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Abstract: Starting school is an important time for young children, their families and educators. Data gathered from interviews and questionnaire responses from approximately 300 parents, 300 educators and 300 children have been used to describe the most important issues for children, parents and educators as children start school in New South Wales, Australia. Using grounded theory, a series of categories of responses was devised that reflected the issues raised by respondents. These categories related to: knowledge needed to start school; elements of social adjustment required in the transition to school; specific skills to be mastered; dispositions conducive to a successful start to school; the rules of school; physical aspects of starting school; family issues; and the nature of the educational environment. These categories and the relative value attributed to them by the different groups of respondents form the basis of this article.

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Children starting school: What should children, parents and school teachers do?

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Abstract

This paper reports on the outcomes of an ongoing study in NSW about what is seen by children, parents, school teachers and prior-to-school educators to be important in children's transition to school. In particular, the reports on the following questions:

1. What do teachers—both at school and in prior-to-school settings—and parents see as important for children, parents and school teachers to do as they prepare for children to start school?
2. How do these findings compare across the two groups of respondents—teachers and parents?
3. What are the consequences arising from these comparisons for children starting school?

Introduction

Starting school is a key time for children, parents and educators. The way in which the transition to school is managed “sets the tone and direction of a child's school career” (Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 1999, p. 47). In Kagan's (1999) words, starting school is a “big deal”. It is clearly a key experience not only for the children starting school, but also for educators—both in schools and in prior-to-school settings—and for the families of the children. Bailey (1999, p. xv) summarises the importance of this experience in the following way:

Kindergarten is a context in which children make important conclusions about school as a place where they want to be and about themselves as learners vis-a-vis schools. If no other objectives are accomplished, it is essential that the transition to school occur in such a way that children and families have a positive view of the school and that children have a feeling of perceived competence as learners.

Much effort goes into helping children prepare for this important time. For example, there are many guides for parents about helping children start school (Irvine, 2000; Taal, 2000). One of the aims of the Starting School Research Project (Dockett & Perry, 1999a; Perry, Dockett, & Howard, 2000) has been to explore the perceptions and expectations of all those involved in the transition to school. This paper reports the views of parents and educators about what is important to do to prepare children for school.

Method

From a series of pilot studies conducted in 1997 and 1998, the Starting School Research Project developed an extensive questionnaire (Perry, Dockett & Tracey, 1998) which was distributed to parents and educators across New South Wales during the period 1998-2000.

The questionnaire sought responses from parents and educators about their expectations and perceptions as children started school. To avoid excessive length, the questionnaire was divided into two forms with several common questions. This paper reports the analysis of three questions—two from Form A of the questionnaire and one from Form B. The stems of the questions are as follows:

How desirable is it for children to have done the following before starting school?

(Form A, with 19 examples of activities);

How desirable is it for parents / guardians to have done the following before their child starts school?

(Form A, with 18 examples of activities); and

How desirable are the following for school teachers to do so that they are ready for new Kindergarten children?

(Form B, with 19 examples of activities).

For each activity listed, respondents were asked to indicate their opinion on a four-point Likert scale from *not desirable* to *extremely desirable*. For analysis, these options were scored 1, 2, 3 and 4, respectively.

Two hundred and ninety-four responses were analysed from Form A. These consist of 145 teachers—74% from schools, 21% from prior-to-school settings and 5% unidentified—and 149 parents—34% with a child entering Kindergarten in the year following that in which the questionnaire was completed, 56% with a child in the first year of school when the questionnaire was completed, and 10% unidentified.

For Form B, 284 responses have been analysed. These consist of 135 teachers—76% from schools and 24% from prior-to-school settings—and 149 parents—40% with a child entering school in the year following that in which the questionnaire was completed, 57% with a child in the first year of school when the questionnaire was completed, and 3% unidentified.

For each activity in each question, frequencies for each level of the four-point scale, and means have been calculated and are shown in Tables 1-3 below. As well, independent sample t-tests have been carried out to ascertain whether there are any statistically significant differences between the levels of desirability for each activity espoused by the teacher and parent respondents. Hence, discussion of the results will be able to concentrate not only on the strength of the response by the groups of respondents but also on differences between them.

These responses are compared with comments from 50 children, interviewed within the first month of starting school. The children were interviewed in focus groups. Detail of their responses has been reported in other papers (e.g., Dockett & Perry, 1999b). For the purposes of this paper, comments from the children about their expectations of parents and teachers are reported.

Results and Discussion

The results are presented in two ways. The first of these compares the mean ratings for parents and educators using independent t-tests, and identifies statistically significant differences between the expectations of each of these groups. An example of this analysis applied to the first question is detailed in Table 1. In this table, parent responses are listed in italics in each of the columns.

Table 1. Responses and significance between teacher and parent respondents for the question: *How desirable is it for children to have done the following before starting school?*

Activity	ND	SD	VD	ED	Mean	Value of <i>t</i>
visited relatives/other known adults	4 12	27 36	39 31	30 22	2.94 2.63	2.84 **
been exposed to lots of books	0 1	5 10	29 36	66 52	3.61 3.42	2.42 *
talked with adults about school	0 2	6 22	44 40	51 35	3.45 3.08	4.16 ****
gained fluency in their home language	0 5	6 11	36 37	58 47	3.52 3.27	2.81 **
gone on outings	1 4	11 10	48 54	40 22	3.28 2.95	3.68 ****
learned standard English	0 1	11 4	48 36	41 59	3.29 3.54	3.17 **
attended preschool / day care	1 1	32 27	44 46	24 26	2.91 2.97	NS
practised eating a packed lunch	1 5	26 29	40 49	33 17	3.06 2.97	2.80 **
played with children who will be in their class	5 16	68 54	23 22	4 8	2.26 2.22	NS
attended playgroup	3 16	44 47	44 30	8 7	2.57 2.27	3.25 ***
visited the school	0 1	6 9	30 33	64 57	3.59 3.47	NS
stayed with adults other than parent / guardians	2 8	17 22	47 42	35 29	3.15 2.92	2.30 *
talked with other children about school	1 1	18 25	46 54	36 20	3.17 2.93	2.72 **
tried on their school uniform	8 5	33 33	32 40	28 22	2.79 2.80	NS
visited friends often	2 7	22 37	57 44	19 12	2.92 2.61	3.47 ***
mastered simple computer usage	40 40	55 54	5 5	0 1	1.65 1.68	NS
written letters, cards, lists, etc	32 29	46 48	18 17	4 5	1.94 2.00	NS
visited people other than their immediate family	2 11	24 36	50 39	24 14	2.97 2.56	4.20 ****
practised sitting at a desk	22 34	57 43	16 21	6 3	2.06 1.93	NS

(Percentage of responses: ND Not desirable, SD Somewhat desirable, VD Very desirable, ED Extremely desirable.) (Level of significance: * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.005, **** p<0.001). (Teachers, n=145, Parents, n=149)

One of the very clear impressions from this table is that there are a great many similarities between what parents and teachers regard as desirable prior-to-school experiences for young children. While there are several statistically significant differences, these tend to be a matter of degree rather than direction. For example, there is a statistically significant difference in the importance parents and teachers place on the activity of children *visiting people other than their immediate family*. Nevertheless, the mean rating for parents indicates that this

activity was likely to be regarded as between somewhat desirable and very desirable for children. In comparison, the mean teacher rating placed this activity closer to very desirable.

Items with statistically significant differences for questions 2 and 3 are detailed in the following tables.

Table 2. Items with significant differences between teacher and parent respondents for the question: *How desirable is it for parents / guardians to have done the following before their child starts school?*

Activity	ND	SD	VD	ED	Mean	Value of <i>t</i>
read books to the child	0	0	13	87	3.87	2.33
	0	3	20	78	3.75	*
responded to child's written notes	3	7	23	67	3.53	2.03
	5	11	31	53	3.33	*
sung to the child	2	5	37	57	3.48	4.52
	3	25	35	37	3.05	****
written notes to the child	12	34	34	20	2.63	3.03
	21	43	23	13	2.27	***
organised outings for the child	0	10	37	53	3.43	4.76
	3	19	51	27	3.01	****
watched television with the child	9	33	37	22	2.71	3.65
	19	40	32	9	2.31	****
learned to communicate in English, if English is not the home language	3	14	30	53	3.34	2.04
	2	5	29	63	3.54	*
taught the child to be aware of strangers	0	8	25	68	3.60	2.30
	0	5	15	80	3.74	*
played with the child	0	1	12	88	3.87	2.06
	0	4	16	80	3.76	*
taught the child to read	45	44	7	4	1.70	3.79
	28	45	15	12	2.12	****
taught the child to count	22	54	17	8	2.10	4.28
	11	42	27	20	2.56	****
taken the child to public toilets	3	24	39	34	3.05	2.03
	9	26	39	27	2.83	*

(Percentage of responses: ND Not desirable, SD Somewhat desirable, VD Very desirable, ED Extremely desirable.) (Level of significance: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.005$, **** $p < 0.001$). (Teachers, $n=145$, Parents, $n=149$)

Of the 18 activities listed, there were statistically significant differences between parents and teachers on 12. Once again, these differences, while significant, represent differences of degree rather than direction. For example, there is a highly significant difference between the mean responses for parents and teachers for the activity of parents having *organised outings for children*, yet a study of the means reveals that both groups regard this as at least very desirable, with teachers placing more importance on this activity than parents.

Table 3. Items with significant differences between teacher and parent respondents for the question: *How desirable are the following for school teachers to do so that they are ready for new Kindergarten children?*

Activity	ND	SD	VD	ED	Mean	Value of <i>t</i>
develop a teaching program based on the expectations of the parents / guardians	26 19	52 50	19 25	2 6	1.98 2.18	2.14 *
run an orientation program for parents / guardians	0 3	7 16	36 41	57 40	3.50 3.18	3.68 ****
ask the new children what they expect from the school	20 14	39 32	31 38	11 16	2.33 2.56	2.13 *
plan classroom procedures appropriate for the new children	0 3	5 7	28 45	67 46	3.63 3.33	3.80 ****
find out about the new children	0 1	15 20	33 41	53 38	3.38 3.16	2.49 *
buy / make / collect resources needed	1 3	16 20	33 44	50 33	3.33 3.08	2.66 **
meet with the parents / guardians of the children they will teach	0 1	6 10	31 41	63 48	3.57 3.36	2.67 **
ensure that the physical facilities of the school are welcoming	1 1	5 14	38 41	56 44	3.49 3.28	2.54 *
work out how to group the new children	7 3	30 20	39 46	24 30	2.81 3.03	2.20 *

(Percentage of responses: ND Not desirable, SD Somewhat desirable, VD Very desirable, ED Extremely desirable.) (Level of significance: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.005$, **** $p < 0.001$). (Teachers, $n = 135$, Parents, $n = 149$)

Nineteen activities were listed in relation to this question. Statistically significant differences between teachers and parents are reported for nine of these. The same pattern of difference is evident in this analysis, with generally the same items being rated as desirable, but to different degrees. For example, neither group regards it as more than somewhat desirable for teachers to *develop a teaching program based on the expectations of the parents/guardians*, yet parents rank this activity significantly higher than teachers. Both groups rate the *planning of classroom procedures appropriate for the new children* as more than very desirable, yet teachers rate this significantly higher than parents.

Most desirable and least desirable activities

The second means of analysis involves a comparison of the most and least common responses from parents and educators across the three questions. The results of these comparisons are detailed in Tables 4-9.

Table 4. Most desirable activities for **children** to have done before starting school

Activity	Teacher Rating	Mean	Parent Rating	Mean
been exposed to lots of books	1	3.61	3	3.42
visited the school	2	3.59	2	3.47
gained fluency in their home language	3	3.52	4	3.27
talked with adults about school	4	3.45	5	3.08
learned Standard English	5	3.29	1	3.54

Table 5. Least desirable activities for **children** to have done before school.

<i>Activity</i>	<i>Teacher Rating</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Parent Rating</i>	<i>Mean</i>
mastered simple computer usage	19	1.65	19	1.68
written cards, letters etc	18	1.94	17	2.00
practised sitting at a desk	17	2.06	18	1.93
played with children who will be in their class	16	2.26	16	2.22
attended playgroup	15	2.57	15	2.27

Remarkably, parents and teachers rated the same five activities as most and least desirable. The order for these items varied, however there was general agreement that these activities were the most, and the least desirable of the 19 listed. Similar patterns are reported later for the most and least desirable activities for parents and for teachers in schools (see Tables 6-9).

Teachers' emphasis on the importance of children being *exposed to lots of books*, having gained *fluency in their home language* and having *learned standard English* before starting school may well be reflections of aspects of the New South Wales State Literacy Strategy, which has guided a concerted effort in the development of children's literacy since 1997 (NSW Department of Education and Training, 1998). The parent respondents have also treated this 'literacy' grouping with almost as much strength as the teachers, particularly the activity about *learning standard English*. It is also interesting to note the relative lack of enthusiasm by both groups for the activity of having *written letters, cards, lists*, possibly reflecting the emphasis of the *State Literacy Strategy* on reading and speaking rather than writing.

Other activities which are strongly advocated by the teacher respondents and only slightly less strongly by the parents are *talking with adults about school*, and *visiting the school*. Yet neither group of parents or teachers attribute great importance to children *playing with other children who will be in their class*, or *attending playgroup*. While these activities may not be the ultimate in socialising experiences, they do reflect the opportunities that children talk about as important—that is, opportunities to get to know other children and make friends.

Two activities which are rated quite low for both the parent and teacher groups are that children should have *practised sitting at a desk* and *mastered simple computer usage*. The first may indicate familiarity with school environments, where rows of desks in Kindergarten, at least, are not as common as they may have been. The second suggests that computer usage is not yet seen as very desirable for young children, by either group. It may reflect the view of some educators in prior-to-school settings, and some parents, that children will use computers at school, and therefore do not need to have this experience prior to starting school (Dockett, Perry & Nanlohy, 1999).

Table 6. Most desirable activities for **parents/guardians** to have done before children start school.

<i>Activity</i>	<i>Teacher Rating</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Parent Rating</i>	<i>Mean</i>
played with the child	1	3.87	2	3.76
read books to the child	1	3.87	3	3.75
talked with the child about school	3	3.81	1	3.83
visited the chosen school	4	3.60	5	3.62
taught the child to be aware of strangers	4	3.60	4	3.74

Table 7. Least desirable activities for **parents/guardians** to have done before children start school

<i>Activity</i>	<i>Teacher Rating</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Parent Rating</i>	<i>Mean</i>
taught the child to read	18	1.70	17	2.12
played computer games with the child	17	1.89	18	1.81
taught the child to count	16	2.10	14	2.56
written notes to the child	15	2.63	16	2.27
found out what is in the Kindergarten curriculum	14	2.67	12*	2.85*
watched television with the child	13*	2.71*	15	2.31

* included for comparison

Once again, there is a great deal of agreement from groups of parents and teachers about what parents should do to help children make the transition to school. There is a focus on interacting with the child, *playing* with them, *reading* to them and *talking with them about school*. *Visiting the school* is regarded as important by both groups, as is the activity of *teaching the child to be aware of strangers*. This last activity suggests that issues of safety are of concern to both groups and that starting school involves more than a focus on academic issues.

This focus on other than academic issues is maintained in the group of least desirable activities, with neither parents nor teachers regarding it important for parents to have *taught the child to read*, or *taught the child to count*. In one sense, it is pleasing to see that there is not a strong push-down curriculum effect, with the expectation that children will start school reading and having a range of counting skills. On the other hand, it seems clear that neither group sees it as being particularly the parents' role to teach such 'school' knowledge and skills even though it is seen as imperative that parents/guardians undertake many of the activities which are seen as precursors to these knowledge and skills. Further, the teachers did not rate highly the activity of parents finding out what is in the Kindergarten curriculum, suggesting again that there is a strong perception of what is regarded as 'teachers' work'. There was no significant difference between the mean ratings of teachers and parents on the desirability of this activity.

This is consistent with earlier Australasian research, where Parr, McNaughton, Timperley and Robinson (1993), reported an apparent contradiction in teachers' approaches to parents. On the one hand, teachers invited parents to participate in the school experiences of their children and many parents did seem to embrace this by spending a great deal of time in school classrooms. On the other hand, teachers did not seem to consider parents as equal partners in education. This view was reiterated by parents, who also did not see themselves as educators.

Parr et al., (1993) note that “teachers are seen as, and see themselves as, experts and this contrasts with parents who are seen as having little to offer to discussions of curriculum matters or pedagogy” (p. 41).

Just as for the activities to be undertaken by the children, there was very little support from either group of respondents for the activity *played computer games with the child* which, on average, was rated less than somewhat desirable by both groups, in spite of the obvious support for playing with the child, as such.

Table 8. Most desirable activities for **teachers** in school to have done so that they are ready for new Kindergarten children.

<i>Activity</i>	<i>Teacher Rating</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Parent Rating</i>	<i>Mean</i>
plan classroom procedures appropriate for new children	1	3.63	4	3.33
meet with the parents/guardians of the children they will teach	2	3.57	3	3.36
run an orientation program for the children	3	3.54	1	3.59
welcome parent/guardian participation in school activities	4	3.53	2	3.45
run an orientation program for parents/guardians	5	3.50	8*	3.18*
ensure that the physical facilities of the school are welcoming	6*	3.49*	5	3.28

* included for comparison

Table 9. Least desirable activities for **teachers** in school to have done so that they are ready for new Kindergarten children.

<i>Activity</i>	<i>Teacher Rating</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Parent Rating</i>	<i>Mean</i>
meet the children in their family setting	19	1.51	19	1.60
develop a teaching program based on the expectations of the parents/guardians	18	1.98	17	2.18
develop a teaching program based on the expectations of the children	17	2.05	18	2.07
observe the children in their prior-to-school setting	16	2.32	16	2.22
ask the new children what they expect from the school	15	2.33	15	2.56

The most desirable activity for teachers, according to parents, was to *run an orientation program for children*. Parents indicated that a program for children was more important than an orientation program for parents, although parents did place a high level of importance on meeting with the teacher and being welcomed by the teacher into the school. Teachers, however, rated orientation programs for parents and children highly. It may be that teachers see an orientation program as the way to induct both parents and children into the school community. Parents, however, may be seeking a more personalised approach, or something more than the general orientation. The activities listed by both parents and children have a strong focus on the social adjustment of parents and children to the school setting, indicating

once again that transition to school is often more about the relationships that form than about the academic attributes children bring with them (Dockett, Perry & Howard 2000).

Parents and teachers agree that visiting children in their home setting is not a high priority for either group. This reflects a general trend in Australia away from home visits, which may be regarded as exceeding the authority of the school. In addition, the time involved and the legal implications which can arise from interacting with children outside the protection of one's place of employment will both have influenced the responses to this activity, as will the possible sense of intrusion which might be seen by many parents, especially for those who do not hold fond memories of schools and school teachers.

The pattern of teachers' work in school being quite separate from that of parents and home, which was identified in the activities of parents (Tables 6-7) is repeated in responses about desirable activities for teachers. Both parents and teachers agree that it is at best somewhat desirable for teachers to *develop a teaching program based on the expectations of the parents/guardians*, or *based on the expectations of children*. Further, neither parents nor teachers regard it as important for teachers in schools to *visit children in prior-to-school settings*, or *to ask the children what they expect from school*. In a very real sense, there is an expectation that school will be the way that it is—it is immutable—and that children (and parents) will need to adjust to it.

What children expect

When asked about starting school and what was important for them, the children highlighted their desire to get to know the rules of the school they were attending and the importance of friends (Dockett & Perry, 1999b). Friends assumed a great deal of importance as children started school. Some children seem to measure their success at school by whether or not they had friends. Comments such as *I like school cause I like playing and finding some friends* and *big school is better than preschool cause can make up lots and lots of friends* highlight the importance of being among friends. Children expect to be with friends and to make friends at school. The importance children place on friends and being with friends is in contrast with some of the ratings of parents and teachers. For example, one of the activities for children prior to school that was rated lowest by both adult groups was to have played with children who would be in their class.

Some, but not all, children who were interviewed expressed views as to what parents and teachers should do to help them start school. Children expected parents to have some knowledge of the school, particularly of the physical orientation of the buildings, and to share this with the children. For example, parents need to *tell kids that they are going to school* and *know where the office is and which school you are going to*. In addition, several children were concerned with some of the pragmatics of getting to and attending school. Comments included the need for parents to *buy uniforms*, *wash clothes and get them ready*, *wake me up in the morning*, and *pack the lunch box*, *look at things you have been working on*. Parents and teachers each rated the activities of children *trying on their school uniform* and *practising eating a packed lunch* as very desirable, also indicating that these were important things to do.

Teachers in prior-to-school settings were regarded by some children as having a role in teaching some knowledge that was required for school—such as *teach[ing] some letters*. According to the children, most teaching occurred at school. The children were clear that they went to school to learn and that the teachers did the teaching. 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: At school *they tell you how to read and write* and *If you don't go you don't learn*. This understanding of school, teaching and learning may not be dissimilar from that implied by parents and teachers in their ratings. Clearly, there is an expectation that there are certain things that are learned by going to school and that the source of knowledge is the teacher.

Conclusion

From this analysis we have clear signals that the group of teacher respondents and the group of parent respondents have a great deal in common in terms of the desirability of many activities for children, parents and teachers as they prepare for children to start elementary school. However, there are also clear messages that there are some differences which must be considered. We also have some strong indications that the activities identified by adults as important are not necessarily the same as those upon which children focus.

The current phase in the Starting School Research Project involves the development of contextually congruent transition programs in a range of communities across New South Wales. The data reported in this paper makes it especially clear that effective transition to school programs need to consider the perspectives of all participants—children, parents and educators. In particular, it is evident that the voices of children should not be ignored.

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