

Children starting school: Images from picture storybooks

Sue Dockett, Diana Whitton, Bob Perry
University of Western Sydney
Australia

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Abstract

The Starting School Research Project has gathered data from stakeholders in children's transition to school in many different ways. From these data, the following categories of concerns held by children, educators and parents about starting school have been derived: knowledge, adjustment, skills, rules, disposition, educational environment, family issues and physical issues. This paper draws from a sample of over 100 children's books gathered from several countries, which are designed to be read to or by children around the time they are starting school, and analyses them in terms of the previously derived categories. This analysis is then compared with the analysis of concerns undertaken through the project, which has shown that the adults involved in transition see things quite differently from the children making the transition.

The picture books, written and illustrated by adults, reflect the earlier findings about what adults think is important as children start school. As a consequence, they reflect different aspects of this transition from those the children have reported as critical. The consequences of these findings for the curriculum of transition to school in prior-to-school settings and schools are investigated.

Introduction

Since 1997, the Starting School Research Project at the University of Western Sydney, has investigated the perceptions and expectations of those involved in the transition to school. From extensive interviews with children, parents and teachers, combined with the responses of many adults to a comprehensive questionnaire, the project has identified a list of areas that are considered important as children make the transition to formal schooling.

In informal interviews, over 300 children who were about to start school, or who had just started school, were asked to nominate what was important for them and what they thought school would be like. Over 1300 adults have responded to questionnaires asking them to nominate the things they thought of when children started school. From these responses, the following categories have been identified:

<i>Knowledge:</i>	ideas, facts or concepts that needed to be known in order to enter school.
<i>Adjustment:</i>	social adjustment to the school context, including interpersonal and organisational adjustment.
<i>Skills:</i>	small units of action that could be observed or inferred from observable behaviour.
<i>Disposition:</i>	children's attitudes towards, or feelings about, school or learning.
<i>Rules:</i>	fitting in with the school and school expectations.
<i>Physical:</i>	physical attributes, needs or characteristics of children. Also includes issues about safety, health and age.
<i>Family issues:</i>	issues related to family functioning or involvement with the school.
<i>Environment:</i>	concern about the nature of the school environment.

(Perry, Dockett, & Howard, 2000)

These categories of response about 'what matters as children start school' have been identified consistently in the work of the project (Dockett & Perry, 2002). Another finding that is replicated consistently is that children differ from adults in the issues they refer to most often when thinking about starting school (Dockett & Perry, 1999). Children tend to focus on the importance of 'knowing the rules' in order to start school, and on the importance of friends (under the category of disposition). For many children, having a friend or friends starting school at the same time is a crucial part of believing that school is a good place to be. So too is having some understanding of the rules of school. In interviews, children do not perceive this focus on the rules to be negative—it seems much more a matter of knowing what parameters of expected behaviour and interaction are in place at schools.

Parents and teachers also highlight the importance of the category of adjustment, but tend to interpret it in different ways. For example, teachers emphasise the importance of children being able to function in a large group setting, through actions such as following direction, showing initiative and taking turns. Parents also want their children to adjust to school, but tend to emphasise aspects such as parent-child separation and children knowing how to make their needs known.

In their discussions with members of the research team, children and adults referred to many sources of information about school. Family members—including siblings—were reported to share much information with children about school. In addition, television programs and books were described as sources of information. Mitchell and Weber (1993, p. 3) consider these popular culture images of schools and starting school, suggesting that they “might serve as the child’s first teacher in terms of images of school—if not the first, a very important one.” The study described in this paper investigated one of these sources—children’s picture storybooks. Using the categories described above, the aim of study was to analyse the issues addressed in children’s picture storybooks about starting school. From this analysis, the relationship between the issues addressed in children’s books and those identified as important for children, parents and teachers was assessed.

Picture storybooks

Picture books cross genre boundaries. These books generally “picture children’s experiences as they begin to extend their range of activities” and within this show that the “family is still involved but the child is growing towards independence and establishing identity, gaining self confidence through achievement, and satisfying curiosity” (Sutherland & Arbuthnot, 1977, p. 93). Stephens (1992) suggests that ideologically, picture books belong “firmly within the domain of cultural practices which exist for the purpose of socialising their target audience” (p. 8). Hence, when the topic of picture books is starting school, it would be expected that the messages conveyed are about children’s developing sense of maturity and independence, within a framework of inculcating a sense of what is expected and accepted in a school context.

Picture books are often regarded as appropriate for young children, who are assumed to understand the pictures, if not the text (Marriott, 1998). Temple, Martinez, Yokoto, and Naylor, (1998) describe three types of picture books: wordless books (where the reliance is totally on pictures to tell the story); picture storybooks (where text and illustrations combine to tell the story); and illustrated books (which rely mainly on the text, supported by illustrations to tell the story). The unique feature of picture storybooks is that the combination of text and illustrations “amplify each other ...text and story do not merely reflect each other—combined, they tell a story that goes beyond what one tells alone” (Temple, et al., 1998, p. 181). In picture storybooks, children construct meanings from both the text and the visual context (Parkes, 1998).

Method

The data used for this study were picture storybooks dealing with the experience of starting school. Over 100 children’s books have been consulted. Of these, 70 met the criteria of picture storybooks, in that both text and illustrations combined to ‘tell the story’. Books that were not considered include readers—where the text was supported by an occasional illustrations—and books that clearly related to starting child care, or preschool, rather than formal school. Where different uses of the terms ‘kindergarten’ and ‘school’ suggested either school or prior-to-school settings, or where books were described as relevant across different stages—for example “suitable for any child starting preschool or school”—they were included in the sample.

The picture storybooks studied were all written in English. The books are currently available through retail outlets. They have been sourced from a number of countries including Australia, Canada, Singapore and the United States of America. Their publication spans a period of 35 years, encompassing some books regarded as ‘classics’ and others that are contemporary.

The picture storybooks used in this study include books featuring a range of characters, including some well-known television characters and cartoon characters. Both the images created in words and pictures have been considered in the analysis. The artistic media used in the books covers the range of: computer generated art, mixed media, photography, woodcut, scratch boards, paper crafts, pencil drawings, and painting. The texts include rhyming books, alphabet books and prose utilising a variety of fonts and images.

Each of the books was read independently by two members of the research team. A coding proforma was used to record the level of reference to the categories listed above. These categories had been derived using grounded theory to analyse the responses of children and adults to issues about starting school (Perry, et al., 2000). In addition to these eight categories—knowledge, adjustment, skills, disposition, rules, physical issues, family issues, and educational environment—ratings were included for:

- ?? representations of the teacher (was the teacher evident; how the was teacher represented; the actions and expectations of the teacher);
- ?? representations of characters with special needs or culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Using a three-point scale, books were rated on whether the item was not evident at all (none), mentioned to minor degree (some), or a major focus on the book (a lot). In each instance, the illustrations and text were considered to be integral parts of the book. Where a discrepancy of 1 point existed between coders—that is, where the coding was none (1) and some (2), or some (2) and a lot (3)—a score of 2 was recorded. Where the discrepancy was 2 points, a third researcher coded the books and the score was determined to be the median of the three scores (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000). Overall, the coders agreed (to within one point) on 98% of their coding. This represents an initial analysis of the books and provides the basis for identification of specific issues for further analysis and consideration.

Results and discussion

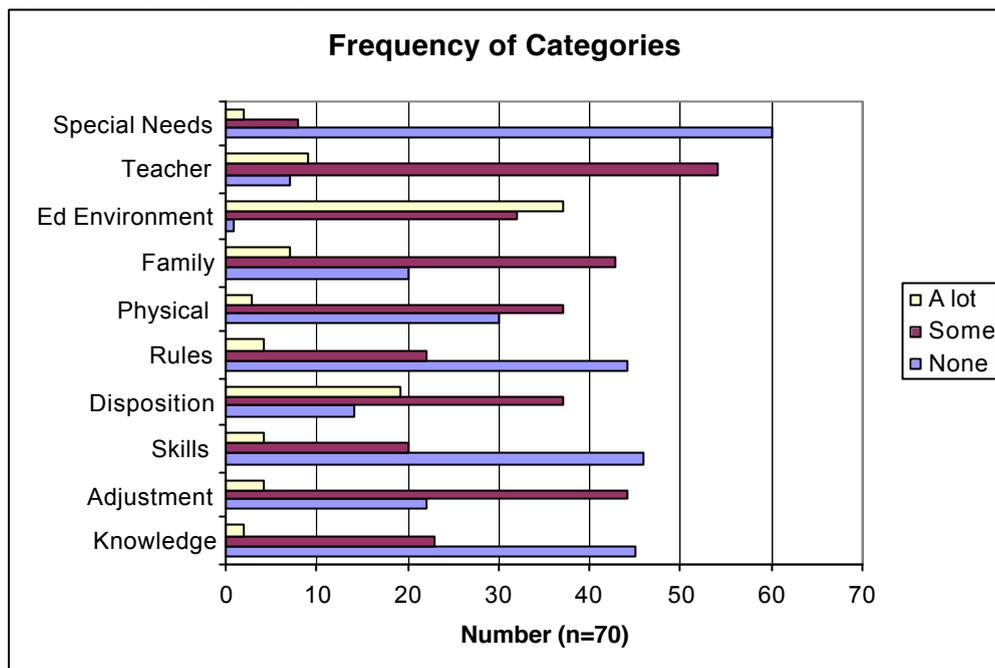
An overview of the results is presented in Figure 1. Frequencies for each of the categories, across the ratings of ‘none’, ‘some’ and ‘a lot’ are indicated.

It is clear that there is very little mention of characters with culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, or characters with special needs in the books. Sixty of the 70 books had no mention of this at all. Only two books specifically considered this area. Gemma (2001) has reported a similar finding in her analysis of North American books, noting that few

address many important linguistic, religious, and cultural issues and questions faced by children and teachers ... For instance, in a multicultural school, whose culture prevails and to what extent are individuals, their culture, and families valued, accepted, or accommodated? On the rare occasions when children of ethnic diversity are depicted ... there is no mention of any adjustment or struggle on the part of either the child, family, or teacher. (p. 75)

In picture storybooks, the illustrations and text combine to form images of characters in particular roles. Views of individuals, as well as groups of people, create potentially powerful images (Mendoza & Reese, 2002). The omission of specific groups of people from picture storybooks, as well as the general lack of discussion about possible tensions, as well as positive interactions, also generates powerful messages about who belongs at school and who is likely to succeed at school.

Figure 1. Frequency of categories



Teachers

The teacher appears as a character in 63 of the books. In only nine is the teacher central to the story. Representations of teachers in these nine books vary considerably. Some books reflect children's concerns that teachers will be monsters (Harris & Smith, 2001; McCourt, 2000; Thaler, 1989), and others present images of teachers as helpful and caring people (Slate, 1996) or as disciplinarians (Shannon, 1999). In the majority of books, where the teacher has some but not a central role, representations typically reflect a white, female teacher (whether it be human or animal), who is portrayed as providing help and assistance to children. Drawing on the view that picture storybook serve a socialisation function, it is clear that gender roles and expectations about these contribute to the establishment of social norms. Picture storybooks can contribute to children's developing understandings about gender and gender roles. Despite many challenges to gender stereotypes, many images in media such as picture storybooks continue to reflect stereotypes (Roberts & Hill, 2003).

Typically, the teacher engages in tasks such as reading stories to children, playing music games, setting up art and craft experiences, and helping children with skills such as tying shoelaces. In Gemma's (2001) words, teachers are depicted as "nice and smart [but] boring" (p. 75). Few books include male teachers. Those that do (eg., Tester, 1979) portray the teachers as caring and fun.

Educational environment

The category most often identified in the picture storybooks was educational environment. Only one book had no reference to this category, with the remainder presenting images of the educational environment some of the time (32 of the 70 books) or a lot (37). School was presented as an important place, and starting school as an important event. Many of the books described—in both words and pictures—what would happen at school. For example,

The children wait in the playground with their mums and dads and brothers and sisters ... and a puppy. The bell rings. Gavin and Errol and Sophie and Sushma and David and Kate and Robert and Alison go into the school and meet their teacher. They hang their hats and their coats in the cloakroom, have a look at the toilets and go into the classroom. They sit on the mat with the rest of the class. The teacher calls the register and collects the dinner money. (Ahlberg & Ahlberg 1988, pp1-4)

Hallinan (2002, pp 7-10) uses rhyme to convey expectations:

We gathered in bunches

By the kindergarten door
To find what our nametags
And booktags were for ...
And we learned that we never
Could take the wrong bus
Or ever get lost
With our nametags on us.
And then in a flash,
We marched into class.
There were five little tables
With cards marking places,
So everyone knew
Where their own special place was.
And our teacher just smiled
And talked with such care
That all of our fears
Disappeared into air.

Several of the books use a character other than a child starting school to familiarise readers with the school environment. Carter (1992), McGeorge (1996) and Tyler and Hawthorn (1996), use a possum, dog and dragon respectively as characters who visit the school and generally create havoc as they explore both spaces where children are permitted to be, as well as places that are prohibited (such as staff rooms and store rooms). Part of the appeal of these books seems to be the change of focus from children to animals, and the emphasis on some other character breaking the rules of school.

The prevalence of educational environment as a theme in these books may well reflect their purpose. The books are written and illustrated by adults, often with the intent of helping children feel comfortable with school and what happens at school. In Stephens' (1992) terms they seek to socialise children in relation to school. There are multiple messages about what happens at school—with representations covering the range of formal classrooms organised with desks in rows and teachers standing at the board (eg., London, 1996) and less formal settings, where teachers and children work together in groups (eg., Schwartz, 1988). There are clear expectations about what happens at school, in terms of rules and responsibilities. For example, children are expected to be friendly (Wells, 1981) and to obey the teacher's instructions (Robbins, 2001).

Family issues

Families feature in many of the books. Levels of involvement for families range from helping children get ready for school by getting dressed, having breakfast and packing school supplies (Carlson, 1999), and taking children to the bus (Bourgeois & Clark, 1995) to providing emotional support (Hest, 2000) and encouraging children to regard school as fun (London, 2002). Family members contribute a great deal to the expectations of children starting school, though these contributions are not always positive. For example, Cousin Pete in Skarmeas' (2001) *My first day of school* does little to settle Daniel's fears with the following comments:

“You have to walk down a long, dark hallway to the bathroom,” Pete said. “And you can't ever talk unless you raise your hand.”

Pete said that Kindergarten was in a huge school and all the doors looked alike. One time, Pete told him, a boy couldn't find his room and got lost. The teachers didn't find him until after lunch. (p. 12).

Physical issues

An implication in many of the books is that starting school is a time when children change, grow up and assume greater independence and responsibility. Graham (1987) reflects this change in *The red woollen blanket*, which chronicles a child's development from birth to starting school in terms of her reliance on a red woollen blanket. By the time she gets to school, Julia has lost the last threads of her

blanket: “It may have been while playing in the school yard ...or having lunch under the trees. It could have been anywhere at all ... and she hardly missed it.” (pp. 22-24). Other physical issues with some mention include the physical activities that occur at school, including play at recess and lunch times (Tester, 1979), and Physical Education (Impey & Porter, 2001).

Rules

Rules feature strongly in children’s concerns about starting school (Dockett & Perry, 1999; Perry, et al., 2000). Children who are about to start school, or who have just started school, can generate a substantial list of rules to be obeyed at school, as well as the consequences of breaking those rules. While this may be perceived as negative, the children themselves regard it more as a means of finding out what they can and cannot do at school, as a means of checking out the boundaries. Most books in this study did not focus a great deal on rules. Several indicated in both text and illustrations that children were expected to know rules such as putting up their hand before speaking, taking turns and doing what the teacher asks (eg., Robbins, 2001). Only four books emphasised rules as a central theme in starting school. Of these, Shannon (1999, p.1) deals most explicitly with rules and the consequences of breaking rules:

David’s teacher always said ...
NO, DAVID!
No yelling.
No pushing.
No running in the halls.

After breaking numerous rules, David’s teacher (a woman pictured from chest down), says “That’s it, Mister! You’re staying after school!” and gives David the task of cleaning desks. When he is finished he is given a gold star and permitted to go home.

This book presents behaviour considered by children to be taboo. In much the same way as fairy stories, it presents actions that are remote from their own experiences (given that many have not started school), yet related to their own fears. Once again, it may represent an attempt by adults to socialise children to school, with the expectation that “to integrate a rule against something into a child’s mind, so that it becomes their own, part of their own values and perceptions...it has to be understood; and for a rule to be fully understood involves imagining what happens when you break it” (Spufford, 2002, p. 53).

Disposition

The other area that features strongly in children’s comments about school is the category of disposition. How children feel about school is important. This is often affected greatly by the presence or absence of friends (Dockett & Perry, 1999). The majority of books mention friends in at least some way (56 of the 70). Nineteen books use friends as a central theme, focusing on how children feel without friends (Cohen, 1967), making friends (Wells, 1981), and the importance of a special friend (Lewis, 1995). Children’s fears about school are addressed in several books, including Henkes’ (2000, pp. 18-19), *Wemberly worried*, where Wemberly generates a long list of worries about school:

What if no one else has spots?
What if no one else wears stripes?
What if no one else brings a doll?
What if the teacher is mean?
What if the room smells bad?
What if they make fun of my name?
What if I can’t find the bathroom?
What if I hate the snack?
What if I have to cry?

Henkes (1991) explores similar issues in *Chrysanthemum*, where a young mouse is very excited about being at school until the other children laugh at her name. At this point, “Chrysanthemum wilted”, and decided that “school is no place for me”. The importance of the teacher, as well as support from home

through this difficult time for Chrysanthemum taps one the areas of greatest concern for parents as their children start school—that of ‘fitting in’ to the school context and being accepted by others within that context (Perry, et al., 2000).

Skills and knowledge

The categories of skills and knowledge do not feature strongly in the books. Forty-five of the books contain no mention of knowledge, and forty-six no mention of skills. These findings are interesting in at least two ways. Firstly, knowledge and skills are heavily represented on checklists for school readiness and readiness assessments (Dockett & Perry, 2002), yet, they are not heavily represented in these books. This could be because there is a whole other genre of activity books designed to prepare children for school, through the acquisition of knowledge and skills. Secondly, children themselves often focus on knowledge and skills as being important to them as they start school. Parents and teachers mention skills, but often give it less import than children (Dockett & Perry, 1999).

Children have reported that they need to know such facts as their name, address, colours, shapes and letters before they go to school. They have also indicated that tying shoelaces is important. McGhee (2002, pp. 4-5), focuses on this in her story of an almost-Kindergartener who cannot tie her shoelaces. The young girl (who is not named) laments:

Want to know what I can do? Count backwards from ten.

Want to know what I can't do? Tie my shoes.

In the last few days before school, she resigns herself to failure, “what if I have to wear a sign that says VELCRO GIRL” (McGhee, 2002, p. 23).

Children have a clear sense that they go to school to learn (Dockett & Perry, 1999). They expect that they will acquire knowledge, and expect to know things after being at school for even a relatively short time. Kirk (2000, p. 25) confronts this concern in his talk of Little Miss Spider who completes her first day of school feeling inadequate as a learner: “The school day was over. They sounded the bell. She sobbed, “Is there *anything* I can do well?”

Adjustment

Parents and teachers, when asked about what is important as children start school, consistently refer to children’s adjustment to school. For teachers, this typically involves children being comfortable in a large group, taking turns within that group, and showing initiative and independence. For parents, it usually means separating easily from them, and interacting appropriately with the children and adults at school (Perry, et al., 2000). Adjustment issues feature in many of these picture storybooks (some mention in 44 books, mentioned a lot in 4). Much of what has been coded as adjustment also relates to the category of educational environment, where what happens and what is expected at school is discussed or depicted. Illustrations, particularly, depict classrooms in a variety of forms, with children interacting as part of a large group, led by the teacher (eg., Cork, 1989; Hughes, 1992; Schwartz, 1988).

For children, adjustment to school often means accepting that family members will do things while they are at school. Johnson (1990) explores this, as does Skarmeas (2001, p16), who has Daniel explain “Would Mom take the baby to story time and to the park and to Gramma’s while he was in kindergarten? Would they have so much fun that they would forget about him? No, Daniel thought, I had better not go to kindergarten.”

Conclusion

This analysis of the themes of children’s picture storybooks indicates firstly, that there are many books available that cover the topic of starting school. We are well aware that we have not considered all picture storybooks about starting school, and therefore cannot claim a comprehensive sample. Nevertheless, we are convinced that the sample includes many picture storybooks readily available and frequently used in adult-child discussions about starting school.

The study is limited in that the books included in this sample are English texts. Clearly, this reflects a cultural bias and provides avenues for further investigation. The aim of this paper is not to recommend some books and reject others. Rather, the focus has been on how the books reflect the issues that have previously been identified as important for different groups of people as children make the move to formal schooling.

Picture storybooks address many concerns raised by children, parents and educators. In doing so, they reflect those aspects most often identified by adults as important, namely the educational environment of the school and the experiences and expectations of children as they adjust to the school context. At least one of the concerns expressed by children features regularly in the books—the category of disposition, with particular reference to friends. This is also an area of concern for parents, as one of the ways in which they report making judgements about how well a child has adjusted to school is in relation to whether or not they have friends. The other major concern of children—the rules of school and what happens when the rules are broken—features much less than the categories of adjustment, disposition, physical issues, family issues or educational environment. Three categories often mentioned by children in terms of what matters to them when starting school (Dockett & Perry, 1999)—knowledge, skills and rules—are the least mentioned in children’s picture storybooks about starting school.

This may not be surprising given that these books are written and illustrated by adults, often for use by adults in interactions with children. However, it does raise several issues in considering the curriculum of transition to school, especially relating to whose interests and perceptions drive such programs. Transition to school programs usually have as their main aim, the desire to help children (and sometimes families) become familiar with school, with the expectations of school and the nature of school life. In addition, a prime focus is on building positive relationships between children, parents and educators (Dockett & Perry, 2001). Part of building positive relationships is basing interactions on trust and respect. In turn, this means having a sense of what matters to those involved in transition and responding in supportive ways. Knowing that children are concerned about rules and friends should guide the curriculum of transition programs, in order that the needs and concerns of all involved are addressed. It will be evident in such programs that children’s concerns are often different from this of adults, but are nonetheless valid in terms of their contribution to the curriculum. Children’s voices need to be recognised and responded to in appropriate ways. One strategy could be to consider children’s perspectives through picture storybooks.

In using picture storybooks, several questions are raised. Many of the images—in both text and illustrations—reflect stereotypical images of schools, teachers and children. Children are often portrayed as lacking power, with the expectation that interactions between teachers and children are characterised by children conforming to what the teacher wants or expects. This applies to children’s learning experiences (for example where there is a correct answer to be gleaned) as well as to children’s behaviour. Teachers are often portrayed as nice, sometimes boring, and sometimes punitive, but always with power. Teachers make the rules.

Many of the picture storybooks analysed in this study rely on animal characters. Gamble and Yates (2002) note that animals and toys commonly appear more frequently in children’s fiction than in adult fiction, and this is certainly reflected here. In many instances, using animals seems to meet some criteria for addressing differences among children (eg., Robbins, 2001; Slate, 1996), but it also takes away the need to confront some of the issues faced by children who find adjusting to the cultural or linguistic life of school quite difficult. Clearly,

the meanings we attribute to texts are partly determined by the culture in which we have grown up. Factors such as race, gender and social class all have a part to play in forming our previous experiences and therefore in influencing the way in which we are able to make sense out of texts. (Evans, 1998, p. xiv)

Yet, the experiences and expectations reflected in many of the picture storybooks analysed does little to address such diversity, or to explore the issues faced by children, parents and teachers experiencing diversity.

If, as parents, researchers and educators, we aim to take children's concerns seriously, and to respond to these in ways that facilitate a positive transition to school, we would do well to consider the potential of children's picture storybooks, both as a means of initiating discussions with children about what matters to them as they start school, and as a way of challenging stereotypical images and interactions.

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