifts. These shifts raise issues of how schools will face the challenges of educating a diverse population, how communities will work to support families and schools working collaboratively, and how the teacher workforce will need to respond to student and family diversity.

This study has highlighted the needs, concerns and expectations of one group of CALD families, which need to be taken into account in developing sensitive transition to school programs for children and families of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

References


