They may be ready for school, but are you? A parent’s experiences

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ABSTRACT

A qualitative investigation and exploration of parental perspectives regarding their child or children starting at school full time. A mixed method of an autoethnographic diary and open-ended questionnaires were used to gather data which was then analysed thematically for any emergent themes. In line with current literature it was found that parents were unsure about their child’s readiness to start school, and that they had vague knowledge of school practices. Home learning also appeared to be a dominant underlying factor to the activities undertaken out of school. Whilst it also emerged that culture and religion especially, appear to have a dominant role in establishing productive relationships between school and home, and that good relations between school and home often appear to be beneficial to both parents and possibly child on an emotional level, and beneficial to the child on an academic level. It is also proposed that constructions of childhood along with social norms and expectations also go some way into determining how school life is interpreted and experienced.

KEY WORDS: Childhood, Emotion, Interaction, Parent, Readiness
Introduction

It is generally accepted that a child entering into an educational setting, such as a school or nursery, may be a daunting experience for the child (Brooker, 2008), and with increasingly larger numbers of young children entering into educational settings (Pugh, 2001), greater attention is being paid to the importance of these experiences during the early years of learning. Recent media attention has also highlighted concerns regarding the age that children start full time education, with some suggesting that in England children start too young, (see The Daily Mail, 16 October 2009).

It may also be speculated that, a parent with greater understanding of school life, and one that realises the importance of the transition for both adult and child would perhaps be a parent best equipped to ensure that they themselves and their child are both ‘ready’ to enter into an educational style of teaching and learning environment, and thus all the more likely to gain fuller and richer experiences of this new phase of the young child’s life. In England it is compulsory for a child to enter full time education at the age of five; this practice does vary from country to country, with some children not starting school until the age of seven (Brooker, 2008). In England whilst the compulsory school start age is five years old, many children now start school at the age of four with many more, some from as young as three months, also being looked after in day care settings most of which will partake in what is known as ‘The Early Years Foundation Stage’ (EYFS) of The National Curriculum. This has raised issues of concern regarding how children’s development may be affected, with a vast majority of research highlighting that positive early relationships can have many positive effects in a child’s development and suggesting that parents acting as ‘teachers’ can significantly improve a child’s learning in regard to social, emotional, behavioural and cognitive skills. (Bornstein and Tamis-LeMonda, 1989; Grolnick and Ryan, 1989; Landry et al, 2001; Landry et al, 2006; Mashburn and Pianta, 2006; McCartney and Phillips, 2006; Parker et al, 1999; Pena, 2000; Rogoff, 2003). It is argued that these early relationships can be significantly affected by children starting school and thus may hinder their development, however the Early Years Foundation Stage of The National Curriculum recognises this in part and thus aims to enhance these early relationships by bringing together the family and educational setting to form a continuous means of support for the child or children and not two separate environments.

Recent government proposals such as the Families green paper (DCFS, 2010) also highlight the importance of strong family relationships and good school-child-home relations. Bronfenbrenner (1989) also offers some intriguing accounts of how the various institutions such as family and school can play a major factor in child and family experiences. Whilst Bryk et al (1993) also highlight how religion in schools can impact upon the lives of those involved. However despite evidence and proposals being in place to highlight and encourage the benefits of good family relations and the relations between school and family life, it appears that very little academic information is available in regard to child or parental perspectives on their relationship with their children’s schooling and what the perceptions or knowledge of their child’s school are or what their knowledge is regarding teaching and learning.
Common perceptions suggest that, learning refers to a change in understanding or behaviour brought about as a result of experience and not due to temporary states of the organism, whilst teaching is an attempt to bring about this learning. Yet it must be noted that an individual’s notions or perceptions of teaching and learning can vary greatly even amongst teachers. For example folk psychologies and folk pedagogies can be greatly affected by social factors (Olsen and Bruner, 1998). As we mentioned earlier factors such as culture, religion and class can all impact upon how teaching and learning may take place or how it is perceived (Bronfenbrenner, 1989; Bryk et al 1993; Derman-Sparks et al, 1989; Greer, 1970; Lee and Johnson, 2007; Lee and Walsh, 2004). Thus perhaps the reasoning behind recommendations made within the proposed frameworks for the EYFS of the National Curriculum. Examples of such include a statutory framework with legal requirements for learning and development which cover six key areas: Personal, social and emotional development, Communication, language and literacy, Problem solving, reasoning and numeracy, Knowledge and understanding of the world, Physical development, and Creative development (DfES, 2008) all of which are provided with guidance for effective practice, however they do not dictate how these practices must take place, thus allowing for individual differences to evolve. Other aspects include what are termed as ‘statutory guidance’, it is generally under this heading that recommendations about equality and diversity and the inclusion of parents or families are made, thus giving rise to the question of, are parents being included in their child’s schooling?

Research also suggests that learning not only takes place within educational contexts but that it can take place within the home too and can occur in many forms and has even been shown to impact upon academic performance (Foster et al, 2005, Hill, 2001). Yet it appears that a child’s learning once they start school is associated mainly within the schooling environment and little importance is paid to the role of the parent or family as teachers in the home, a point highlighted by Burman (2008) who suggests that the notion of ‘transition’ into school as a learning environment devalues the learning that may take place in the home, whilst Brooker (2008) highlights the specific factors that can effect child transitions from home to school, suggesting that transitions not just for children but for young and old alike ‘can threaten and undermine our sense of self-esteem, self-confidence and self efficacy, and make us feel insecure and foolish’(Brooker, 2008, p4) if not handled correctly.

So whilst it appears that some regard is being shown to the importance of parents to their child’s education, questions also arise as to what degree this importance takes and to what extent the practices suggested by the EYFS are implemented in regard to these issues, suggesting perhaps more research needs to be done in order to ascertain further understanding on parental, child and teachers perspectives in regards to how transitions can be made seamless, what makes an ideal situation for teaching and learning to take place, and to become aware of the various contexts in which this can do so. Like Child (1986) points out ‘no one learning theory provides us with all the answers. Furthermore, all the theories put together do not provide all the answers’ (p92). Emphasising the importance then of the need to have a school or education system that takes account of all aspects of a child’s life including that of their parents and family. Furthermore practices of early parental involvement and parental interaction in regard to children’s schooling appear to have positive effects on the child’s relationships with their peers and teachers (Clark and Ladd, 2000; Knoche et al, 2009). Providing evidence that including parents in their child’s
schooling should be beneficial to all parties concerned. It was with this research into various literature, Government proposals and the recommendations of the EYFS and through personal experiences that the questions for this research arose and thus the aim was to answer some of the questions posed, at least in part, perhaps with a view to undertaking further quantitative investigation.

Thus the aims of this study were to investigate further the parental experiences and perspectives in respect of a child entering full time education within England. By using a quantitative methodology of personal narrative from a parent whose child is currently entering into full time education and data from open-ended questionnaires completed by various parents, it is anticipated that light would be shed upon this particular subject of concern, thus the main aims were:

To identify the different elements that make up the relationship between parent, child and school by way of the following objectives:

- The Analysis of parental perspectives regarding their child’s first day at school.
- The exploration of, parental understandings regarding teaching and learning, and the practices in and out of school.
- The consideration of various relationships surrounding school and family life.

In light of the aims of this research it was initially intended that a phenomenological diary using an autoethnographic method would be sufficient for the data analysis, however upon immersion into the data, some consistencies and inconsistencies were beginning to emerge and thus it was felt that further data would be beneficial to the research in order to clarify or expand further some of the emerging themes, thus open ended questionnaires were also devised in order to ascertain quickly, due to time constraints, whether any patterns of association or assumptions would emerge between the data from the ethnographical diary and the answers to the questionnaires.

**Method**

**Design**

The research opted for a qualitative approach in order to achieve depth and quality, as it was deemed to be most apt as opposed to a quantitative methodology because the research was concerned with gaining a humanistic view, a ‘real’ parents knowledge, feelings and inner experiences, something which it is often argued cannot be reliably understood or measured by quantitative methods (Lincoln and Denzin, 1994; Parker, 2005).

Methods of data collection included an autoethnographical diary (Appendix 1) of a parent’s personal journey as their child entered into a reception class within main stream school, which was to record key events during the first two terms of the child starting school. This methodology was used as it attempts to gain a true insight into various individuals and communities not by measuring them but by the interpretation
of their more personal narratives (Deck, 1990; Ellis and Bochner, 1992; Kivet and Warren, 2002; Lincoln and Denzin, 1994, Parker, 2005; and Reed-Danahay, 1997).

In reacting to the autoethnographical diaries, an open-ended questionnaire (Appendix 3) was also developed and the data corpus from the questionnaires and the diaries was broken down using thematic analysis in order to establish any continuing or new emerging themes. Thematic analysis allows for a flexible approach, and can yield a complex, rich and detailed data account (Braun and Clarke, 2006), thus enabling the data to be interpreted in an appropriate and informative manner highlighting any connections or relationships that may have emerged between or within both data sets (see Appendix 5 for an example of how the data was analysed).

Participants

Participants for the questionnaires were recruited using an opportunity and snowball sampling method, namely a plea by the researcher for participants to take part in a questionnaire, using a social networking site which consisted of close and distant friends and relatives of the researcher. Once initial interest was confirmed participants were sent via email a consent form (Appendix 2) and a questionnaire (Appendix 3) which they were required to complete electronically then return to the researcher via email. Following the return of the consent form and questionnaire, all participants were then sent a debrief form (Appendix 4) again via email and were given the opportunity to ask any further questions if they desired.

In total there were ten participants that completed the questionnaires and returned them. They consisted of eight female participants and two male participants, with the youngest being 26 years old and the oldest being 53 years of age (Mean 31.3, S.D. 7.87).

Reflexivity

It was felt that these methods were most appropriate as they aimed to access multiple realities of the individual and not just data that could be generalized to the general population (Davis and Salkin, 2005). By considering firsthand how the parent participant may be affected through and/or by personal experiences and comprehensions, it should be possible to gain a fuller and richer perspective of this aspect of a parent’s life in relation to their child and their school. However, in opting for this type of methodology, as with others, it gives rise to a whole host of ethical issues, such as informed consent and vulnerability. Many of the issues were addressed initially via way of the ethics forms (Appendices 16 and 17). Whilst the issue of informed consent was addressed within the consent forms (Appendix 1) in order to ensure participants were aware of their rights whilst taking part in the study. However vulnerability was perhaps the major consideration of ethics in respect to the autoethnographic diary and personal questionnaire methods that were used in this research. As they were asking for personal and emotional information, and whilst participants were informed there was no harm intended, Ellis (2004) puts it into words how being so emotionally open and honest can affect you.

‘honest autoethnographic exploration generates a lot of fear and self doubts- and emotional pain….. The vulnerability of revealing yourself, not being able to
take back what you’ve written or having control over how readers interpret your story. Critics judging your life as well as your work.’ (Ellis, 2004, preface)

Thus as the researcher/participant it was vital to remain fully aware and conscious of all the narratives and constantly monitor and assess, how these issues may be of relevance and how if at all they may effect upon the individual. Finally another major consideration with all types of research methodology is that of reflexivity. Stories or narratives are often used to make sense of life (Ellis, 2004), autoethnography allows this to happen by focussing on various different angles of cultural interpretation (Deck, 1990; Ellis and Bochner, 1992; Reed-Danahay, 1997). Reflection is generally thought of as an understanding and exploration of personal experiences (Boud, Cohen and Walker, 1993), thus an autobiographical article may be viewed simply as a reflexive journal (Angelides, Evangelou and Leigh, 2005) as the majority of the interpretations made are purely from the researchers perspective, however in the aim of carrying out good research the researcher will always try to consider all possible perspectives, as was done within the analysis of this data.

In summing up then like all other research methods, autoethnography has its share of critiques, those who say that autoethnography is limited and that researchers as participants will fail to see weakness in the research and that autoethnography is merely storytelling (Chang, 2008; Holt, 2003; Krizek, 2003). The debate also still lives on regarding whether qualitative or quantitative methodology should be the ultimate method of choice (Erickan and Roth, 2006; Gorard and Taylor, 2004; Smith, 1986). Yet in answer to some of the main critiques, I suggest that whilst this research does use a qualitative methodology, it does still aim for some validity and generalizabilty, yet it also maintains all of the rich and diverse data that is not often associated with quantitative methods.

Results/Analysis

Figure 1: Table showing overview over main and sub themes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sub-theme</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Emotions and Readiness</td>
<td>A, Parents and Child emotions.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B, Uniform.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>C, Readiness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>D, Memories.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. School procedures, policies and other activities</td>
<td>A, Processes involved with the child’s first day.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B, Parent sessions, evenings, workshops.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C, National Curriculum, school and home activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>D, Gender of school staff/teachers.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B, Religion, Culture and Community.</td>
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Theme 1: Emotions and Readiness

1A, Parents and Child emotions

Analysing the data from the autoethnographical logs it appeared that emotions were a significant factor in the reporting of the experiences a parent had on their child’s first day at school, this theme was also evident when analysing the data provided by the questionnaires, emotions for both the adult parent and the child who had started school were key features and very significant in the parents reported experience’s of their child starting and/or taking part in school

‘On my daughters first day at school I felt very apprehensive, I was nervous...’ (Participant D, Question 1, Appendix 9).

Analysis suggests that the emotions experienced within by most of the parents seemed to vary between fear and/or nervousness for the child’s safety and well being. However many also reported feeling proud of their child, perhaps due to aspects of development and what may be deemed a significant milestone being reached. Whilst many of the parents reported feeling what may be termed as negative emotions they appeared to outwardly portray positive ones for their child. Within the data it also appeared that many of the parents thought that their children were experiencing similar emotions to them but, in most cases the positive emotions were believed to outweigh the negative ones for the child.

1B, Uniform

The wearing of uniform’s also appeared to be a key feature within the adult’s experiences of their child starting school and could evoke some strong emotions, and appeared to signify much deeper meanings,

‘she was wearing her compulsory school uniform, which includes a tie that made her seem so grown up and I felt like she was my little baby going into the big wide world’ (Participant B, Question 1, Appendix 7).

Underlying themes of institutionalisation issues also appeared to be evident in parents references to the school uniform, the word ‘compulsory’ in the above quote may suggest a form of social control, and the use of the phrase ‘the big wide world’ may suggest that the parent feel’s that their child is too small, or not ready perhaps.

1 C, Readiness

Analysis also revealed the issue of readiness and the parent’s thoughts and feelings regarding whether they felt their child was ready to start school. References to this were mainly in regards to age, though social issues were referred to in some instances,
‘teachers do not dote on her as much as we do and they way her carers did at nursery. ... It sometimes feels that because they are at school they need to grow up. Not too sure I agree with them forcing them to become independent & grow up though. 4-5 year olds are still very young in my eyes’ (Participant E, Question 6, Appendix 10).

This issue of readiness is an interesting one as it was mainly an underlying theme that emerged and was rarely addressed directly. Whilst one parent did suggest that their child was ready the indirect theme appeared to be that many parents felt their children were a little unready for this new transition.

1D, Memories

The maintenance of memories or the remembering of previous experiences also seemed to be a theme for many of the participants, as many of them reported having taken pictures of their child on their first day of school.

‘We took pictures to remember her on that day forever’ (Participant B, Question 1, Appendix 7).

Participant B’s above comment may suggest that the child’s first day at school is a significant marker in life, that there would never be another one like it, or that their child would never be the same again perhaps. Thus it would suggest that the starting of school is a very significant event within both the child’s and the parent’s lives.

Theme 2: School procedure, policies and other activities

2A, Processes involved with the child’s first day

These parents commenting on their child’s first day at school said,

‘I went in to school with him and waited until he had settled in but i was encouraged by staff not to stay for too long as it would upset him’ (Participant A, Question 1, Appendix 6).

‘We waited outside as they line up and the teacher takes them through’ (Participant I, Question 1, Appendix 14).

This may suggest that some of the schools, which the children in our data attended, allowed parents into the classrooms whilst others did not, these practices also appeared to effect the emotions of some of the parents and children. Participant A above was encouraged to leave by staff so they would not upset their child which seems strange as many would suggest that a parent leaving their child would be more likely to elicit that emotion than a parent staying with their child, suggesting perhaps, that a form of hierarchy or politics may be at play within some school practices.

2B, Parent sessions, evenings, workshops
The analysis also suggested that communication between the school and the parents and families took various forms, with some using only a few methods and others using lots.

‘We were invited to an open evening once her place was confirmed. We were then invited to several workshops, during which the parents were led to a classroom to have areas of the curriculum explained & the children had a taster session in their new classroom. The school also offered a playgroup for children due to start the following September. Her teacher also came to visit my daughter in our home a week before she started’ (Participant F, Question 4, Appendix 11).

Again emotions also arose for these events, with the parents whom had more contact/more sessions seeming to display more positive feelings than those who had only experienced one of these methods of communication.

2C, National Curriculum, school and home activities

When asked what they knew of the National Curriculum there appeared to be a vague awareness of what it was, for example,

‘The National curriculum is like a standard what schools follow’ (Participant J, Question 5, Appendix 15).

‘The National Curriculum is a way of making sure children are learning to their full ability, as not all children are natural academics therefore it can help point out the children who may need further help with their learning’ (Participant A, Question 5, Appendix 6).

Only Participant C managed to give a detailed definition, however it must be noted that Participant C did also tell us that he was a teacher, thus this may well have impacted on his answer.

Whilst activities out of school were quite varied many of those reported were similar to the activities that were suggested as having took place in school, mainly reading, baking, sports or games,

‘As a family we go walking & swimming, we also do a lot of reading, painting, drawing & general play’ (Participant H, Question 2, Appendix 13).

‘My husband enjoys writing and encourages her to try and write, he also likes to bake and they made scones last week. I often help my daughter colour and paint, she likes to have messy play’ (Participant D, Question 2, Appendix 9).

This theme did make me wonder though as very few parents mentioned watching television or videos, or using a games console, which is quite surprising given statistical evidence regarding the amount of hours children spend watching television or playing games consoles.

2D, Gender of school staff/teachers
The gender of the teaching staff also seemed to be an underlying theme in that many of the teachers referred to were being done so as females,

‘The teacher came out and introduced herself’ (Participant D, Question 1, Appendix 9).

That is except for one participant whom commented about her child and the child’s teacher that,

‘this past academic year she has improved substantially and seems to work well for this teacher, who is male, which I think makes a slight difference as he seems more calmer and relaxed with the children but they know not to push him’(Participant B, Question 4, Appendix7).

Thus suggesting perhaps that the majority of teaching staff in school is female and also that gender stereotyping may also be at work.

**Theme 3: Relationships and Interactions**


In looking at the data surrounding relationships,

‘She loves playtimes and often talks about playing games with her friends but often comes home saying ‘A’ has fallen out with ‘B’ etc’ (Participant C, Question 3, Appendix 8).

Parents seemed to place a lot of emphasis on their child’s interactions with peers, perhaps because of the many social implications this may be believed to have.

3B, Religion, Culture and Community

Culture appeared to be yet another theme and the importance of family and equality was also highlighted,

‘He attends a school that has a very diverse mix of children from various other cultures and I feel that this also makes children aware that we are not all the same. They learn about the various countries other children come from and the religions that other children practice’ (Participant A, Question 3, Appendix 6).

‘The school is centred on love and equality and the children are taught to love 1 another like a family. The older children take care of the younger 1s from their very 1st day by buddying with them and showing them around the school and being there for them throughout their whole 1st year’ (Participant B, Question 6, Appendix 7).
The local community also seemed to play an important factor in school life, though this was quite often linked to religion in the questionnaire data, which was quite surprising,

'I like my daughters school. It's a church school and so has a family ethos. I feel like we have all been welcomed not just my daughter' (Participant E, Question 6, Appendix 10).

'My daughter’s school has a strong sense of community and parents, teachers and children alike, are all encouraged to interact and take part in activities together. I think this is partly because it is a catholic school and so the parish is very important to the school also which shows them a sense of belonging' (Participant B, Question 6, Appendix 7).

Religion is generally quite a controversial topic these days with the UK having such a diverse population, it was surprising how much emphasis there was in respect to the positive effects that it had on the relationships between the family, the school and the local community

**Reflexivity**

Whilst some very rich and diverse data has been achieved here it would have perhaps been better to have been able to follow up these initial questionnaires with personal interviews to allow for greater explorations of the emerging themes to have been carried out. This may have allowed for any flaws in the presentation of questions to be reduced and it may have also taken away some of the researcher bias as it would have allowed for greater exploration and an agreed interpretation to have been formed rather than the themes solely consisting of the researchers interpretation. Though it must be stated that every care has been taken by the researcher to remain as unbiased as possible within the analysis of the data.

**Discussion**

The analysis of the data has been productive in that it has shed light on many of the questions that had been posed. In looking at the parent’s perspectives regarding their own personal experiences of their child or children starting mainstream school, it appears that as suggested it may be considered a particularly daunting experience as many parents did report feelings of, nervousness, anxiousness and uneasiness and it also appeared that aspects of socialisation were major contributing factors to these emotions. After all the starting of school becomes a very big part of both parties life, especially that of the child who may be going from an environment of close, one to one, emotional attachments with lots of care and attention to one totally alien to this, where they now have to share the attention of a few key figures, to whom they initially have no emotional attachment to, with a large number of other children.

In analysing the data it appeared that many schools may adopt different policies and procedures regarding children entering school and the levels of parental involvement during the transition and afterwards which may perhaps be a factor regarding the many negative emotions that parents reported along with the issue of readiness
which was more an underlying theme. Rita Watson (1998) raises some interesting issues regarding parents and children’s readiness and how it is perceived especially within folk pedagogy suggesting that ‘a commonsense view of readiness pervades our personal, social, and institutional lives’ (1998, p148) and it is also suggested that cultural beliefs on issues such as teaching and learning, along with broader frameworks of psychology and pedagogies are all embedded within the many theories surrounding readiness (Bruner, 1996; Lee, and Walsh, 2004; and Watson, 1998). Thus perspectives on readiness can vary greatly depending on many personal and social factors. Burman (2008) though suggests that readiness for a child ‘means that the child must be ‘ready’ to learn’ (p263), with learning including aspects of social, emotional and cognitive development. So, as masses of research suggest that a child’s, social, emotional and cognitive development is attributed to their parents (Clark and Ladd, 2000; Dunst and Bruder, 1999; Landry et al, 2001; Pan et al, 2005; Weigel et al, 2006), a parent’s readiness is also of paramount importance too as we had speculated. What a parent knows or understands about school and its practices will play a vital role in the experiences of school for the family. Surprisingly then that most of the parents only had a vague knowledge of what their children did during their time in school and that some were even unaware of what exactly the National Curriculum was, despite this being a key concept in their child’s everyday life at school.

The analysis also appeared to suggest that like previous research, engaging with parent’s during and prior to their children starting school can have positive effects (Clark and Ladd, 2000; Knoche et al, 2009). Whilst drawing on Bronfenbrenners (1989) theory of ecological systems we can also begin to understand why and how aspects surrounding school life can impact greatly upon individual perceptions of starting school, for both adult and child. Alongside this aspect’s of gender stereotyping perhaps in line with social expectations also appeared to be an underlying theme in respect to how children behaved during school.

Another key factor that arose within the data was the wearing of uniforms, not only did they appear to signify change or new beginnings for the parents, but they appeared to evoke some strong emotions within them regarding developmental issues such as ‘growing up’ or entering the big wide world, thus again supporting the notion that a parents readiness is paramount and that their perceptions of their child’s readiness can, and does vary like research suggests (Watson, 1998). Perhaps they are not quite ready to see their child as an individual, a separate entity capable of survival outside of their parents grasp or they are not ready to see their child institutionalised, stripped of their own individual personality having to wear a uniform and look the same as everyone else, though it should be noted many parents felt proud of their child in the uniform, so less support is provided for the latter theory.

Another factor that could be linked to the notion of parent’s readiness to let their child go is the taking of pictures the capturing of memories, wanting to remember the day forever. In exploring these issues it may appear that conceptions of childhood play a big factor in the experiences of children starting school for all parties concerned, and that childhood ideologies within the Western culture tend to perceive childhood as a time of happiness and innocence, of freedom, a time for exploration and play (James and Prout, 1990; and Kitzinger, 1988), and thus it may be speculated that the beginning of school may appear to remove all these ideologies from the child’s life.
with the set routines and Governing by authority, and thus the child may no longer be perceived as this happy, innocent, vision of freedom. That their childhood as ended perhaps with the introduction to school life.

It may also be suggested that modern conceptions of childhood along with societal norms and expectations are what dictate the activities parents and families partake in and also what their perceptions are regarding teaching and learning. Olsen and Bruner (1998) suggest that there are four common perceptions of learning, these include, seeing children as doers, seeing children as knower’s, seeing children as thinkers, and finally children as knowledgeable, which in turn very much effects how child development is perceived and encouraged. Whilst the importance of home learning has been documented (For some examples of this see, Bornstein and Tamis-LeMonda, 1989; Grolnick and Ryan, 1989; Landry et al, 2001; Landry et al, 2006; Mashburn and Pianta, 2006; McCartney and Phillips, 2006; Parker et al, 1999; Pena, 2000; Rogoff, 2003), and it has been suggested that

‘parental behaviour during a child’s first five years of life is critical for the development of important social and cognitive outcomes in children that set the stage for long term functioning....the interactions and experiences that children have in the home and family setting provide a framework for how the child will interpret his or her world and give meaning to culturally-framed events’ (Watson, 1998, p3).

However we must also consider how the home learning and the family environment interact and how they may be affected by school practices. As perhaps one of the biggest themes that emerged during the analysis of the data was socialisation aspects for the children and emphasis made upon the interaction between the children which was often believed to take place on a daily basis, thus signifying the importance of the interactions between school and family life. Interactions of this kind during the analysis appear to happen at varying levels, with some reporting lots of interaction between home and school life, yet with others reporting very little. It was also noted that those parents who reported more interaction with the school appeared to be more knowledgeable regarding school practices and appeared to be more positive about school and home life. Which may be viewed as providing further support for the theories suggested by Bronfenbrenner (1989), Clark and Ladd (2000) and Knoche et al (2009), that interaction between separate institutions can have positive effects on individual experiences.

Other aspects to consider are that of religion and culture, as it is suggested that childhood developmental frameworks often ignore these aspects despite there being evidence to suggest that they play vital roles within the everyday life of children, families and schools (Bruner, 1996; Bryk et al, 1993; Lee and Walsh, 2004, and Lee and Johnson, 2007). Whilst Derman-Sparks et al (1989), warn that some approaches adopted by schools to promote equality and diversity in respect of race, culture and religion may actually encourage stereotypes and social inequalities rather than discourage them. However in general the evidence we gained from the data tended to support the notions of culture and how interpretations were made within the school to include different cultures as being positive aspects. Surprisingly too was the reference to religion, Bryk et al (1993), suggest that religious or catholic schools ‘might appropriately been described as culturally isolated, doctrinaire and racially
seggregation (p15). Like them, the evidence from our data suggests that this is not so, as many of the parents that did refer to religion, did so in a positive manner and even suggested how religion helped to build the community and encourage the interactions between home and school life. Thus suggesting that more research needs to be done in this area as there was very little available, and it must also be noted that the racial, cultural or religious backgrounds were not requested from the participants and so the participants within this research may not be a fully representative sample in regards to religion and culture.

Conclusion

In summary then, many of the initial assumptions that were made about a parent’s and child’s readiness for school have been upheld by the data and the importance of relationships between school and family life has been suggested as being vital to effective school practices. The relationship between school, family and cultural and religious aspects was also an important one that arose, given more time and resources it would have been beneficial to pursue these aspects further. As could the same be said for many of the other emerging themes. In respect of the chosen methodology and its limitations, whilst we were able to gain some rich and varied data, the questionnaire method left a lot of significant points unexplained and perhaps would have benefitted from being followed up with informal interviews or even focus groups which would have allowed greater exploration of the emerging themes. It would have also been beneficial to the research to have been able to include the children and explore their perspective of how they feel and not just rely on the interpretations of adults about how the children felt. However I suggest that the data from this research has been productive and does shed light upon a much needed perspective in respect to children’s schooling, that of the Parents. Thus I propose that this research is perhaps best considered as, an excellent starting point for further investigations rather than as the answer to all questions.

Reflexivity

As a participant/researcher within this research it was very difficult not to catch on to one or two themes that may have emerged within my ethnographical diaries, thus why it was felt beneficial to adapt with my discoveries of the emergent questions and include the questionnaire method, in doing this I allowed myself to regain an open perspective of the data that I was exploring and analysing for themes. In doing so this enabled for themes to emerge that were initially not even considered, mainly that of the importance of culture and more surprisingly religion. As a white, female, non-religious, parent I obviously will have my own stand points and views on aspects of this research. However I feel that I have enabled a full non judgemental analysis to be produced by maintaining an open mind and allowing for themes to emerge unhindered. In doing this research I feel that sufficient data has been produced in order to warrant further investigation of the emerging themes.

References


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