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ABSTRACT

During 1998 and 1999, the Starting School Project at the University of Western Sydney-Macarthur conducted a survey across New South Wales (Australia) of parent and teacher opinions about children's successful transition to school. Survey responses were received from 240 teachers and 243 parents of young children. Respondents were grouped according to geographic location: metropolitan Sydney and Wollongong, "regional" areas (major rural centers), and "rural" areas (small rural communities and isolated areas). The survey examined physical issues (child's physical size and ability to interact with adults), child's knowledge of school rules, social factors, health factors, and distance and other issues. Differences were found among groups of respondents concerning the perceived importance of preschool experiences, the nature of these experiences, the particular effects of geographic isolation, school and class size, the nature of local communities, distance education, the effects of the rural recession, the role of technology in children's education, and the nature of transition to school programs. Despite the differences, most parents and teachers wanted children to be happy to go to school, to feel positive about themselves as learners, and to settle into the routines of school life. An appendix includes the factor structure of 47 survey items. (Author/SV)

What do early childhood educators and parents think is important about children's transition to school? A comparison between data from the city and the bush.

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Abstract

During 1998 and 1999, the Starting School Project at the University of Western Sydney Macarthur has conducted a New South Wales-wide survey on what key stakeholders see as being important to ensure smooth transitions to school for young children. This paper uses data from this survey and a series of focus group interviews to report on the responses from early childhood educators—in both school and prior-to-school settings—and parents who have children recently starting school or preparing to start school. In particular, it compares data derived from country New South Wales—including rural and remote areas—and city locations within the state. Differences found include: the perceived importance of prior-to-school experiences; the nature of these experiences; the particular effects of geographical isolation; school and class size; nature of the local communities; distance education; the effects of the rural recession; the role of technology in children's education and the nature of transition to school programs.

The paper considers each of these and derives some initial recommendations for successful transition to school programs which involve all the stakeholders in this transition.

Introduction

Starting school represents a major change in the lives of young children. For some, the move to attending a setting five days a week is a considerable change from their prior-to-school experiences, for others the need to wear a uniform, become a member of a large group outside the family and attend to the requests of non-familial adults require major adjustment. Sometimes for the first time, children are expected to adjust to the demands of the classroom and the school as well as to the individual teacher. They may also experience a change in educational goals, classroom management and in individual interactions with a specific adult (Hadley, Wilcox & Rice, 1994). Academically as well as socially, children meet challenges as they are expected to comprehend and perform a range of new or different tasks. Furthermore, the ways in which children respond to academic challenges and the changed social expectations of the classroom have direct bearing on how they regard themselves as well as how they are regarded by others. Children's images of themselves, particularly as learners, are influenced directly by what happens in the early years of school. Teachers' images of children also are shaped in this time and these are often used as the basis for grouping or stratifying children (Entwisle, 1995).

The changes experienced as children start school also impact on the family, for example in the need to meet the time commitments of school attendance and to contribute to the school community. Teachers in schools also experience a number of changes as they adjust to the new group of students and start to form expectations of those students based on their observations and interactions.

Starting school in rural and isolated communities presents these same challenges—as well as some others associated with geographic isolation. Fegan and Bowes (1999) note that

young children who live in rural and remote isolated circumstances often have limited choices and opportunities to be with children of their own age for social interaction or for educational activities. This is equally true for their parents. Lack of opportunity to see their child interacting with other parents and professionals, can erode parents' confidence in their ability to monitor progress in their child's development and learning. For some families virtually the only source of comparison is via television... (p. 121)

For many families, the greater opportunity for children to interact with peers and for parents to compare their child's progress provided by starting school can be both exciting and worrying: exciting because of the opportunity being provided; worrying in case such interactions and observations are negative. Anecdotal comments from families in rural areas also suggest that the added demands of travel, family and work commitments introduce a further dimension to the changes experienced as children start school.

As part of the broader Starting School project, the authors of this paper sought to examine what mattered to families in rural NSW when children started school. It was expected that there would be a number of differences, as well as some similarities, between the issues raised by parents and teachers in rural areas and those mentioned by their city counterparts.

Method

During 1998 an extensive survey of parents and teachers was undertaken in NSW as part of the Starting School project. Specifically, parents who had a child about to start school, or a child who had just started school, and teachers in prior-to-school and school settings, were invited to complete a questionnaire asking them to identify issues they considered important as children started school. The questionnaire was constructed on the basis of the categories of responses identified in a series of pilot studies (Perry, Dockett & Tracey 1998) and distributed in 15 locations across the state. These locations were identified through the use of stratified purposeful sampling (Gall, Borg & Gall, 1996; Miles & Huberman, 1994), enabling the targeting of a cross-section of areas based on the variables of geography, socio-economic status, cultural diversity and special needs of children.

In the pilot studies and in analysis of the questionnaire responses, both teachers and parents indicated that social adjustment to the school setting mattered the most to them, followed by the child's disposition towards school and learning. Other categories, such as skills, knowledge, physical issues and rules were mentioned, but to a lesser degree than children's social adjustment and their disposition towards school (Perry, Dockett & Howard, 1999).

The comparison reported in this paper analyses the responses of parents and teachers according to geographic location. It also draws on interview data from parents living in rural and isolated communities.

Procedure

Data were collected for this study using the questionnaire described above for parents and teachers, and interviews with parents. A total of 1290 questionnaires were distributed across the different locations. The analysis for this paper is based on a return of 483 (37%) questionnaires. There were 240 responses from teachers and 243 responses from parents. The teacher respondents were drawn from a variety of educational settings, as indicated in Table 1.

<i>Educational setting</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Government primary school	119	49.6
Catholic primary school	59	24.6
Independent primary school	9	3.8
Preschool	27	11.3
Long day care	19	7.9
Other	7	2.9
<i>Total</i>	240	100

Table 1. Educational setting of teacher respondents.

Forty-eight (20%) of the parent respondents had children who were due to start school in the year after the survey was administered (1999), while 185 (76%) had a child who had commenced school in the current year (1998). Ten parents did not report this information about their child.

The analysis focuses on responses to a question consisting of 47 items in which the parents and teachers were asked to indicate how important each item was to a child's successful transition to school. Responses were made to each of the items on a four point Likert scale: not important, somewhat important, very important and extremely important.

A confirmatory factor analysis, using principal axis factoring and an oblique rotation solution method, was conducted on the 47 items of the question "*How important is each of the following to a child's successful transition to school?*" Using a criterion of >0.30 (or <-0.30) for the significance of a factor loading, 6 factors were identified. These were similar to, but not exactly the same as, those which had been predicted from the pilot study. The full details of the factor analysis and the loading of each item has been detailed elsewhere (Meredith, Perry, Borg & Dockett, 1999; Borg, Dockett, Meredith & Perry, 1999). The factors and examples of items subsumed under these are listed in Table 2. A complete list of the 47 items, the predicted category and the confirmed factor is located in Appendix 1.

<i>Factor</i>	<i>Examples</i>
social	participating in a large group; confidence in interactions; following directions; not disruptive; feels good about self; happy to go to school.
knowledge	children can read their name; knows address; count to 10; recognise letters.
physical	physically big enough to cope with older children; knows how to speak to teachers.
health	child receives regular medical and dental care; understands the need for personal hygiene; gets plenty of rest, eats a balanced diet.
rules	knows the rules that apply in the classroom and the playground.
skills	child can dress self, eat lunch without assistance.

Table 2. Factors derived from questionnaire responses

For comparison purposes in this paper, respondents were classified into one of three groups, based on postcode information they had provided. These groups were:

- metropolitan—respondents residing in the Sydney and Wollongong metropolitan areas;
- regional— respondents residing in major rural centres;
- rural—respondents residing in small rural communities or in isolated areas.

Numbers of respondents in each geographical location are detailed in Table 3.

Location	Number of respondents (teachers)	Number of respondents (non-teachers)	Teacher/non-teacher not specified	Total
metropolitan	82	183	5	270
regional	48	94	2	144
rural	21	48	0	69
	151	325	7	483

Table 3. Geographic location of respondents.

SPSSX was used to analyse the ratings for each factor for these three groups using one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) to compare the means for each group and the Student-Newman-Keuls test to determine which, if any, of the means were significantly different from the others.

Interviews: These were conducted in two rural areas of NSW. One location was a small country town which was the venue for a parent conference, and the other was a larger regional centre located in the south-west of the state. A total of 15 parents participated in focus group or individual interviews. In this paper, the data obtained from these interviews is used to provide examples of issues raised in questionnaire responses. It is not claimed to be representative: rather, it provides some detail of the experiences and issues that are important to these families.

Analysis and results

A first analysis of the factors according to location (metropolitan, regional, rural) which considered teachers and parents together revealed no significant differences, suggesting overall agreement, rather than difference in what was regarded as important. A comparison of the means for each group for each of the factors indicates some variation between groups, but this does not reach a level of significance. One of the comments from parents interviewed for the study provided a context for this finding by suggesting that being in an isolated area meant that *things happened differently—the same things happen [as elsewhere], they just happen differently.*

When groups of parents and teachers were considered separately, several significant differences among the groups emerged. All these differences were significant at the $p < .05$ level.

Significant differences were that:

- teachers in the metropolitan area rated the physical factor more important than teachers in regional areas;
- teachers in the metropolitan area rated the rules factor more important than teachers in regional areas;
- teachers in regional areas rated the social factor more important than teachers in rural areas;

- parents in the rural areas rated the health factor more important than teachers in the metropolitan areas.

Interview data provide some possible explanations for these results.

Discussion

Physical issues

The two items which contributed to the physical factor referred to the child's physical size (the child is physically big enough to cope with older children) and the child's ability to interact with adults (the child knows how to speak to teachers). In an urban community where schools tend to be larger than in many country areas and where, as a result, there may be fewer personal interactions between teachers and students, these items could well be important. A child who looks small and who is unable to voice their requests or concerns may have difficulty managing the new school environment. A child confronted with a large group of older, noisy and unfamiliar children in the playground may well need to have the physical size to appear to fit in order to make the transition to school successful. Children who have recently started school have indicated the scary nature of the playground and the *big kids* within it (Dockett, Clyde & Perry, 1998). Teachers in the metropolitan areas may well be aware of this.

This factor may be less of an issue in regional areas where the school is often a more central part of the community and community life. In interviews, some parents reported the sense that the school was a community resource which supported families in a number of ways. One parent gave the example of sending preschool-aged children to school with their school-aged siblings during times of need, such as harvest time.

Several parents from regional communities indicated that starting school was easier for their children than their city counterparts in that they knew most of the other children at the school and their parents, as well as the school staff. School and class sizes were often smaller than those experienced by metropolitan children, and many children starting school felt comfortable being with familiar people. To paraphrase a comment from one parent, *in spite of the difficulties getting to school, the people in school are known to the children.*

Rules

Items that loaded onto the Rules factor focussed on children knowing the rules which apply in the school classroom and the school playground. These items were significantly more important to teachers in metropolitan areas than teachers in regional areas.

A possible explanation follows from the discussion about physical issues. Larger school communities, usually located in metropolitan areas, with their associated larger student populations and numbers of teachers and class groups may well set the context for a focus on rules. Where schools are large and individual students not well known, it would be easy to focus on rules and the importance of these as a form of 'crowd control', rather than taking into account, and responding to, the individual circumstances of each child or family. The latter is only possible where there is a level of familiarity between the school staff and members of community. This is more likely to occur when school staff live in the local community.

Social

Several items contributed to the Social factor. These covered aspects of social adjustment for children, such as participating appropriately in a large group, being confident in interactions with other children and adults, responding appropriately to changes in routine

and following directions from adults other than parents. Teachers in regional areas rated the items for this factor as more important than teachers in rural areas.

In interviews, a number of parents from rural areas reported that they *worked hard* to provide a range of social experiences for their children. While the facilities such as sporting arenas and meeting places that are taken for granted by metropolitan and even regional families were often non-existent, families in rural areas reported travelling for many kilometres in order to attend a soccer match, birthday party or playgroup. In most cases, the travelling was reported as a major drawback. However it was deemed necessary in order for the families, and particularly the children, to mix with other children and adults. While it was considered important for children who already attended school to have such experiences, it was even more important for children who did not yet attend school to have opportunities to interact with others. Some parents indicated that they travelled considerable distances to attend playgroup or mobile meets in order that their children could interact with peers. As a result of these efforts, children in rural areas may be more familiar with their peers and other local families than children in regional areas. Hence, issues of social adjustment and responding appropriately to others may be attributes that children have developed despite their relative geographic isolation compared with their regional peers.

Health

Items contributing to this factor involved access to regular medical health and dental care; understanding the need for personal hygiene; getting plenty of rest and eating a balanced diet. In many rural communities, access to medical and dental care involves a great deal of travel and time. Fegan and Bowes (1999) note that

the challenges of geographic isolation can perhaps be seen most starkly in times of emergency or ill health. The nearest hospital may be more than a day's journey away by car, and childhood illness can be a time of extreme stress for families...

The range of health professionals such as doctors, physiotherapists, dentists and psychologists that is available in cities and often in regional centres does not exist in geographically isolated towns. (p.122)

Recent publicity about the struggle to attract doctors to rural areas lends support to the position that health issues are of concern for those living in these communities. Hence, it is not surprising that parents in rural areas cite health concerns more often than their metropolitan counterparts.

Comments from parents in interviews suggest that many families in rural areas are struggling to maintain the family farm. In more affluent times, many farmers with small holdings could afford to employ farmworkers to assist in the day-to-day running of the farm. As a result of many years of drought and economic downturn, this is no longer possible. Family members now bear the brunt of maintaining the running of the farm, and this includes children as well as adults. For some children, responsibilities at home contribute to a long day. For some parents, whose responsibilities include driving long distances to ensure that children get to and from school, the days are even longer.

Other issues

In addition to these issues where there were significant differences between different groups of respondents, parents who participated in interviews provided other insights into the experiences of themselves and their children as the children started school. For example, they described different experiences in orientation and transition programs. One parent cited an ongoing orientation program for new students which involved the two prospective students attending the school for one day per fortnight during terms 2 and 3 and then one day per week

in term 4 of the year preceding their Kindergarten year. The two students were entering a very small school, with a student population of only seven. They certainly were familiar with all other students and adults involved with the school by the time they started Kindergarten.

Others referred to access to distance education for their children and the implications of this. Some parents described adding a room to the family home to provide a space to access distance education services and to serve as a school room. Still others described expanding their home library so that their children could access the information needed to undertake distance education. In some cases, the home library has been supplemented with a computer linked to the Internet. All of these adaptations represent a significant cost for the families involved.

Some teachers in schools have reported inviting children who rely on distance education to attend the school whenever they are in town. As a result, children whose parents are in town for the day may spend that time at the school. The aim, from the teacher's point of view, is to provide opportunities for social interaction as well as access to library and classroom resources that may not be readily available at home.

As well as the financial cost, a number of parents described a cost in terms of the time required to supervise children when accessing distance education. This role usually fell to the mother, who was usually not a trained teacher, contributing additional pressure to the education of young children. Despite these issues, parents who relied on distance education for their children were remarkable positive about the experience. It is difficult to know if this is the preferred educational option for their children, or the only option available. In the words of one parent, *that's just the way it is*.

Children's travel to school and the length of the school day, including the travel, was an issue for many parents. While children across the state travel to school, travel in regional and rural areas differs considerably from travel in the metropolitan area. For example, some parents reported that their young children would spend over ten hours each day away from home as they travelled to school and back. Sometimes this involved travel on a bus, without the comfort of a familiar adult and other times it involved a parent driving long distances at least twice a day.

Conclusion

The nature of the starting school experience varies for each child and each family. 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. The analysis reported in this paper suggests that one dimension impacting upon the experience of children and families is their geographic context. Many of the same issues are involved for children and families in different geographic locations, however the ways in which these issues are managed or responded to varies considerably across locations. For example, many children across the different geographic contexts travel to school. The way in which this is done, as well as the time and expense involved makes it a different experience for many children and families within those contexts.

Despite the differences noted in this paper, there are many similarities in what matters to parents and teachers when children start school. In a majority of cases, parents and teachers want children to be happy to go to school, feel positive about themselves as learners and settle into the routines of school life. These similarities, as well as the differences already noted, can provide the basis for some initial recommendations for transition to school

programs which involve all the stakeholders in this transition. Such programs take account of:

- the perspectives of all participants in the transition to school: children, parents and teachers;
- the physical nature of the school and surrounds and the implications of this for new students. For example, a large open area shared by all students in a school may be confronting to new students. An alternative could be to set aside a smaller area for new students where they could become familiar with peers and school staff;
- ways in which teachers, parents and children can get to know and understand each other. When all participants in the transition to school are familiar with each other and their expectations, less effort needs to be directed to rules and rule-governed behaviour;
- the nature of the school community and the importance of this within the broader social context;
- issues of parental and community concern, such as access to appropriate health services, and ways in which these can be addressed appropriately;
- the nature of the community served by the school.

It is quite likely that successful transition to school programs will differ in different areas as they serve different communities and meet the needs of different groups of people. Whenever this difference represents a move to respond to the community served by the school, it is to be celebrated.

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FACTOR STRUCTURE OF 47 ITEMS

Item	Predicted category	Confirmed factor	Loading
<i>How important is each of the following to a child's successful transition to school?</i>			
the child knows how to speak to teachers	Social adjustment	Physical	0.40
the child participates appropriately in large groups of children	Social adjustment	Social	0.58
the child is confident when interacting with other children	Social adjustment	Social	0.58
the child's best friend is in the same class	Social adjustment	N/A	
the child knows how to react appropriately to changes in routine	Social adjustment	Social	0.49
the child is confident when interacting with adults	Social adjustment	Social	0.51
the child does not disrupt other children's work or play	Social adjustment	Social	0.49
the child responds appropriately to being corrected	Social adjustment	Social	0.50
the child can follow directions from adults other than parent / guardian	Social adjustment	Social	0.53
the child separates well from parent / guardian	Social adjustment	Social	0.57
the child is happy to go to school	Disposition	Social	0.47
the child likes to have books read to him / her	Disposition	Social / Health Concerns	0.33 / 0.33
the child talks positively about school	Disposition	Social	0.60
the child feels good about her / himself	Disposition	Social	0.58
the child is bored at home	Disposition	Skills	0.31
the child wants to learn	Disposition	Social	0.62
the child is eager to participate in most school activities	Disposition	Social	0.66
the child is bored at preschool / day care	Disposition	Skills	0.36
the child can read her / his name	Knowledge	Knowledge	- 0.56
the child knows his / her address	Knowledge	Knowledge	- 0.42
the child can recognise letters	Knowledge	Knowledge	- 0.71
the child can say the days of the week in order	Knowledge	Knowledge	- 0.73
the child can write his / her name	Knowledge	Knowledge	- 0.70
the child can run simple computer programs	Knowledge	Knowledge	- 0.62
the child can count to 10	Knowledge	Knowledge	- 0.79
the child can identify basic colours	Knowledge	Knowledge	- 0.69
the child can describe the school uniform	Knowledge	Knowledge	- 0.43
the child can dress him / herself	Skills	Skills	- 0.41
the child can eat lunch without assistance	Skills	Skills	- 0.41
the child can wash hands without supervision	Skills	Health Concerns	0.49
the child can tie her / his shoelaces	Skills	Knowledge	0.49
the child takes responsibility for personal belongings	Skills	N/A	
the child can play computer games	Skills	Knowledge	0.56
the child can hold a pencil correctly	Skills	Knowledge	0.57
the child can go to the toilet by him / herself	Skills	Health Concerns	0.38
the child can throw and catch a ball	Skills	Knowledge	0.54
the child knows the rules which apply in the school classroom	Rules	Rules	0.73
the child knows the rules which apply in the school playground	Rules	Rules	0.81
the child knows the rules about turn taking	Rules	Social	0.46
the child is physically big enough to cope with older children	Physical	Physical	0.48
the child receives regular medical and dental care	Physical	Health Concerns	0.62
the child understands the need for personal hygiene	Physical	Health Concerns	0.47

the child has been immunised	Physical	Health Concerns / Rules	0.31 / 0.33
the child is 5 years of age	Physical	N/A	
the child gets plenty of rest	Physical	Health Concerns	0.52
the child is the oldest child in the family	Physical	N/A	
the child eats a balanced diet	Physical	Health Concerns	0.66



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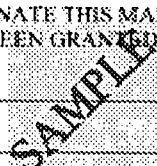
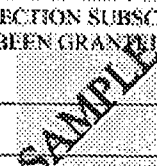
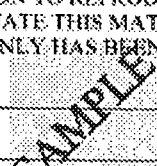



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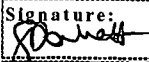
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