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Sara Harkness
Charles M. Super
Editors

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Parents, Preschools, and the Developmental Niches of Young Children: A Study in Four Western Cultures

Sara Harkness, Charles M. Super, Sabrina Bonichini, Moises Rios Bermudez, Caroline Mavridis, Saskia D. M. van Schaik, Alexandria Tomkunas, Jesús Palacios

Abstract

Recent years have witnessed increasing attention to early childhood education and care as a foundation for children's successful development in school and beyond. The great majority of children in postindustrial societies now attend preschools or daycare, making this setting a major part of their culturally constructed developmental niches. Although an extensive literature demonstrates the importance of parental involvement or engagement in their children's schools, relationships between parents and their children's preschools have received scant attention in the research literature. This paper aims to address that gap through a mixed-methods cross-cultural study of parents and preschools in four Western countries: Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, and the United States. Following an introduction to national systems of preschool in each country, parents' involvement and ideas about the family–school relationship are presented, drawing from parental diaries and from semistructured interviews (n = 110). Results indicate areas of cross-cultural similarity but also some differences, especially between the U.S. sample and the three European samples. Discussion addresses the question of how preschools and parents can work together to create optimal developmental niches for their young children. The authors also suggest that parent–preschool relationships deserve greater

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attention by both researchers and program developers

Recent years have witnessed increasing attention to early childhood education and care as a foundation for children's successful development in school and beyond. From an earlier concern with the possible deleterious effects of early nonmaternal care, especially in the first 2 years of life, public attention has shifted more recently to the perceived necessity of preprimary education. In addition to being proposed as a goal within the United States, universal preprimary education has been identified by the United Nations as a Sustainable Development Goal for the year 2030. A worldwide survey by the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) of trends in preprimary education from the year 2000 to 2017 found substantial increases in enrollment, from 30% to 50% on average, with the steepest increases in East Asia and the Pacific (up to over 80%), while the African regions lagged behind with only about one third of children enrolled. Interestingly, North America was the only region showing no changes during that period, with just about 70% of children enrolled in preprimary education (UNICEF, 2019). A survey of early childhood education and care in low- and middle-income countries shows inequalities not only across but also within countries (Lu et al., 2020), which the authors cite as a matter of concern because "Inequalities in ECD tend to persist across the life course and amplify into adulthood" (p. 1). The same concern is voiced by Leseman and Slot (2014) in their survey and discussion of challenges for early childhood education and care across and within member countries of the European Union.

In addition to the issue of unequal access to early childhood education, concerns have been raised about its adequacy or appropriateness in various sociocultural contexts. For example, Leseman and Slot (2014) suggest that increasing cultural sensitivity and engaging in a dialogue with parents from low-income or immigrant families are necessary steps toward building early education and care programs across Europe that are more conducive to participation. A related concern has been raised by researchers involved with early childhood education (ECE) in Africa. Pence (2011) challenges the concept in psychology of a general, universal child, based in Western experience. He proposes more involvement of African researchers in both research and its application to early childhood education in Africa. Ejuu (2015) takes this argument further in his depiction of a conflict—especially in rural African communities—between proponents of Western-based "best practices" and other people who reject them as incompatible with their local cultural beliefs and values. Likewise, the inherent disconnect between traditional expectations for early childhood development and current early childhood curricula in Botswana is described by Tsamaase and colleagues as a problem that needs to be addressed through a more

holistic approach, encompassing elements of both tradition and the new skills needed for life in an increasingly interconnected world (Tsamaase, Harkness, & Super, 2020). In short, although the importance of early childhood education for children's development has been recognized globally, there are pressing concerns about not just access to ECE for all children, but also access to *appropriate* ECE. In this context, listening to the voices of parents would seem to be a particularly relevant tool for improving ECE across diverse populations.

Parental Engagement in Their Children's Preschools: An Understudied Topic

In contrast to the copious literature on the benefits of parental involvement or engagement with their children's schools, from primary through secondary and even postsecondary institutions, we are aware of little published research on parent–*preschool* involvement (excluding early intervention programs). A 2008 review by Arnold and colleagues found only four published research studies of parent–preschool involvement (defined variously to include attending parent–teacher conferences, class visits, helping with class activity, and other indices) and children's emergent academic development in the United States; all of them (in addition to their own study) concerned mostly low-income families, with three focused specifically on families with children enrolled in Head Start (Arnold et al., 2008). Within these particular populations, greater parent involvement was found to be associated with better preliteracy skills while various individual, neighborhood, and contextual factors predicted parental involvement (both at home and at school) as well as better parent–teacher relationships (Waanders, Mendez, & Downer, 2007).

As suggested by this literature, the term "involvement" does not necessarily entail communication or collaboration with the child's preschool. For example, Suizzo and colleagues' study of "home-based parental involvement in young children's learning" across several ethnic populations within the United States focuses on parents' ideas about the meaning of educational attainment and their role in promoting their child's academic success (Suizzo et al., 2014). The parents in this study were chosen in order to learn about cultural patterns in their education-related ideas and practices *before* contact with formal schooling might influence them. Through semistructured interviews with middle-class Mexican American, African American, and European American mothers, the researchers explored a variety of different kinds of "involvement," including educational aspirations and perceptions of barriers as well as actual behavior such as reading to or playing with the child, or helping the child with homework. Although they found some cultural differences among these groups (e.g., the two ethnic-minority group mothers tended to express themes of "determination with intervention" whereas the European American mothers more commonly expressed

themes of "trust and laissez-faire"), the frequency with which mothers in *all* groups talked about actual teaching activities related to later school success was striking. In a contrasting approach, Edwards et al.'s (1987) study of parents with infants enrolled in a university-based daycare program, compared to similar parents whose children were not enrolled, was designed to test the hypothesis that simply having one's child in a model daycare setting would, over time, influence parents' behavior with their children at home. The researchers' expectations of difference were confirmed, with parents whose children were enrolled in daycare showing more frequent behaviors that were characteristic of practices at the daycare, including playing with and being near their child. A particularly interesting finding was that this difference was also observed among fathers. The authors suggest that "Research on the effects of child care requires moving beyond earlier paradigms to an ecological perspective in which families are seen as participants in interconnected settings that directly and indirectly influence the developing child" (p. 116).

Compared to research on parental involvement in preschools in the United States, even less attention has been paid in the published literature to cross-national differences in characteristics of parental involvement in their children's preschools. For example, in Lamb, Sternberg, Hwang, and Broberg's edited volume *Childcare in Context*, a global collection of accounts of (mostly) nonparental childcare, parent involvement is mentioned only briefly in a few chapters (Lamb et al., 1992). More recently, Cochran's (2011) survey of early education programs in four postindustrial Western countries (Australia, France, Italy, and Sweden) does include a discussion of parent involvement. Another exception to the scant attention to parent involvement in their children's preschools is the work of Carolyn Pope Edwards, whose career in early childhood education included field research with both Italian and U.S. preschools. Based on this work, Edwards and Kutaka (2015) compared American concepts of "parent engagement" with Italian understandings of *partecipazione*, suggesting that there is a fundamental though unstated difference in these ostensibly similar terms. Specifically, they discuss the emphasis in the United States on the role of parental involvement in their children's education as a means to reduce disparities in achievement among different socioeconomic and racial/ethnic groups, concluding that "In this contemporary climate with its focus on academic success as the road to economic well-being, parental engagement is conceptualized as a source of social capital, and it becomes natural for stakeholders to call for cost and benefit assessments of programs" (p. 42). Within this perspective, they argue, parents' engagement is perceived as "a matter of duty." In contrast, Edwards and Kutaka suggest, Italian parents' concepts of *partecipazione* in their children's preschools relate to municipal systems of early education and care that were established following World War II as part of larger movements relating to women's rights, and more recently the rights of children. Based on this history, relationships between home and

preschool are characterized as a "cooperative, or socially-oriented" mindset organized around concepts of "civic engagement, sense of belonging, and the common good." In this context, being able to participate has more the quality of a right than a duty.

In summary, although early childhood education is widely recognized as essential for children's successful development, there has been little attention to the cultural contexts in which preschools operate, both at the level of the community and in relation to the families they serve. In particular, we know little about cultural patterns of families' contact and participation in their children's preschools. The ongoing worldwide historical shift from home care to group education and care implies a profound change in the developmental niches of preschool-aged children. All three components of the niche are affected: the physical and social settings of daily life, customs and practices of care, and the psychology of the caretakers, especially shared cultural models or parental ethnotheories (Harkness et al. 2015; Super & Harkness, 1986). Of particular interest for the present study is the interface between parents and their children's preschools and how it may relate to parents' own perceptions and goals for their children, and their related parenting practices.

The Present Study

In the present study, we explore relationships between parents and preschools in four middle-class Western cultural communities. The data come from the International Study of Parents, Children and Schools (ISPCS), a collaborative project carried out in the mid-1990s to study parents' and teachers' cultural belief systems, their instantiation in practices, and their implications for children's development in seven Western societies. The present paper is based on work carried out by research teams in four of these cultural places: the city of Padua (Italy), periurban towns in the area between Leiden and The Hague (the Netherlands), urban neighborhoods in Seville (Spain), and towns in northeast Connecticut (USA). Although we identify the samples in terms of their national location for ease of reference, we make no claims about their broader representativeness. Rather, following anthropological tradition, this research has attempted to understand the culture of each place as an integrated system in and of itself.

In order to understand the larger cultural contexts of parent–preschool relationships, we begin by describing national policies regarding early childhood care and development, elaborated with examples as described by coauthors of this paper. We then turn to a closer look at data from the International Study of Parents, Children, and Schools. Patterns of enrollment of 3- and 4-year-old children in preschool or daycare are described as important aspects of their physical and social settings (the first component of the developmental niche). Parents' contacts and involvement with their schools are then described, as an aspect of the customs and practices of

care (the second component of the niche). The third component—parental ethnotheories—is represented by an analysis of parents' own stories about their experiences with their children's preschools, and relatedly the parenting practices that they see as helping their child to be successful in school. The similarities and differences among the four cultural places offer new perspectives on what is most helpful for young children's successful development, as we discuss in the final part of the paper.

Preschool in Four Cultures: The Wider Context of Parent–Preschool Relationships

Policies and programs, as we have suggested elsewhere (Harkness et al., 2013), are "cultural products" that both reflect and influence shared ideas among a population. This is evident in the following brief overviews of early childhood education and care in the four countries in the present report. Much like Bronfenbrenner's (1988) "macrosystem," national policies, programs, and norms for early childhood development form the wider cultural context within which the developmental niches of individual children are constructed.

Italy. In Italy, almost all children begin preschool at age 3 and continue through age 5. Parents can choose between private and public schools, even though they do not differ greatly in organization and quality. Most middle-class children are driven to and from school by their parents. Children can arrive at school as early as 8:00 AM, but organized activities begin at 9:00 AM. The school day ends at 3:30 PM, although parents can pick up their children until 4:00 PM. Children at school follow scheduled activities such as play, expressive activities, or motor activities until 11:30 AM to 12:00 PM, when they have lunch. After lunch, all the children less than 5 years old have a nap together. The 5 year olds do not nap at school; instead, during the napping period they draw, listen to a story, or watch a cartoon. At 2:00 PM, formal activities for all children begin again and continue until snack time at 3:00 PM, before the children go home. The main objective of the last year of preschool is to slowly accompany the child in the transition to elementary school, making this delicate and learning-based phase less difficult; therefore, greater emphasis is placed on respect for rules (such as raising one's hand before speaking and remaining seated during structured activities). Targeted pregraphical exercises may be introduced for the acquisition of writing, as well as phonological exercises for starting to learn the alphabet, and exercises on sets and manipulation of small numerical quantities to support the development of numerical learning. In recent years, special preschools for children younger than 4 years have been set up.

Spain. The Spanish public education system offers free preschool education (*educacion infantil*) for children from 3 to 6 years of age. For both preschool and primary school, the standard school day runs from 9:00 AM to 2:00 PM, although some schools offer more varied school days while

keeping the same total number of hours. Schools are generally located within walking distance for families, so parents (or grandparents) usually walk their children to and from school; parents who work outside the home typically drive their children to school on the way to their own jobs. At a preschool in the outskirts of Seville that may serve as one example (although a relatively advanced one), the school day begins with circle time with all the children sitting on the floor as the teacher leads activities such as telling about something that happened at home, or the weather—if its sunny or raining—and especially what they are going to do at school that day. Circle time lasts from 15 minutes to half an hour; then the children go to their assigned tables, each with its own activity focused on one of the five areas: knowing themselves, knowing the environment, language, psychomotor activities, and a foreign language. Children move among activity tables completing three activities. At 11:30 AM, they go out to the patio to play and to eat a snack that parents have sent with them. At 12:15 PM, the children return to the classroom to finish the last two activities of the five prescribed. Then at 1:45 PM it is time to pick up their belongings and go to the door of the school, where a family member will pick them up by 2:00 PM.

The Netherlands. In the area of the Netherlands where the present study was carried out, 3-year-old children typically attended "educational playgroups" for one or two 3-hour morning sessions a week, in order to "get used to being in a group." More recently, the Dutch government has developed preschool programs designed specifically to help low-income and immigrant children acquire the needed skills for starting school (Leseman et al., 2017).

The starting age for primary school is on the child's fourth birthday (regardless of time of year), with the first 2 years or so spent in a mixed-age kindergarten class. The school day typically lasts from 8:30 to 11:30 AM, followed by a 1-hour lunch break during which almost all children in our Dutch sample went home (currently, most children remain in school for lunch), returning at 12:30 PM to complete the school day at 3:30 PM. Weather permitting, children are typically ferried to and from school by bicycle, either on the back of a parent's bike or riding their own. The ride is short, as schools are located close to home in the densely settled towns where the research was carried out. Activities in Dutch preschools generally start with a group circle time in which all the children are welcomed to class and stories and songs are shared, followed by small group pretend play or constructive play, and then morning snack time. Educational activities include language support through reading stories, nursery rhymes, and singing songs, and early numeracy activities (e.g., starting to count, learning spatial language and concepts such as weight and size). A class day also always includes sessions of free, unstructured play, in which the children can choose where and with what they will play. In the second-year class (typically for 5-year-old children), there is some focus on learning skills,

such as being able to start and finish a small task and learning how to hold a pen or pencil, as a preparation for primary school. In all preschools, children always go outside for a short morning or afternoon break and enjoy free play including running, cycling, and playing games in the school grounds.

The United States. In contrast to Western European countries, early childhood education is not regulated by government policies in the United States at any level (other than health and safety matters). The closest comparable guidelines are provided by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (Cochran, 2011). Thus U.S. 3- and 4-year-old children are in a variety of care arrangements, including at home with family or a babysitter, or in family or center-based daycare or preschool. A daycare center in Connecticut, observed by the research team, follows a fairly typical group schedule. The day runs from about 7:00 AM to 3:00 PM, but varies depending on parents' schedules. Around 7–7:30 AM is breakfast and/or free-play, after which the day officially begins with "circle time," when children participate in a group activity (such as shouting one's name) and the teacher introduces the theme of the day, perhaps an upcoming holiday. Structured activities follow, for example, reading a book to the children, followed by snack time (when the week's child "helpers" set the table), then going outside to the enclosed playground for free play, for about 45–60 minutes. After the children come back in, teachers help them wash up for lunch. Following lunch, which is taken at small tables, nap time of about 1 hour begins. Low cots are brought out and placed fairly close together around the room, the lights are turned off, and some soft music is played. Actual napping is optional. If children are not tired they can choose a book or something else quiet to do. After nap time, children engage in their choice of different "stations" around the room, dedicated to different activities (such as a sensory or "water" table, coloring, blocks, and pretend play such as a mini-kitchen). For children who need to practice certain school-related skills, teachers guide them in more directed but short activities such as writing their name. Following an afternoon snack, again taken at the small tables, the rest of the day is open to free play at the different stations. Around 3:00 PM parents begin picking up their children. Those who remain either continue free play or may be taken to an area (such as a small "gym" in the center) for some physical activity.

In summary, preschool or daycare in these four countries is similar in some ways, with daily schedules that include indoor and outdoor play, specified times for eating, and (in the centers where children stay for longer hours), designated sleep or rest times. Looking more closely at the descriptions above, however, one might surmise that policies and programs in the different countries encourage the development of academic skills to varying degrees—differences that become increasingly evident when one considers parents' own perspectives, as explored below. Relatedly, parents' participation in their children's preschools differed considerably across the cultural research sites.

Methods

Samples. The ISPCS sought to study cultural variability within the larger context of Western middle-class postindustrial societies, a relatively neglected perspective in cross-cultural research that frequently seems to assume a high level of homogeneity within this larger category. The sites were thus chosen to capture both possible north–south and east–west contrasts within Europe, with an additional dimension represented by samples in the United States and Australia (both products of the British diaspora). The samples for the ISPCS consisted of sixty families in each cultural site, with target children divided equally into five age-cohorts: 6 months, 18 months, 3 years, 4.5 years, and 7–8 years of age, each balanced for sex and birth order (first born vs. later born). These age points were chosen to cover several developmental niches from infancy to toddlerhood, preschool, kindergarten, and primary school. For present purposes, we focus on the cohorts of target children aged 3 and 4–5 years. The samples were located in particular communities within their respective countries, and this should be kept in mind when interpreting the results. In addition, the data were collected mostly in the mid-1990s, and thus represent arrangements that may have since changed in some regards, although their general outlines have been consistent, as described in the preceding section on preschools in each country.

Two of the community samples were primarily urban—the ones in Seville, Spain, and Padua, Italy. The Spanish sample was recruited through schools and social service and health networks; the Italian families were recruited through their membership in a parents' civic organization. The Dutch sample was based in the town of "Bloemenheim," a periurban community in the densely settled area near Leiden and Amsterdam, where participating families were recruited through a school-based network and snowball sampling. Two U.S. subsamples ranged from suburban to rural, and were located in central Pennsylvania and northeast Connecticut; families were recruited through advertising as well as school and community networks. Because the results in the two American locations are quite similar, we have combined them into a single sample for present purposes.

Participant recruitment procedures and measures for the protection of human subjects followed guidelines set by the project's home university in each country, and always involved informed consent. Selection criteria for participants in each site were developed in order to enhance the focus on cultural models and their expression in practices of care in each society, relatively unburdened by unusual circumstances that might otherwise affect them. The criteria included that both parents were resident in the household, were native-born and native speakers of the local language, that one or both parents were employed, and that there were no major health problems in the family. Other characteristics (e.g., maternal employment

Table 6.1. Sample Characteristics

	ES (n = 23)	*IT (n = 21)*	*NL (n = 23)*	*US (n = 33)*
Child gender (% male)	54%	48%	46%	65%
Child birth order (% first born)	61%	62%	45%	53%
Number of children in family M (range)	1.8 (1–5)	1.7 (1–3)	2.5 (1–4)	2.4 (1–9)
Mother age (years) M and (range)	33.5 (25–46)	36.5 (28–44)	32.9 (26–41)	35.4 (29–39)
Father age (years) M and (range)	35.7 (23–53)	37.9 (29–51)	35.1 (29–43)	37.6 (28–54)
Mother education (years) M and (range)	12.0 (6–17)	16.2 (13–23)	13.5 (10–18)	15.7 (10–21)
Father education (Years) M and (range)	11.9 (6–17)	16.7 (8–23)	15.0 (10–20)	15.8 (10–21)
Mother employed (%)	46%	78%	33%	62%
Mother hours/week if employed M and (range)	33.3 (15–45)	26.3 (18–36)	16.3 (2–32)	27.1 (5–50)
Father occupational status*	4.8 (1–9)	7.0 (4–9)	6.0 (2–9)	7.2 (2–9)

*Occupation status coded as: 1 = farm/service labor, 2 = unskilled worker, 3 = semi-skilled, 4 = craftsman, small business owner, 5 = clerical, sales, business owner, 6 = technician, semi-professional, 7 = manager, minor professional, 8 = administrator, medium-size business owner, 9 = major professional, doctor, professor.

or use of nonparental childcare) were left to vary freely as typical of the larger cultural context.

Characteristics of the samples, shown in Table 6.1, indicate both similarities and differences in the demographic backgrounds of the parents and children in Spain (ES), Italy (IT), the Netherlands (NL), and the United States (US). For the children, small differences in gender and birth order are not statistically significant. Mothers' ages averaged from early to mid-thirties (site differences are marginally significant), with fathers averaging a year or two older (site differences not significant). Parental education, maternal employment, occupational status, and family size all show statistically significant differences: Mothers' and especially fathers' education were lowest in the Spanish sample, although they ranged up to postgraduate studies; likewise, while Spanish fathers averaged the lowest occupational status, they ranged up to the highest level seen in the other samples. The Dutch mothers were distinctive in working fewer hours per week than did mothers in the other samples, and fewer of them were employed outside the home (this situation has since changed toward fuller employment of mothers, although many still work part time). These sample differences reflect both minor variations in our recruitment strategies in each site, as well as real population differences typical of their wider societies. Nevertheless, the internal consistency of patterns among families within each of

the samples suggests that our findings adequately reflect normative patterns in the places and time of the research. A major difference in samples, not shown in Table 6.1, is that the data on 3 year olds in the Netherlands was collected in an earlier period of fieldwork (1992) and not replicated in the work 4 years later that included the other cultural samples. The Dutch data on the 4–5 year olds were collected in 1995–1996, revisiting the families of infants and toddlers we studied in 1992.

Measures, Procedures, and Analysis

For the present paper, we draw from two kinds of data from the ISPCS: parent diaries and parent interviews. Parents filled out a week of daily diaries, with time allocation of children's daily activities, including attendance at preschool. The diary forms also included aspects of parents' own daily activities, including parent–preschool contact and participation. These activities were tabulated across the school days for each family, and then summarized for each cultural site.

Interviews, usually held with both parents together in their homes, were semistructured, following a protocol developed collaboratively at the start of the project. Questions were designed to explore parental ethnotheories about children's development and about themselves as parents, and how they expressed these ideas through children's daily routines and family activities. Given our particular focus on the transition from home to school, the interview protocol included questions about parents' perceptions of their child's preschool, their own involvement with the school, and ideas about themselves as teachers and how they could help their child be successful in school. Interviews were carried out in the native language of each site, and the audio-taped recordings were transcribed in the original language. Interviewers in the Netherlands were Harkness and Super, with help from local student research assistants. The U.S. interviews were carried out by Harkness, Super, and their graduate students. The Italian and Spanish interviews were carried out by graduate students at, respectively, the University of Padua under the direction of Professor Giovanna Axia, and the University of Seville, under the leadership of Professor Jesus Palacios. Two of the lead graduate student investigators, Sabrina Bonichini (Italy) and Moises Rios Bermudez (Spain), went on to join their faculties and have remained active in the project, as indicated by their coauthorship of this paper. Interviews lasted from about 45 minutes to an hour and a half.

Codes representing themes and practices for each topic were derived iteratively through close reading of the interviews, and cross-checked across sites to make sure that the final list of codes was adequate for each place. This process involved both local researchers (specifically, Bonichini in Italy, Rios in Spain, van Schaik in the Netherlands, and Mavridis in the United States), with some coding and general oversight by the first author (Harkness). Coding was done using Dedoose (2020), a software program for

Table 6.2. Preschool Attendance

	Days in School Mean	*Range*	*Daily Hours in School Mean*	*Range*
ES				
3 years ($n = 8$)	2.6	0–5	4.5	3.3–7.1
4 years ($n = 15$)	4.2	2–5	5.3	3.7–8.5
IT				
3 years ($n = 10$)	4.3	1–5	5.6	1.8–7.4
4 years ($n = 13$)	3.8	1–5	7.2	4.1–8.3
NL				
3 years ($n = 11$)	1.4	0–3	2.9	2.6–3.0
4 years ($n = 12$)	4.9	3–5	4.7	4.1–5.5
US				
3 years ($n = 10$)	1.1	0–5	3.6	1.0–9.0
4 years ($n = 17$)	3.4	0–5	5.1	3.3–10.1

mixed-methods research. We report here the percent of parents in each site reporting each code, rather than the relative salience of particular codes within any given interview. The patterns of response in each cultural site are then illustrated with excerpts of responses in the parents' own words.

Results

Patterns of Preschool Attendance: The Physical and Social Settings of Children's Daily Lives. The physical and social settings of children's lives, the first component of the developmental niche, include where children spend their time, with whom, and involved in what activities. These basic parameters of daily life create both opportunities for and limits to children's learning and development. Patterns of preschool attendance among the children in our cultural samples are consistent with the larger trends described above for each country.

As shown in Table 6.2, the Italian children at both 3 and 4 years of age attended preschool about four of the five weekdays, with attendance by the younger group actually a bit higher, following the general trend for all children in Italy to begin preschool at age 3. Also similar to the general description of Italian preschool attendance, the amount of time these children were in school per day varied from under 2 hours to over 8, as some parents took advantage of the extended day options while others chose to bring their children home after the core preschool curriculum was completed for the day. The Spanish publicly funded preschools do not require attendance, but they were used frequently by the Spanish parents in our study, especially for the 4 year olds who attended school almost every day. The Dutch pattern of preschool attendance for the 3 year olds reflects the "play group" option that was generally available for that age at the time those data were collected (1992). As described above, these playgroups generally met twice a week

Table 6.3. Mothers' and Fathers' Participation and Contact: Average Percent of Days Activity Reported

Cultural Site	*ES*		*IT*		*NL*		*US*	
Parent	*Mo*	*Fa*	*Mo*	*Fa*	*Mo*	*Fa*	*Mo*	*Fa*
Talk with child's teacher	47	5	21	4	45	1	21	12
Talk with other class parent	42	0	31	7	65	2	20	11
Talk with child re school day	68	68	49	17	77	50	35	29

for 3 hours of guided activities, and attendance was voluntary. The Dutch 3 year olds in our sample averaged just over one school day per week in 1992, while the 4–5 year olds in 1992 and 1995–1996, who were all registered in local primary schools, averaged just under five days a week for approximately 5 hours. Finally, preschool attendance for the U.S. children in our study was comparatively lower than for all the other samples, but the U.S. children attended preschool (or in some cases daycare) for up to 10-hour days.

In summary, the 3- and 4-year-old children in our study were generally involved in some kind of preschool or daycare, even though for differing numbers and lengths of days. Children's patterns of attendance set the parameters for parent engagement, both at preschool and at home. In the following section, we draw again from the parental diaries where parents reported daily occurrences of several kinds of engagement, including talking with their child's teacher and with other parents in the class, talking with their child about the child's day at preschool, helping the child with preschool projects, and checking on the child's progress.

Basic Indicators of Parents' Engagement With Preschool

As any parent who has had the experience of dropping off or picking up their child at preschool knows, these moments at the beginning and end of the day can entail a variety of communicative events, ranging from a simple wave of the hand or "See you tomorrow" to the teacher, to more extended conversations with teachers and other parents. The preschools in our four samples varied in the contexts they provided for these inherently significant opportunities for engagement, while the child's frequency of attendance also placed upper limits on parents' possible weekly contacts with the school.

Based on the parent diaries, we calculated the percentage of the school week (5 days) that both mothers and fathers reported engaging in these interactions with teachers and other parents, as well as how often they talked with their child about the day at school. As shown in Table 6.3, the Spanish and Dutch mothers reported talking with their child's preschool teacher most frequently, while the Italian and U.S. mothers both registered

these communications at about half the rate (or the equivalent of 1 day a week).

The Dutch mothers reported talking with other parents far more frequently than did mothers in any of the other samples—the equivalent of an average of 3 days in the recorded week. The schools generally presented a welcoming format, with entry areas presenting interesting displays for both parents and younger siblings to enjoy. At the time of our research, parents of 4-year olds were in and out of their children's preschool classrooms four times a day, for delivery and pick up in the morning and then, after returning from lunch at home, for the afternoon session. The most common mode of transportation to school was by bicycle, with sometimes both the preschooler and a younger sibling perched on seats in front of and behind the rider. Given this arrangement, it was not surprising to see parents chatting together by the school entry or even in the classrooms. The Spanish and Italian mothers were slightly lower in this measure of conversing with other parents, while the U.S. mothers averaged about 1 day a week.

Rates of talking with their child about the school day were relatively high overall, with the highest for the Dutch mothers, followed by the Spanish mothers, the Italian mothers following at about 2 or 3 days per week, and the U.S. mother reporting the lowest rate of talking with their child about the school (or daycare) day.

In general, fathers rarely talked with their child's teacher or with other parents—presumably because mothers were mainly the ones who took care of their child's transportation to and from preschool. On the other hand, fathers in all samples were much more frequently engaged in talking with their child about the day at preschool, especially in the Spanish and Dutch samples.

In summary, rates of children's attendance at preschool or daycare in our samples determined the extent of some basic aspects of their parents' contacts with school, including conversations with their children's teachers, with other parents at school, and with their own children about their day at school. Beyond these basic indicators, the nature of parent–preschool relationships in each cultural place is captured by what the parents told us in interviews about their involvement in their children's schools, what they thought was most important for preschools, and how they helped their children to be successful in school, both now and in the future.

Parents' Communications and Involvement in School-Related Activities

As shown in Table 6.4, the parents in our study described a variety of contacts and involvement in their child's preschools, including talking with teachers informally and by appointment, participating in school events and helping with activities, and helping with leadership or management of the

Table 6.4. Parents' Roles in Relation to Child's Preschool/Daycare (Percent Parents Mentioning)

Cultural Site	*ES*	*IT*	*NL*	*US*
n	23	31	23	33
Participate in school events	60	44	39	35
Help with activities/events	20	39	43	50
Parent takes a leadership role in school	20	44	13	15
Greets, talks with teacher	100	56	100	40
Parent says collaboration is important	0	17	18	20
Parent desires more involvement	40	0	9	15

school. Some parents expressed the view that collaboration was important, while a few wished they could be more involved.

Parents in all samples reported participating in school events, but the Spanish parents were highest in talking about this activity. Many of these events were related to festivals in the Spanish Catholic church. As one mother reported, "I have gone for the celebration of the Kings, now for the carnival, for the excursions they have," adding, "Every time there is an event, I go." All the Spanish parents reported greeting their child's teacher frequently, and many stopped to check informally on their child's day in school. As described by these parents, teachers were often standing by the door of the classroom at both the beginning and end of the day in order to greet the children and their parents, and many parents took advantage of their availability for a brief chat about their child. One mother described how she always "tries to get something from her [the teacher]" at these moments; her husband, who usually picked their daughter up at the end of the day, reported, "When I go to pick my daughter up, I always ask the teacher whether she ate well and behaved well, and she always responds that she ate well and behaved well." In addition to talking frequently with their child's teacher, the Spanish parents described being involved as helpers and audience members for special festivals or celebrations. One father recounted requesting to change his work shift so that he could film an upcoming performance of Christmas carols by the children, as he had done for other events. A mother described being very involved in the school's parent–teacher organization, including managing the school's academic materials on a daily basis, concluding with pride that "That's why I say I'm not a housewife, if I don't have the beds made nothing happens, I do them later." In contrast, these parents thought that actually helping in the classroom was not a good idea—as one mother of a 4 year old explained, "The child has to be free in this regard, to be himself." Other Spanish parents spoke wistfully of wishing they could be more involved, but opportunities were not there. Parents also had regular scheduled meetings with their child's teacher, when, as one mother recounted, the teacher would show them "Everything,

all the work, all the activities, all the material, her psychomotor development, if she plays, if she doesn't play, right?"

The Italian parents also talked about participating in events at their child's preschool, as part of a larger commitment to be involved for the benefit of the child. As one mother said, "We have daily contacts with teachers, each time we pick her up … then we go to meetings and parties, but these are twice a year … and then we try to participate when the school asks parents to collaborate … also because we are aware that if there is no home-school collaboration, school is less effective … furthermore, children seem to be very happy to see us involved." The Italian parents were highest in talking about taking leadership roles at their child's preschool, perhaps reflecting in part the fact that they were recruited through a parent–teacher association. As one mother said, "Yes, we are pretty involved in school. I am part of the management committee … we always try to participate." Others made an effort to participate actively despite the demands of their workdays: As one parent explained, "We try to participate in school activities, but it's not always easy due to our working schedule … In any case, we are always present at school parties. This year we haven't been able to attend all parent meetings, but in general we try to participate."

One Dutch mother commented when asked about her contacts with her child's teacher, "No, no special meeting. With the preschoolers the teachers are on the school grounds at 11.30, so you can address them then. And also when you take your child to school the teacher is already in the classroom, so you can talk with her." Relatedly, the Dutch parents expressed an easy relationship with the school through attending and helping with special activities or events. As one father commented, "If the children are taken to the library one day. Or if they're going out, then I help – or with other things like cleaning up the toys. Then my wife or I go, one of us." His wife added, "Making pancakes." The father concluded modestly, "So, we're not unusually much at school, but we have a good contact."

The U.S. parents also talked about participating in school events such as performances by the children, but they mentioned helping with activities even more frequently. When asked how much contact with the preschool she thought would be helpful for her child, one mother who was a teacher herself responded, "I think it should be, a positive helpful, kind of if you need me to bake cupcakes, if you need me for field trips I'm available, you know for the whole entire classroom." A father added his perspective on the importance of building an individual relationship with the child's teacher as creating an advantage for his child: "Mostly with, again, the teacher of your kids. Um … to have a rapport with them and be in cooperation with them, so that, you know, the kid is associated with some people that the teacher knows. You know, it's good to know them. I think that teachers look at kids very, very differently if they know some of the parents' concerns or aspirations for the kids. It makes a big difference in the way that the teacher treats the kid." Having parents involved could also benefit children

Table 6.5. Preschool/Daycare Qualities Considered in Choosing (Percent Parents Mentioning)

Cultural Site:	*ES*	*IT*	*NL*	*US*
n	23	31	23	33
School promotes physical development/skills	14	24	9	3
School promotes social development	33	76	27	34
School has diverse students	24	0	18	10
Quality of facilities and resources	71	0	5	41
Quality of staff in general	62	29	36	28
Convenient location	48	18	36	28
Teacher has good moral qualities	29	0	41	0
Teacher promotes self-confidence	5	6	10	7
Teacher has good relationship with children	67	47	18	31
Teacher has good relationship with parents	10	6	18	10
Teacher promotes learning	28	35	23	17
Teacher encourages creative learning	14	29	32	24

in general, as one mother expressed: "I think it is important to be involved with the kid's school. I think you should be involved … [What] I tried to do is … run … help run all the parties, and go on the Walk-A-Thon and do all that. I think it's important. And I think the kids feel better having their parents involved in things. So, I'm going to try to do as much as I can with them."

Preschool Qualities Considered Most Important by Parents

Parents' ideas about their choice of preschool for their children, together with descriptions of what qualities they value most, are important aspects of parental ethnotheories of young children's education and development. In addition to matters of convenience, the parents in our study expressed a variety of ideas about what they found most important in their children's preschools. As shown in Table 6.5, more of the Spanish parents mentioned location as a factor in their choice of school, but this point was also mentioned by over one third of the Dutch parents, with the U.S. parents not far behind and almost one fifth of the Italian parents mentioning this practical aspect of choosing a preschool. Beyond that, distinctive profiles are evident for each of the samples.

The Spanish parents overwhelmingly mentioned the quality of the preschool facility itself as an important determinant of their choice. Likewise, almost two thirds of the Spanish parents mentioned the quality of the staff in general, and even the level of the other children at the school, as important considerations. One Spanish father explained that they had chosen a public school for their child because his wife was a teacher of public education; but that (fortunately) the school in their area was at a "high level," unlike some other areas in the city. Asked about what qualities

he thought were most important in a school, this father continued: "I think that the students, the children he's going to relate to, because in principle I imagine that the teachers will all be the same, they all have the same training, there will be good ones and bad ones, right?" Other Spanish parents indicated a more differentiated view of teachers, but generally agreed that teachers should be patient, dedicated to their work, and care about the children as individuals. As one mother said, the most important qualities of a good teacher were "having a vocation as a teacher – the modern one, not the old one – who loves the children, who enjoys what she is doing." In addition, the Spanish parents—in contrast to parents in the other samples—also emphasized the importance of the teacher's moral qualities and ability to instill "discipline" and "respect for others" in the children, but without being punitive.

The Italian parents in our study focused on children's social development as by far the most important aspect of a good preschool, with over three quarters of the Italian parents mentioning this theme—two or three times more than parents in the other samples. As one Italian mother expressed: "Preschool is important because children become more autonomous. They start to learn the first social rules, and … well, they become more self-confident. I've seen the difference at home while we eat, his behavior has changed a lot." Similarly, another parent stated, "Preschool is very important, because they spend time with other children … they learn to respect rules, and how to deal with their peers. They learn how to relate to others, to speak, to express themselves … and they also learn how to defend themselves!"

In addition to promoting autonomy and learning to get along with peers, however, these parents were unique among our samples in their emphasis on close emotional relationships, especially with the teachers. As one mother expressed: "School is as important as the family. It's a social moment, his 'collective' moment. For example, he attends a private preschool because it was the closest to home … I actually would have preferred a public one, but we made this choice because we want him to connect with the children living in our neighborhood … And most of all, he loves his teachers, which is the most important thing." Another parent echoed the same sentiment: "I think that teachers have a really fundamental role, also because children spend 8 hours a day at preschool … so as parents maybe we care too much about things like a library or the organization of laboratories at school, whereas other things are more important … the affective quality of the teacher-child relationship is the most important thing."

Although the Dutch 4 year olds were attending full-day sessions of what would become primary school after 2 years, the Dutch parents also expressed sentiments concerning the centrality of social development in the school context—but less so than others and with a somewhat different flavor. As one mother explained, "What I really like is the combined age groups, that the older kids can help the smaller ones. Ya, working together

on projects, I really like that." Another mother commented that she thought the most important thing her daughter was learning in school was to wait her turn to talk: "That she can't always talk whenever it occurs to her, and that she needs to learn to pay attention to whether someone else is busy. I'm noticing that that's going a lot better." A father summarized the agenda for his 4-year-old son: "What he's learning now is social things – singing and playing games, guitar, that sort of thing, a little computing. Ya, learning begins for him next year. Then writing and counting and that sort of thing. Now it's just playing. But I think it's important that a child can play, so it's going well."

When describing their children's preschools or daycare centers, the U.S. parents in our study often highlighted their educational components, including the encouragement of creative learning. One mother described the activities in her child's preschool that was specifically oriented to the arts: "The school encourages free thinking. They have movement classes, advanced classes. They have different activities every day, art classes. They even talked about foreign languages … they'll have like a France week, and they'll teach them different words in French, but not necessarily make them remember it, but they just refer to different things so, they introduce them to a large variety of different stimulus." She added, "They are also requiring the children to do performances. They have recitals twice a year, which I thought was nice." Preparing their child for upcoming lessons was exciting to the parents of another 3 year old, who appreciated that their child's preschool sent home lesson plans for the following week, "so that you can talk to your child about what's going on in school before they go to school." As the mother explained, "I think that's important because they have something that they know they are looking forward to." Aside from academic preparation, though, promoting social development was also important for the American parents. As one mother said, she liked her son's preschool because "It's, you know, based on the activities they do – they don't push academics, which is good. He's there to learn how to play and cooperate with other children, and they sing songs, and you know, they do all the cute little things that three-year-olds should do." Finally, the American parents expressed similar ideas to those of the other samples about the importance of teachers' really caring about the children in their classrooms.

Parents and Preschoolers at Home: To Teach or Not to Teach (or Something in Between)?

In the interviews, we asked parents whether they thought parents should teach their children academic skills that they would be learning at school. As shown in Table 6.6, the patterns of response varied sharply between the American parents and parents in the three European samples, with the U.S. parents overwhelmingly responding that parents should teach their children academically. For the most part, the U.S. parents saw themselves as

Table 6.6. Parents' Beliefs About Teaching School-Related Skills in the Preschool Years (Percent Parents Mentioning)

Cultural Site	*Should Teach*	*Should Not Teach*	*Teach If Child Asks*
ES	20	60	20
IT	6	31	63
NL	0	15	85
US	69	15	14

essential partners in teaching. The father of one couple spoke of their 4-year old son: "If he's not being challenged in school, it's our job as parents to notice that, and to go in and say, 'He's not being challenged.'" The mother suggested another response, emphasizing the parents' own role: "Or, we ourselves, can pick up the slack and do stuff, like take them to museums, bring home things that are interesting, and do family outings … that kind of thing … That's our job, it's not the school's job." When asked about whether parents should help their child with academic learning, a father (who was a teacher himself) was emphatic: "Without a doubt, the parents that are involved in their education … those are the kids that are doing well academically. And, you know, I definitely think that's important – there should be teaching along with the teacher."

At the other end of the spectrum, a similar proportion of Spanish parents said they should *not* teach their children. As one mother explained, "I think that is the job of teachers who have studied for this [teaching]. The teachers don't know how to do my job, and I shouldn't want to do theirs."

The majority of Italian parents took a different approach, saying that they should teach the child only at the child's request. One mother of a 3 year old put it succinctly: "Parents should not teach their children before they start primary school, first of all because the kids have an entire life to study, so it's not worth it." She continued, "It will happen only if he asks for it. I never insist, also because I think that teachers are much more trained than parents, they know when children are ready to learn certain things … I strongly believe that a specific preparation is needed to follow kids properly according to their developmental stage, so parents should avoid interfering because maybe they provide different explanations for things, and children get confused." An Italian mother of a 4 year old elaborated, drawing a contrast with her perception of U.S. ideas about parenting: "We teach him sometimes, but in a 'soft' way, and only if he asks for it. For example, I show him things, explain, but I do not insist, because children have their own maturation rhythms … yes, not like the Americans who want their children to grow up becoming little geniuses … I prefer to respect his developmental timing, he needs a time to play, because at primary school things get much more demanding. If he learns now, then it's definitely through play."

Table 6.7. Parents' Ideas About Helping Child Succeed in School (Percent Parents Mentioning)

Cultural Site:	*ES*	*IT*	*NL*	*US*
n	23	31	23	33
Reading/story-telling	0	18	48	55
Encourage drawing, etc.	29	6	38	28
Provide resources	7	0	43	45
Help with social development	29	0	15	24
Learn through play	29	18	86	24
Love, stability	7	18	52	14
Ask child about the day in school	14	0	48	7
Model academic skills	0	6	10	24
Teach self-discipline/work ethic	7	6	24	45
Help with or check homework	50	53	14	38

Even more strongly than the Italian parents, the great majority of Dutch parents in our study were of the opinion that although parents should not, in general, teach their children school-related skills ahead of the school curriculum, they should respond if the child showed a particular interest or desire. Parents warned against teaching the child material that would later be covered in school, lest the child be bored and not fit in well with other children in the class. Teaching in response to the child's own interests, on the other hand, would be alright if done through play. As one father recounted, "I have some educational children's games on the computer. Ya, things that he's good at, drawing and playing around, playing with clay. I don't know … but it's not with an eye to the future or his career." Another father commented on the approach to learning taken both at preschool and at home: "So, I don't think she has to learn anything. As long as she's doing things she enjoys … she's only five." Similarly, a mother expressed disapproval of parents who were requiring their child to learn at home using an educational toy. Summing up the views of many of these parents, one mother said, "No, I really didn't want to be so focused on high achievement during the preschool years, I'm not in favor of that. I mean, I always say that I just hope they'll be average, in relation to school and also socially. As far as I'm concerned, they don't have to be eggheads – as long as they don't get left behind that's enough for me."

Parents and Preschoolers at Home: How to Help

Aside from teaching (or not) academic skills at home, we asked parents how they thought parents could help their child succeed in school. As shown in table 6.7, the Spanish parents frequently mentioned helping with social development; for some, this began with helping the child feel loved and valued—as one parent summarized, "Play, relationships with other

children, and love." Another parent emphasized, "The parents are [emotional] pillars. If they don't pay attention to the child, it will make a big difference—the child will fall behind." When asked about parents as teachers, one mother of a 4 year old recounted an educational moment, but with an essential emotional basis: "I sit down to study with her, to teach her to write her name – before, she didn't know how to write it but now she does. And furthermore, she enjoys having her mother with her, and I enjoy having my daughter with me while we both do something positive." An important part of social development, according to many of these Spanish parents, was learning to respect each other, their teacher, and their parents. Children should also learn to be affectionate with each other, sharing, and not getting into fights. As distinct from actually teaching, half the Spanish parents thought it was important for them to help with or review any small assignments sent home for the child to complete.

Similar to their ideas about preschool as a context for social and emotional development, the Italian parents in our study emphasized the importance of play as a medium of learning at home also. Interacting through reading or story telling was also mentioned by the Italian parents; more generally, they saw providing love and stability as a primary way of helping their child succeed. Like the Spanish, half of the Italian parents found helping with or reviewing "homework" to be an appropriate function for parents to undertake, supporting but not supplanting the teacher's role.

The Dutch parents in our study were most emphatic about play as the primary way home life can contribute to success in preschool. They also spoke of the importance of a warm, loving relationship in which school was often a topic of conversation. Reading or story telling was mentioned by almost half of these parents, and encouragement for creative activities such as drawing was emphasized more than in any other sample. Unlike the other European samples, though, the Dutch parents did not see involvement with any homework as so relevant for them.

As indicated by their responses to the question of whether parents should teach school-related skills at home, the U.S. parents in our sample projected an image of themselves as active educational partners with teachers in their children's education. One mother and her husband fulfilled the partnering role by finding ways to translate lessons from school to the context of home. The mother explained that it was "sometimes learning by example … they learn measurements in this preschool, and they say that one of the good … things that you can do with them at home is bake with them and have them help you measure out a half a cup. So, I think that when you work along with what they are doing in school, it really does help though." The U.S. parents also sought to capitalize on their children's own interests by providing resources; as one mother said, "When they show an initiative, I think we do glob onto it and go in that direction and, like, 'Do you want to get some books on dragons? I noticed that you were talking about dragons. Do you want to get some books?' Or, 'Do you want to

listen to this tape?' Or we'll get a movie, that kind of thing." While these parents believed in helping the child along academically, they were similar to the Spanish and Italian parents in setting limits to helping the child with school work; rather, the U.S. parents saw the challenges of schoolwork as an opportunity to foster self-discipline and a work ethic.

In summary, the patterns of parent–preschool communication and involvement in our four samples suggest distinctive but not entirely different cultural models. For the Spanish parents, preschool played an important role not only in their child's life but also in their own daily lives, including informal chats with the teacher and other parents, and participation in various annual celebrations—many based on the Catholic calendar. These parents valued the overall quality of the actual physical facility where the preschool was located, as well as the quality of the staff. The ideal qualities of a good teacher, they believed, included personal qualities such as patience and love for the children, as well as being educated in "modern" pedagogy and teaching good values. As for the parents' own roles as teachers, the great majority of the Spanish parents said they should not teach their children material that they would be learning in school, or at least not get ahead of what the teacher was introducing in class. Playing with their children, providing a loving home, and "being there twenty-four hours a day" were the key aspects of how parents should help their children succeed in school, and in life.

The Italian parents expressed somewhat similar ideas, with particular emphasis on the importance of a close emotional relationship between their child and the teacher as "the most important thing." In addition, many of them spoke of a close, collaborative relationship with their children's preschool, which they considered important in and of itself. Like the Spanish parents, the Italian parents also rejected the idea that parents should teach their child academics at home—unless the child took the initiative in asking. In that case, the Italian parents said that play was the best way for children to learn.

The Dutch parents' relationships with their children's preschool was depicted as open and relaxed, with no academic pressure coming from either school or home. Social development—learning to get along with other children in a group—was the primary goal of the two preschool years within the elementary schools, according to these parents. Like the Italian parents, the Dutch parents looked ahead to the primary school years as coming all too soon, when academic learning would no longer be optional.

The American parents in our study were distinctive in their patterns of communication and involvement with their children's preschools or daycare centers. These parents reported talking with their child's teacher, and especially with other parents, less frequently than did the European parents, and they also reported talking with their child about the day in school less often. Instead, the U.S. parents saw themselves as partners in teaching skills and

knowledge that their children would need for elementary school. For these parents, acting as partners with their child's preschool involved observing their child's emerging interests at home, and fostering them through relevant activities such as trips to libraries or museums. They made sure to give plenty of praise and encouragement, guiding their child with school lessons but being careful not to do too much "for" them. All these strategies were designed to build the child's love of learning and self-confidence to pursue his or her interests throughout life. For these parents, school was just around the corner, and they wanted to make sure that their children were ready.

Although the data reported here were collected almost 25 years ago, there is a striking consistency between the patterns we noticed and the messages that parents in these four countries currently receive from the wider culture, including media as well as advice from "experts" such as pediatricians or even their children's preschools. Like their earlier counterparts, Italian parents today are counseled not to pressure the child with preacademic training: an article in a popular parents magazine states that "It is not a task for parents to teach these things: if it is the child who asks for it, then you can direct him and help him satisfy his curiosity, but do not force him by buying him prewriting books and having him already do exercises. These are all things he will learn in school" (Anonymous, 2019). Instead of academic coaching, Italian psychologists quoted in the media portray starting elementary school as a very delicate step for children, because it is considered the school of "grown-ups," which must be dealt with sensitively. Parents are advised to support their children in this transition: "The most important thing is to convey to the child a sense of self-confidence, perhaps by telling him about our experience when we were young, and by telling him that he can do it."

In Spain, similar to our earlier findings, a website proffering parental guidance on "how to work for academic success from the first years" lists several themes that we heard earlier from parents (Anonymous, 2013). First—and most culturally distinctive—parents are advised to teach their children to be "respectful, both with other children and with school materials," adding that "In preschool, remind your child of school rules and the importance of following them." Other tips include letting the child take responsibility for her own school work, showing interest in the child's day at school and participating in the school. Last but not least, parents should make sure not to "over-saturate" the child with activities that leave no free time—"It is important for children to play."

In the Netherlands, a popular website for parents entitled "101 tips to help your young child at school" is prefaced by the statement, "Preschoolers may play a lot at school, but secretly they are also learning a lot through play … Perhaps the most important tip: See what your child likes and encourage him in that. Real learning is in principle what your child does at school – at home, relaxing is very important!" (Maud, 2017).

In the United States, in contrast, parents are flooded with warnings about the importance of "brain development" during the first 2 or 3 years of life, requiring intensive educational intervention before the child's chances of reaching her full potential are irretrievable lost (Engle-Smothers & Heim, 2009). Although a counternarrative has emerged in recent years (including books comparing other countries' parenting practices favorably to the pressured existence of American parents), expectations for children's academic knowledge and skills have risen precipitously to the point where, as one preschool teacher commented to us, "We're now teaching preschoolers what used to be taught in second grade." In line with this approach, one website starts with advice to "Review general curricula for preschool, including what to expect for each subject," and promises to help "find at-home activities to support learning in the classroom" (Ackerman, 2019).

Discussion and Conclusions: What Can We Learn From Each Other?

In this paper, we have explored the role of early childhood care and education—and especially the links between parents and their children's preschools or daycares—as they construct a major part of young children's developmental niches. Our study has obvious limitations—the actual samples are small, and the data were collected almost 25 years ago. On the positive side, however, our study has benefitted from the use of mixed methods, which provide convergent evidence for the general patterns we have identified in each cultural place. Furthermore, the composition of the research team, including local researchers who collected the data in each site, some of whom are coauthors of the present paper, assures that both "insider" and "outsider" perspectives are integrated into a single narrative.

Consideration of the similarities and difference among these four groups of parents may suggest some useful avenues for thinking about what preschool-aged children need most in order to develop into successful members of their own cultures. The children in all societies where our study was conducted were growing up in globally similar sociocultural environments where they will be expected to work in jobs requiring various levels and types of academic preparation, and to become responsible citizens of democratic societies. Thus, the contrast between the U.S. parents' focus on academic preparation for preschool children might lead American educators and parents to question whether, as a society, they may be in too much of a rush to educate their children in school skills at an early age.

In another regard, the present study points to a neglected gap in the literature—and indeed in public discourse—about the role of parent–preschool involvement as a key source of influence on the child's developmental niche. As we commented at the beginning of this paper, the few published studies of parent involvement in early childhood programs have

tended to focus exclusively on their effects on children's academic development. Through contact and participation in children's preschools, however, parents can learn and share ideas about parenting across several domains, as Edwards and her colleagues have shown (Edwards & Kutaka, 2015). Parents' communication and involvement in their children's preschools or daycare thus form a significant resource for the formation of parental ethnotheories of child development, with important implications for their own development as parents. Whether chatting with their child's teacher at the end of the day, or socializing with other parents by the preschool door, parents of preschool children are also forming social knowledge networks that can ameliorate the isolation that often comes with parenting young children in postindustrial societies. Those who design and implement preschool programs—as well as parents themselves—might do well to give more attention to this neglected opportunity.

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SARA HARKNESS is Professor of Human Development and Pediatrics, and Director of the Center for the Study of Culture, Health, and Human Development, at the University of Connecticut, U.S.A. Her research focuses on the cultural construction of parenting, especially parental ethnotheories and their influence on children's development in varied social contexts.

CHARLES M. SUPER is Professor of Human Development and Pediatrics, and Co-Director of the Center for the Study of Culture, Health, and Human Development, at the University of Connecticut, U.S.A. He is interested in cultural variation in early development, and advancing theoretical approaches – such as the Developmental Niche – to accommodate global findings and facilitate their application to programmatic interventions.

SABRINA BONICHINI is Associate Professor of Developmental Psychology at the University of Padua, Italy. Her research interests include cultural differences in parenting, assessment of development, and pediatric psychology.

MOISES RIOS BERMUDEZ is an Adjunct Professor in the Department of Developmental and Educational Psychology at the University of Seville, Spain. His research interests focus on cultural regulation of human development during infancy, childhood, and adolescence, and interventions with families and schools to promote positive development and mental health at the household and community levels.

CAROLINE MAVRIDIS is Assistant Research Professor of Human Development and Family Sciences, and Associate Director of the Center for the Study of Culture, Health, and Human Development, at the University of Connecticut, U.S.A. Her research focuses on the role of culture in parenting and maternal well-being, as well as the influence of organizational culture on the experiences of family service personnel.

SASKIA D.M. VAN SCHAIK is Assistant Professor in the Department of Pedagogic Sciences and Education at the Radboud University in Nijmegen, the Netherlands. She received her PhD in Pedagogical Sciences at Utrecht University and was a Fulbright Scholar at the University of Connecticut in 2020. She is interested in how the study of cultural diversity can help broaden and deepen existing knowledge of childhood development and learning.

ALEXANDRIA TOMKUNAS is a doctoral student in the Department of Human Development and Family Sciences at the University of Connecticut, U.S.A. Her research interests focus on social and emotional well-being and development in early and middle childhood, as well as school and community interventions.

JESÚS PALACIOS is Professor of Developmental and Educational Psychology at the University of Seville, Spain. His research interests focus on children and families, especially children developing in out-of-home contexts, and foster care and adoptive families.

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7

Parents' Concepts of the Successful School Child in Seven Western Cultures

Xin Feng, Sara Harkness, Charles M. Super, Barbara Welles, Moises Rios Bermudez, Sabrina Bonichini, Ughetta Moscardino, Piotr O. Zylicz

Abstract

Although children's school success is a parental goal in most cultures, there is wide cultural variation in the qualities that parents most wish their children to develop for that purpose. A questionnaire contained forty-one child qualities was administered to 757 parents in seven cultural communities in Australia, Italy,

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the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Sweden, and the United States. Exploratory factor analysis was conducted separately within each sample and results revealed both similarities and differences across the seven samples. The factor structures showed considerable similarity: four domains of characteristics (Cognitive Qualities, Social Qualities, Negative temperament, and Good Characters) were identified in each sample as strongly influencing children's success in school. However, parents differed across the seven cultural communities in the importance they attributed to these factors. The results also reveal some culturally unique patterns in parents' concepts of the successful schoolchild; the seven samples were differentiated by distinctive associations of individual qualities around the four common domains. These results offer new insights for incorporating perspectives from other cultures into our own concepts of what qualities are most important for children's success in school, and how educators can be cognizant of differing cultural perspectives represented by the families whose children are their students.

As the most important context for children's learning outside the home, school is a concern for parents around the world. Success in school is not only children's gateway to the future in most societies; it is also a place where children gain a sense of their own competence and form relationships with peers and adults beyond the family. A crucial task of parenting, thus, is to help children develop the personal qualities needed to succeed in school.

Although children's success in school is a transcultural parental goal, there is wide global variation in parents' cultural beliefs, or ethnotheories, about which qualities are most important for success in school—and beyond. These beliefs are in turn embedded in culturally shared ideas about the nature and development of intelligence and competence (LeVine, Miller, Richman, & LeVine, 1996; McGillicuddy-De Lisi & Subramanian, 1996). Further, parental ethnotheories constitute a key element in the developmental niche (Super & Harkness, 1986), where they often play a directive role in customary and emerging practices and in the daily settings for child life (Harkness & Super, 1996). Several authors have suggested that there is a general contrast between the mainstream American emphasis on cognitive competence, and a greater focus on social intelligence found in other cultures and some sub-cultures within the United States (Dasen, 1984; Okagaki & Sternberg, 1993; Serpell, 1993; Sternberg & Grigorenko, 2004.) Relatedly, studies in sub-Saharan African traditional cultures have found that social responsibility appears as a core attribute of "intelligence" (Harkness, Super, Barry, Zeitlin, & Long, 2009; Serpell, 1993). Research in Asian cultures has identified the theme of motivationa "heart and mind for wanting to learn"—as integral to the achievement of success in the acquisition of knowledge or skills (Chao, 1996; Li, 2000; Shapiro & Azuma, 2004; Stevenson & Lee, 1990). Taken together, studies such as these have contributed

to an increasingly detailed understanding of cross-cultural variability in parental ethnotheories that are relevant to the development of children's competence, particularly in the context of school. To our knowledge, however, there has been little research on cross-cultural variability in parental ethnotheories related to children's success in school among the middle-class societies of the Western post-industrial world, countries that are often simply grouped together for contrast to some other locale. Yet, the variation within the industrial West is important not only for the comparative study of educational systems, but also as contexts for understanding family life and child development.

Parents' ideas about what qualities are important for children's success in school, insofar as they are shared within a community of people, constitute cultural models that are elements in even more general ethnotheories about the child, the family, and parenting (Harkness & Super, 2005; Harkness, Super, Ríos Bermúdez, Moscardino, Blom et al., 2010). As such, they also relate in turn to a variety of parenting practices and, ultimately, to children's developmental outcomes (e.g., Stevenson & Lee, 1990). As part of a system of ideas and practices, thus, parents' cultural beliefs about a particular domain—such as success in school—should be consistent with findings of other studies of the same parents, as well as research with parents from similar populations.

In this paper, we examine parents' beliefs about the importance of various child qualities for success in school among groups of middle-class families in seven post-industrial Western societies, chosen to sample the broad East-West and North-South variation within the European continent, as well as the British diaspora: Italy, Spain, Sweden, Poland, the Netherlands, Australia, and the United States. Specifically, we address four questions. First, to what extent do the parents in our samples agree on the importance of various individual qualities for children's success in school? Second, what are the cultural commonalities and differences in the ways that parents conceptualize the relationships among these qualities? Third, how do other factors such as parental gender or education influence parents' ideas? Finally, how much do parents *within* each cultural community agree with each other? The answers to these questions should inform a more general understanding of the role of cultural models in parents' ideas related to children's successful development.

Methods

Participants. Data for the present study were drawn from a larger collaborative project, the International Study of Parents, Children and Schools (ISPCS), carried out in the late 1990s by research teams in the countries listed above (Harkness et al., 2001; Super, Axia, Harkness, Welles-Nyström, Zylicz et al., 2008). The specific research sites in each country were chosen as largely middle-class urban or suburban communities (and practical for

the local investigators), recognizably belonging to the larger national culture but describable as a specific group. By definition, therefore, the samples are not intended to be statistically representative of the countries by which they are labeled here for convenience. Rather, they were chosen to facilitate the systematic exploration of family functioning and children's transition to school in the context of shared cultural models in identifiably distinct communities. The question of how far one can generalize our results to other populations is beyond the scope of the present research, although some insight can be gained from comparing the results to other studies.

The ISPCS samples at each site consisted of approximately sixty families, divided into cohorts of twelve or more based on the target child's age (6 months, 18 months, 3 years, 4½ years, and 7–8 years) and balanced for sex and birth order (first or later-born). All other demographic characteristics (e.g., marital status, parental education, maternal employment) were left to vary freely as these tend to be integral aspects of different cultural systems. Families were broadly middle class, with one or both parents employed, both parents native-born and native speakers of the local language, and with no major family health problems. The varying logistics of funding and data collection resulted in some variation in the size and composition of the samples for any given measure. The Australian sample consisted of Anglo-Celtic families residing in the Melbourne area, who were recruited through public announcements. The Italian families all resided in Padua, and were recruited through their membership in a parents' civic organization. The research site in the Netherlands was located in the town of "Bloemenheim," between Amsterdam and the Hague; parents were recruited through social networks centered around a neighborhood school. The Polish families were recruited through a school and through personal networks in a town on the outskirts of Warsaw. The Spanish sample families lived in a densely populated district of Seville and were recruited through school and social service and health networks. A community in the suburbs of Stockholm was chosen as the Swedish research site, and parents were recruited through neighborhood networks. The U.S. sample was recruited through schools and personal networks in two areas: central Pennsylvania and northeast Connecticut. Both areas include rural as well as suburban neighborhoods.

As shown in Table 7.1, the parents in the present study had generally completed some post-secondary education, and were employed in the business or professional sectors. However, the Polish and American parents tended to be more educated and their range of variation in education was smaller, whereas the Spanish parents generally had a lower educational level and held jobs with lower occupational prestige, as indexed by the Hollingshead scale. Parents averaged between 35 and 40 years old, and almost all were in two-parent households. Rates of maternal employment outside the home varied among the groups from less than one half to virtually all mothers. For those mothers who were in paid employment, the average was around 30 hours per week for four of the communities (Italy, Spain, Swe-

Table 7.1. Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

	Australia	*Italy*	*Netherlands*	*Poland*	*Spain*	*Sweden*	*USA*
Number of parents responding	49	119	132	85	124	108	140
Number of mothers responding	49	60	56	59	65	60	73
Parent's average age							
M	35.3	37.7	37.2	34.2	35.1	37.9	36.2
SD	4.4	5.0	6.0	6.2	4.8	6.0	5.6
Range	27–46	25–51	27–65	23–44	23–53	25–56	26–54
Parent's average education code							
M	5.5	5.4	5.0	6.0	3.8	5.1	5.9
SD	1.2	1.2	1.5	1.2	1.7	1.1	1.0
Range	2–7	2–7	2–7	4–7	1–7	2–7	4–7
Parent's average occupation code							
M	6.7	6.5	6.0	6.9	4.5	7.2	7.1
SD	1.9	1.7	2.2	.9	2.6	1.6	1.9
Range	1–9	3–9	1–9	6–8	1–9	2–9	1–9
Percent of mothers employed	75	78.3	51.9	50.0	42.0	94.2	69.0
Hours mothers work per week							
M	16.2	30.4	17.8	28.6	31.9	33.3	30.3
SD	11.5	8.3	7.8	12.0	8.8	8.2	13.3
Range	1–50	12–50	2–32	3–40	15–45	15–60	5–60

Note. Education coded as follows: 1 = elementary school (6 years); 2 = intermediate/vocational (usually 4 years); 3 = intermediate/academic; 4 = full secondary/college preparatory; 5 = partial college; 6 = college; 7 = postgraduate.
Parents' occupation level is indexed by the Hollingshead (1975) occupational 9-point occupational scale; sample levels are janitor = 1, cab driver = 2, cook or office clerk = 3, carpenter or receptionist = 4, musician or bookkeeper = 5, librarian or supervisor = 6, nurse or financial manager = 7, engineer or school teacher = 8, physician, CEO, or professor = 9.

den, and the United States), slightly less in the Polish sample, and markedly less in the Dutch and Australian samples. On all these measures, there was enough variability within each sample to test their possible relevance to parents' ideas and practices.

Procedures. Parents who responded with interest to the recruitment efforts described above were called by a member of the local research team to check for appropriateness in terms of both the general parameters mentioned above (e.g., employment) and the age of the focal child; the nature and purpose of the study were described. On a subsequent visit the team member explained the specific forms left for them to complete (including the questionnaire used here), obtained informed consent, and made a date to return to collect the forms (and for an interview, not reported here).

Measures. A questionnaire called "What qualities are associated with children's success in school?" was developed specifically for the present study. The questionnaire contains a list of forty-one words and phrases that can be used to describe children, for the respondent to rate from 1 to 7

with the highest category indicating "Very important" for school success and the lowest meaning "Very problematic" for school success. A rating of 4, at the mid-point, indicates that the quality is seen as neutral for school success. The descriptors were identified by investigators from the seven research sites as ones commonly used by parents in talking about their own children, beginning with a list generated through earlier comparative research in the Netherlands and the United States (Harkness & Super, 2005; Harkness, Super, & van Tijen, 2000). This list was further elaborated and modified through discussion among the principal investigators at a meeting in the beginning of the project. Since all the investigators were multilingual, the choice of actual words and phrases was arrived at through a process of consultation. The investigators agreed that the meanings of the terms were sufficiently similar across cultural and linguistic groups, although it became evident later that the connotations and valence of a few terms did vary across the samples. Finally, because the ISPCS included a study of temperament using questionnaires based on Thomas and Chess (1977), terms for all nine of their temperament dimensions were also included in the questionnaire.

Altogether, the forty-one terms in the questionnaire covered a wide range of personal qualities, as indicated by a comparison with the "Big Five" personality factors adapted to descriptions of children (Kohnstamm, Halverson, Havill, & Mervielde, 1966). Three of the major categories of the Big Five factors (Extroversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness) were each represented by six terms in our questionnaire; a fourth (Emotional Stability) was represented by five terms; and the last, most obviously relevant factor (Openness to experience, Intelligence) was represented by nine terms. In addition, three terms were related to a sixth factor (Independence) identified by Kohnstamm et al. (1966); one was related to their ninth factor (Rhythmicity of eating, sleeping, etc.); and three did not seem to fit readily in any of their categories.

Parents were instructed to rate each term in relation to its importance (positive or negative) for children's success in school, keeping in mind that the ratings were supposed to apply to children in general, not their own child in particular.

Results

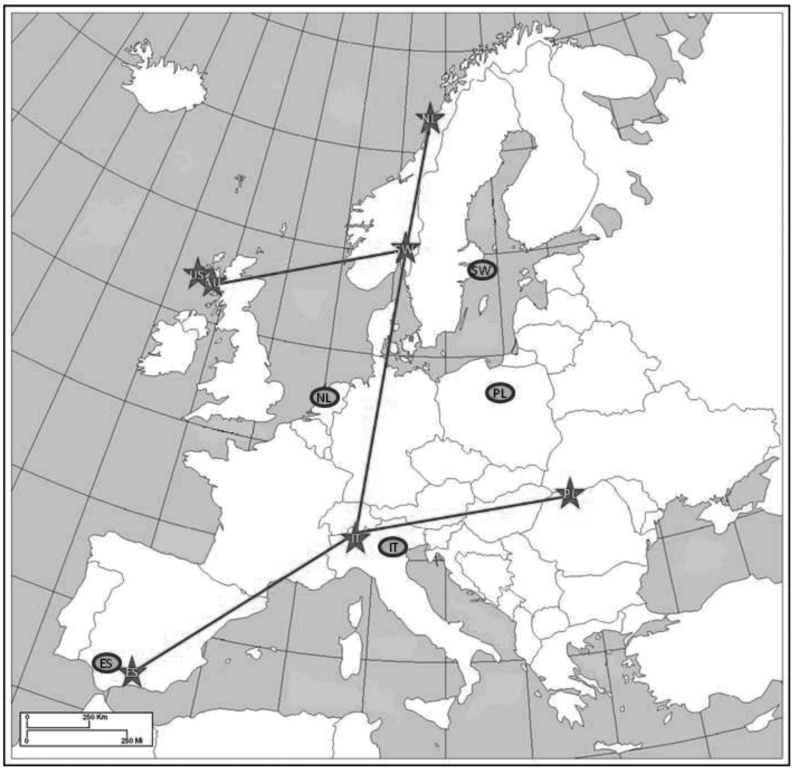
Cultural Similarities and Differences in Ratings of the Forty-One Descriptors. In general, the qualities that parents across the samples rated most highly for success in school included being able to concentrate well, to pay attention, to understand quickly, being curious, and having a good memory, as well as being happy, enthusiastic, self-confident, and responsible. In contrast, the qualities that parents found most problematic for success in school were being shy, sensitive, emotional, intense, impulsive, and, most of all, distractible. Despite the obvious general similarity in ratings across cultural samples, there is a significant overall effect of Culture

(the seven cultural samples) on mean ratings, as indicated by Wilk's lambda ($F(246/3575.9) = 15.05$, $p < .0001$) in a multivariate analysis of variance. Subsequent univariate analyses indicate the effect of Culture is highly significant ($p < .0001$) for each of the individual qualities except for Distractible. The differences in mean ratings were generally not large, however, with the median percent of variance accounted for by Culture being about 10% (ranging from less than 3% for Distractible, Concentrates Well, Honest, and Approaches New Situations Easily, to about 36% for Verbal and Cooperative).

In order to characterize the level of agreement between specific groups, the mean ratings for each of the forty-one qualities were correlated for each pair of cultural samples. Pearson correlation coefficients *for each pair of samples* average .84 and range from .68 to .96; all correlations are significant at the .0001 level. Despite the generally high level of agreement, however, there is some interesting variability in correlations among the different pairs of samples. The highest agreements are found between parents in the Northern European cultures (Sweden and Netherlands, $r = .91$; Sweden and Poland, $r = .86$), and in the two English-speaking samples, (Australia and the United States, $r = .96$). In contrast, the lowest level of agreement is found between Spain and the Northern European samples (Spain and the Netherlands, $r = .68$; Spain with Poland and with Sweden, $r = .74$). About two-thirds of the pair-wise comparisons of correlations indicate significant differences; for example, the .96 correlation cited above is significantly greater than all others.

The implication—that samples which are more similar in terms of cultural heritage (and therefore generally geographically closer) are in closer agreement on the ratings of qualities for success in school—is demonstrated by applying multidimensional scaling methods (Kruskal & Wish, 1978) to the seven-by-seven sample intercorrelation matrix described above (stress = .003 in two dimensions). Results from the scaling were superimposed graphically on a standard map of Europe, anchored in Seville and manipulated by hand to optimize placement of the other points. As shown in Figure 7.1, the five samples from continental Europe spread out into a recognizable pattern, with Spain and Italy in the "south" and Sweden, the Netherlands, and Poland in the "north." Further, Spain lies to the "west" of Italy, and Sweden and the Netherlands lie to the "west" of Poland. Australia and the United States are placed close together, in the "north" with Sweden and the Netherlands, but to their "west"—curiously, just where Britain, their cultural origin, would be on a true map. Although the match is not perfect (the Netherlands is placed "north" of Sweden), the correlation between the scaled intersample distances based on the correlation of parental ratings, with the actual distances in air miles, for the five European samples is .65 ($p = .04$). This result provides concrete evidence that the obtained differences among the samples, although relatively small compared to the shared covariance, are psychologically and culturally meaningful.

Figure 7.1. Scaling results for sample similarity (stars) compared to geographic location (ovals).



Note: AU = Australia, ES = Spain, IT = Italy, NL = The Netherlands, PL = Poland, SW = Sweden, US = United States
Ovals identify actual location the country; stars indicate the location by MDS.

Common Factors and Cultural Models. The analyses presented above show clear variability among the samples in patterns of judgment about child qualities for success in school, but they do not inform us about the underlying cultural models that parents in each sample presumably drew from in rating each of the qualities. A further perspective on cultural similarities and differences in parents' ideas about what child qualities contribute to (or detract from) children's success in school is gained by examining patterns of association (covariation) *among the qualities*. We pursue this question first by using exploratory factor analysis, an appropriate choice since we have no a priori expectations of what the emerging patterns will look like.

Dimensions of meaning for the forty-one descriptor items were extracted by common (exploratory) factor analysis of the item intercorrelations separately for each sample (except Australia which was omitted

from factor analysis due to the small sample size). The number of factors extracted with Eigenvalues greater than one ranged from six to eight. After reviewing the results individually, we decided to standardize on a six-factor solution with orthogonal (Varimax) rotation in order to facilitate comparison and interpretation of the factor structures. The cut-off point of loadings for an item to be included in a factor was set at .32 (indicating a 10% shared variance with the factor), as shown in Tables 7.2A–7.2E. The results indicate both commonalities and culture-specific patterns.

A comparison of the contents of the factors across samples indicates four common factors as identified by "core items" that are shared across at least five of the six samples:

1. Cognitive Competence (Table 7.2A). This factor includes three core items: Pays Attention, Concentrates Well, and Understands Quickly, two of which represent attention management skills that are involved in cognitive performance.
2. Social Competence (Table 7.2B). The factor of social competence is present in all samples, but shares only two core items: Concerned for others, and Sociable, which together capture both the purely social and the pro-social dimensions of sociability.
3. Good Character (Table 7.2C). A factor that we have called "good character" brings together three core items. Obedient and Polite indicate a well-behaved child who will not present management problems to the teacher. Together with a third core item, Honest, these qualities suggest a child who can be relied on for not only good manners but also entrusted with responsibilities for self or others.
4. Difficult Temperament (Table 7.2D). This factor is strongly evident in all samples, as indicated by three core qualities. They include two aspects of temperament indicating behavior dysregulation, which parents may themselves find difficult: Distractible and Impulsive. Added to these characteristics is another quality, Shy, suggesting a tendency toward social inhibition.

A potential fifth factor, Self-Actualization (Table 7.2E), is evident across the six samples but lacks core qualities that are present in at least five. Instead, four qualities (Brave, Enterprising, Leader, and Strong-willed) are found in four of the samples. This factor is particularly important for the Swedish parents, and it is also salient in the U.S. and Polish samples.

The seventeen core items that define the four common factors constitute fewer than half of the total list of forty-one qualities rated by parents in relation to children's success in school. Virtually all the other twenty-four items appear either somewhere on these common factors, on the Self-Actualization factor, or on a sample-specific sixth factor. Furthermore, the relative size of each factor (that is, the variance it accounts for) differs across the samples, as reflected in the order of factors (from 1 to 6) within each

Table 7.2A. Common Factor Results for Cognitive Competence

Italy *n = 119* *factor 5 (14%)*	*Netherlands* *n = 106* *factor 2 (18%)*	*Poland* *n = 73* *factor 1 (34%)*	*Spain* *n = 113* *factor 2 (19%)*	*Sweden* *n = 83* *factor 3 (15%)*	*USA* *n = 115* *factor 1 (23%)*
attention .45	**attention** .73	**attention** .74	**attention** .65	**attention** .64	**attention** .72
(**concentrates** .36)	**concentrates** .61	**concentrates** .79	**concentrates** .50	**concentrates** .47	**concentrates** .68
understand .61	**understands** .62	**understands** .82	**understands** .71	**understands** .59	**understands** .76
memory .53	memory .56	memory .79	(memory .40)	memory .64	
clever .45	clever .59	clever .80		(clever .36)	clever .36
	(curious .38)	curious .74	curious .48		(curious .38)
intense .53	confident .45	active .63	cautious .45	(adaptable .42)	calm .57
	even temper .40	cooperative .48	(enthusiastic .41)	calm .57	(concern .40)
	(independent .37)	(enterprising .41)	happy .40	even-temper .47	cooperative .74
		(enthusiastic .35)	leader .34	(independent .35)	(enthusiastic .49)
		even-temper .41	persistent .45		even-temper .55
		happy .64			independent .58
		honest .47			verbal .59
		inventive .47			
		persistent .74			
		polite .69			
		responsible .52			
		(verbal .35)			

Note: Bolded items are core items for common factors, and constitute the summary scales. Numbers following items are factor loadings. Factor number in row 2 indicate order of extraction (after rotation), and figures in parentheses are percent of common variance (same for Tables 7.2A–7.2E).

Table 7.2B. Common Factor Results for Social Competence

Italy *n = 119* *factor 3 (18%)*	*Netherlands* *n = 106* *factor 6 (14%)*	*Poland* *n = 73* *factor 4 (12%)*	*Spain* *n = 113* *factor 5 (10%)*	*Sweden* *n = 83* *factor 2 (16%)*	*USA* *n = 115* *factor 6 (13%)*
concern .42	**concerned** .69	**concerned** .54	**concerned** .55	**concerned** .70	**concerned** .62
(**sociable** .35)	**sociable** .69	**sociable** .64	**sociable** .57	**sociable** .64	**sociable** .62
approach .49	(happy) .35	athletic .52	enthusiastic .51	cooperative .54	(concentrates .43)
cooperative .42	(honest .38)	(inventive .44)	(happy .34)	enthusiastic .41	enthusiastic .69
confident .41	independent .48	open .59	(polite .35)	(happy .41)	happy .65
happy .47	open .35	sweet .66		(honest .40)	(memory −.44)
independent .38	responsible .35			open .71	
inventive .52	verbal .32			responsible .37	
open .57				sweet .49	
regular −.36					
(honest .50)					

Table 7.2C. Common Factor Results for Difficult Temperament

Italy *n = 119* *factor 2 (18%)*	*Netherlands* *n = 106* *factor 1 (24%)*	*Poland* *n = 73* *factor 6 (12%)*	*Spain* *n = 113* *factor 3 (18%)*	*Sweden* *n = 83* *factor 5 (14%)*	*USA* *n = 115* *factor 5 (14%)*
distractible .60	**distractible** .74	**distractible** .77	**distractible** .44	**distractible** .61	**distractible** .50
shy .62	**shy** .72	**shy** .73	**shy** .52	**shy** .76	**shy .55**
impulsive .72	**impulsive** .52	**impulsive** .59	**impulsive** .45	(**impulsive** .42)	**impulsive** .54
	intense .45	**intense** .59	**intense** .45	**intense** .54	**intense** .60
sensitive .43	**sensitive** .65		**sensitive** .38	**sensitive** .56	(**sensitive** .37)
emotional .66	**emotional** .64		**emotional** .57	**emotional** .41	
verbal .60	cautious .66	(honest −.35)	(adaptable .42)	cautious .52	active .73
	cooperative .36	regular .65	athletic .40	modest .48	cautious .65
	modest .46		(concern .45)		curious −.47
	sweet .64		cooperative .46		modest .45
	open .36				(polite .44)

Table 7.2D. Common Factor Results for Good Character

Italy *n = 119* *factor 1 (24%)*	*Netherlands* *n = 106* *factor 4 (15%)*	*Poland* *n = 73* *factor 3 (13%)*	*Spain* *n = 113* *factor 1 (31%)*	*Sweden* *n = 83* *factor 4 (14%)*	*USA* *n = 115* *factor 4 (16%)*
obedient .48	**obedient** .68	**obedient** .46	**obedient** .56	**obedient** .73	**obedient** .54
honest .52	**honest** .58	**(honest** .41)	**honest** .68	**honest** .44	
polite .62	**polite** .67		**polite** .66	**polite** .70	**polite** .59
responsible .43		(responsible .47)	responsible .59	(responsible .36)	responsible .60
athletic .37	(concern .40)	calm .59	active .50	adaptable .76	adaptable .66
brave .53	(confident .37)	(concern .44)	adaptable .50	athletic .36	approach .49
calm .35	regular .58	cautious .65	clever .59	(sweet .34)	(brave .38)
cautious .61		(even temper .36)	(concern .37)		confident .55
modest .51		modest .66	confident .62		regular .48
sweet .52		(sweet .34)	(cooperative .34)		
			enterprising .67		
			memory .57		
			open .56sweet .60		

Table 7.2E. Factor Results for Self-Actualization

Italy *n = 119* *factor 4 (16%)*	*Netherlands* *n = 106* *factor 5 (14%)*	*Poland* *n = 73* *factor 2 (14%)*	*Spain* *n = 113* *factor 6 (8%)*	*Sweden* *n = 83* *factor 1 (33%)*	*USA* *n = 115* *factor 2 (17%)*
	brave .61		**brave** .58	**brave** .59	**brave** .42
enterprising .52		**enterprising .43**		**enterprising .75**	**enterprising .69**
leader .56	**leader** .55			**leader** .59	**leader** .48
strong will .45		**strong will .71**	**strong will .56**	**strong will .66**	
	(adaptable .39)	(concern .39)		active .65	athletic .44
enthusiastic .51	athletic .38	(curious .37)		approach .53	(clever .36)
even temper .39	approach .44	emotional .39		(clever .44)	(concern .36)
sociable .39	calm .37	enthusiastic .57		confident .67	honest .39
	(intense .39)	(even temper .35)		curious .79	inventive .59
	inventive .51	independent .41		(emotional .38)	(modest .40)
	persistent .54	(intense .40)		(enthusiastic .40)	open .60
		(confident .49)		impulsive .58	sensitive .50
		verbal .63		independent .61	
				(intense .44)	
				inventive .62	
				(memory .37)	
				persistent .47	
				(responsible .34)	
				verbal .76	

sample. Thus, although there was moderate agreement across the samples about which qualities are (and are not) related to each of the four common factors, the remaining differences among them can be seen as evidence of cultural models unique to each sample. Convergent evidence for the meaning and validity of these cultural patterns is available from other research on the same samples and other similar ones, as discussed in the following sections. Of particular note is the similarity of the present results to the ideas of the "ideal student" held by teachers in five of the same communities (Harkness, Blom, Oliva, Moscardino, Zylicz, Ríos Bermúdez, et al., 2007).

The United States: The Primacy of Cognition and Self-Actualization. Cognitive Competence is the first factor in the U.S. sample, accounting for more of the variance and, relatedly, including more qualities, than does this factor in all other samples except the Polish sample. The inclusion in this factor of the qualities Calm, Cooperative, Even-tempered, and Concerned for Others evokes the image of a well-regulated child, while the qualities Curious, Enthusiastic, Independent, and Verbal add a dimension of openness to experience.

The primacy of cognitive development as a theme for American middle-class parents, as indicated in the present study, should come as no surprise to either parents or students of parenting and child development in the United States—in fact, the importance of early stimulation for adequate cognitive development is one of the cornerstones of U.S. "expert" advice for parents (Harkness et al., 2007). The American parents in our other research seemed to have learned this lesson well. In an earlier, two-sample comparative study, for example, we found U.S. parents described their young children as "smart" more than twice as frequently as did the Dutch parents (Harkness, Super, & van Tijen, 2000). The same pattern shows up again in our six-culture comparison of parents' free descriptions of their children: compared to all the other samples (Australia, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, and Sweden), the U.S. parents most often described their children as intelligent or cognitively advanced (Harkness et al., 2010). The U.S. middle-class preoccupation with cognitive development is evident even in early infancy. U.S. mothers of 2-month-old infants, in a separate cross-cultural study, uniquely highlighted themes and practices of childrearing focused cognitive processing and the stimulation of development (Harkness et al., 2007).

Teachers in the parallel U. S. sample (Harkness, Blom, et al., 2007, p. 127) emphasized the importance of "high motivation, … a sense of excitement, [and] engagement in a mutually satisfying process." The U.S. parents' inclusion of Cooperative, Curious, Enthusiastic, and Independent on the Cognitive Competence factor indicates they share the teachers' idea of a happy, busy, successful student.

Poland: Entrepreneurship Versus Traditionality. The Cognitive factor is by far the most important factor in the Polish sample, accounting for 34% of the common variance. As in the U.S. sample, this factor includes a

group of qualities describing a child who is a pleasure to have in the classroom due to being cooperative and even-tempered; but the Polish factor also pulls in qualities that tend to be loaded on the Good character factor in other samples, notably Polite and Responsible. As if in counterpoint to these traditional values, the Polish Cognitive Competence factor also includes items suggesting an outgoing, entrepreneurial spirit (Curious, Active, Enterprising, Inventive, and Persistent)—qualities that became more highly valued in Poland's post-Communist environment.

This combination of traditional and entrepreneurial qualities in the Polish Cognitive Competence factor is also found in the study of teachers from the same town (Harkness, Blom, et al., 2007). Two opposing models were evident in their interviews, as the authors of that study described:

> One is embedded in the previous collectivistic and strictly social hierarchy-based treatment of the children; the other, emerging model is oriented to encouraging independence, curiosity, and proactive learning. The latter approach perceives the ideal student—as stated by one of our interviewees—as a child who "will be open-minded and courageous in his or her activities. Formerly it was emphasized that the student had to be well-behaved, concerned for others, and silent—which would make the child become a loser in the current world" (p. 123).

Another teacher, who espoused the more traditional view, expressed her view of the ideal student as "a compliant child who reacts to my voice. He must know when to be focused and calm, and when he is allowed to play. Today, children do not have a sense of respect in front of teachers—neither the teacher nor what she says is regarded as 'holy' anymore" (p. 124).

Italy: The Importance of Social and Emotional Intelligence. In contrast to the U.S. and Polish focus on cognitive competence, the Italian factors indicate a stronger concern with social and emotional qualities that enable children to succeed in school and beyond. Good character, the first factor (accounting for 24% of the common variance) is joined by the third and fourth factors, Social Competence and Self-actualization, in a cluster that together suggest the image of a creative, lively child who can take initiatives and approach new situations with confidence. Thus, the Good Character factor includes Athletic, Brave, and Calm; the Social Competence factor lists Approaches New Situations easily, Confident, Independent, Inventive, and Open, as well as Cooperative; and the Self-actualization factor likewise includes Enterprising, Strong-willed, Enthusiastic, Sociable, and Even-tempered.

The salience of these socio-emotional qualities for the Italian parents is also reflected in an analysis of the same parents' free descriptions of their children (Harkness & Super, 2005). In contrast to the U.S. parents' emphasis on cognitive competence, the Italian parents "rarely described

their children as intelligent and never characterized them as cognitively advanced. Instead, these parents talked about their children as being easy, even-tempered, well-balanced, and *simpatico*." (Harkness & Super, 2005, p. 73). Another analysis of children's temperament, focusing on the parents of three and four-year-old children from the same sample, highlighted the importance of social competence—especially being able to move easily into new social situations—as a core attribute related to how "difficult" the child was perceived to be (Harkness, Super, Moscardino, Rha, Blom, Huitrón, et al., 2007). Likewise, an emphasis on socio-emotional learning in the context of close emotional relationships was found for a different sample of Italian parents in a cross-cultural study of parental ethnotheories and infant development (Harkness et al., 2007).

Italian teachers from the parallel study also "emphasized children's personal and social characteristics in terms of … independence, creativity, good social skills. … Although skills such as attention, persistence, and intelligence were seen as contributing to a child's success in school, … teachers appreciated those children who were able to engage their classmates, share ideas, and collaborate during group activities" (Harkness, Blom, et al., 2007, p. 121). Like the Italian parents, their children's teachers "valued liveliness (*vivacità*) as related to both intellectual and behavioral dimensions" (p. 120).

Spain: Good Character as the Key to Success. As in the Italian sample, Good Character is the first factor in the Spanish sample. The Spanish version of this factor, however, controls even more of the common variance (31%) than it does in the Italian sample. Despite their similarity in ranking, the content of the Good Character factor varies considerably between the two samples, with only one shared item (Sweet) beyond the core items. The Spanish Good Character factor is distinctive in combining cognitive competence (Clever, Good memory) with other social qualities suggesting an active, outgoing child (Active, Adaptable, Confident, Enterprising, Open, Sweet). Similar social qualities appear again in the second factor, Cognitive Competence, suggesting a close link between cognitive and social skills. The theme of social competence is further elaborated in a unique Spanish fourth factor that includes Approaches new situations easily, Calm, Independent, and Inventive—again evoking an image of a well-regulated child who can move easily into the wider social environment, a child "with whom you can go anywhere—he knows how to comport himself," as one Spanish mother put it.

These characteristics are also evident in the Spanish parents' free descriptions of their children, where words and phrases categorized as "good character" and "socially mature" were among the most frequent descriptors, a unique cultural pattern in this study (Harkness & Super, 2005). The Spanish emphasis on social competence as an important skill is also evident in the temperament study cited above (Super, Axia, Harkness, Welles-Nyström, Zylicz, Ríos Bermúdez, et al., 2008), where the Spanish

parents of a "difficult" four-year-old child described her as shy in public while demanding and "capricious" with her parents at home. As a positive, however, both parents noted that she would willingly sing and dance the traditional "Sevillana" dances for them—evidence of growing competence in the performative aspects of successful development. Likewise, Spanish parents of 2-month-old infants emphasized the idea of development in the context of a close network of social relationships with family and friends (Harkness et al., 2007).

The Spanish teachers, like those in Poland, were reported to be acutely aware of the educational aspects of social and political change (Harkness, Blom, et al., 2007). The traditional approach emphasized "good habits in school such as cleanliness, order, and spending time on both work and play" (p. 125), a picture that has clear connections to the parents' emphasis on Good Character. At the same time, the newer educational focus—attending to student motivation and interest—also expects the ideal student to be "organized, persevering, responsible, and well-behaved" (p. 126). The thread of self-regulated, good behavior continues to underlie teachers' as well as parents' expectations for school success.

The Netherlands: Temperament and Self-Determination. The Dutch sample is unique in giving more weight to Difficult Temperament than to any other factor, including all six of the core qualities of Difficult Temperament—Distractible, Emotional, Impulsive, Sensitive, Intense, and Shy. Like the Swedish and U.S. samples, the Dutch Difficult Temperament factor also includes Cautious, but unlike them, it also includes Cooperative, Modest, and Sweet. Although these qualities do not ordinarily evoke the image of a "difficult child" —quite the opposite, in fact—such qualities were seen by some Dutch parents as potentially disadvantageous for children who, by being *too* agreeable, might end up being pushed around by others. Thus, the inclusion of these qualities in the Difficult Temperament factor for the Dutch parents may index those qualities that were considered unhelpful for success in school (and beyond). Support for this interpretation comes from a unique Dutch factor (the third factor) that includes qualities that parents often used approvingly in describing their own children: Active, Clever, Curious, Enterprising, Enthusiastic, Happy, and Strong-willed. Together, these two factors evoke an image of the successful child who is not overly sensitive, intense, shy, or even cooperative—but rather one who is positive in mood and eager to explore the world around; a child who can stand on her own two feet and make her own choices without being too influenced by others because, as many mothers pronounced with satisfaction, "She knows exactly what she wants."

This combination of qualities is also in evidence in Dutch teachers' concepts of the "ideal student" (Harkness, Blom, et al., 2007). As one teacher described such a child: "Very spontaneous, and child that is open to new things. A child that can nicely work independently. That's an ideal picture, a child who does what you say, but is also spontaneous. Also brings his own

contribution. A happy child, who picks things up easily. Children who are not afraid of failing" (p. 122).

This well-functioning school child depended in turn, according to both Dutch parents and teachers, on a regular, not over-stimulating environment including plenty of rest, a pattern that has repeatedly emerged in our research (Super, Harkness, van Tijen, van der Vlugt, Dykstra, & Fintelman, 1996; Harkness Super, Moscardino, Rha, Blom, Huitrón, et al., 2007). Such a child might embody qualities that the Dutch parents often referred to approvingly in free descriptions of their children, including being agreeable, enjoying life, having a long attention span and a regular daily rhythm. Setting up a proper environment in order to achieve these developmental goals was evident in Dutch mothers' descriptions of caretaking ideas and practices from early infancy (Harkness et al., 2007).

Sweden: The Child as a Natural Being. Self-actualization dominates the Swedish factor structure, controlling fully 33% of common variance. In fact, Self-actualization could be seen as the *only* important Swedish factor as unlike in the other samples, the next factor controls only half the common variance of the first. The Swedish Self-actualization factor pulls in a long list of qualities, including ones related to independence (Self-confident and Independent), persistence, and openness to experience (Approaches new situations easily, Curious, and Inventive), in addition to the core qualities (Brave, Enterprising, Leader, and Strong-willed). The inclusion of Verbal, Clever, and Good memory adds a cognitive theme to this dimension. The quality Impulsive, generally found in the Difficult Temperament factor (where it is also loaded, but more weakly, in the Swedish sample), appears here along with Active, a theme that is further elaborated in the second factor, Social Competence, which features the qualities Cooperative, Enthusiastic, Open, Responsible, and Sweet.

The theme of Self-Actualization—even assertiveness—was unexpected in the Swedish sample, as parents in this group generally did not express enthusiasm about children with these qualities, apparently preferring instead children who were agreeable, happy, and did not make too many demands on their busy parents. In the temperament study (Super, Axia, et al., 2008), for example, the two dimensions of temperament that were significantly correlated with global Difficulty ratings were Mood and Persistence. Although the Swedish parents tended to rate their children overall as much less "difficult" than did parents from all the other samples, the parents of a relatively "difficult" child complained of her clinginess and demands for attention when being dropped off at daycare. Swedish parents' free descriptions of their children also highlighted qualities of a "low-maintenance" child—one who was easy, well-balanced, even-tempered, secure, persistent, and above all, happy (Harkness & Super, 2005). Thus, the dominance of the Self-actualization factor in the present study seems paradoxical. Some insight into this apparent paradox may be gained, however, from consideration of the Swedish cultural model of the child as a free, natural being,

unconstrained by the conventions of adult life, as depicted in Aronsson and Sandin's (1996) reflections on the meaning of the ubiquitous Sun Match Boy whose carefree image appeared on match boxes the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth century. If this is true, then it may be the case that what these Swedish parents wanted for their children included two opposing types: the agreeable, cooperative child, and the unfettered free-spirited child. Interestingly, however, two key qualities were common to both: happiness, and independence.

Effects of Parental Characteristics and Other Possible Confounds. An important concern in cross-cultural research is the possible confounding effects of general dimensions of variability such as respondents' age, gender, and socioeconomic characteristics. Systematic analyses were therefore carried out to evaluate the differences among the cultural samples while accounting for the potential influence of parental characteristics on the ratings. In addition, we examined the results for possible influence of characteristics of the focal child for this study (age, gender, and birth order), even though the present questionnaire was explicitly about desirable qualities for school in general and did not reference the focal study child.

First, the multivariate analysis of variance presented at the beginning of the Results section was repeated, using scores on the four common factors as dependent variables. Not surprisingly, the same picture emerged: the combined factors are, overall, significantly affected by Culture ($F = 13.47$, $df = 24/2275.8$, $p < .0001$). Univariate analyses of variance revealed that the means differed significantly among the seven communities on each of the common factors (see Table 7.3, which also presents significant pair-wise comparisons, using Tukey's method of controlling the maximum experiment-wise error rate). The effect size η^2 (percent of variance explained) of Culture was large in magnitude (Cohen, 1988) on the Cognitive, Social, and Character common factors (Table 7.3). For Difficult Temperament, on the other hand, the effect of Culture was much smaller, indicating greater agreement among groups on its importance.

This analysis was then repeated, but with the parent's age, gender, and educational level, and the focal child's age, gender, and birth order entered *first* as covariates (a procedure that biases strongly against finding significant Culture effects, as any shared variance is allocated to the other factors). Wilks' criterion (lambda) indicates that the combined common factors continued to be significantly affected by Culture ($p < .0001$), as well as three of the background measures (parent's gender, $p = .001$; parent's education, $p = .008$, and child's gender, $p = .001$). The cultural effect on each of the four common factors, separately, remains essentially the same, with some reduction for the Social factor ($\eta^2 = .13$, .08, .12, and .04; compare right-hand column of Table 7.3).

Subsequent univariate analysis of variance on each common factor with Culture as the independent variable and the three parent and three child characteristics as covariates was then conducted; several effects of small to

Table 7.3. Means (*SD*s), ANOVA Results, and Post Hoc Comparisons for Four Common Factors

	Australia	*Italy*	*Netherlands*	*Poland*	*Spain*	*Sweden*	*USA*	F *for Culture*	η^2 *for Culture*
Cognitive competence	$_{d}$5.81 (.69)	$_{ab}$6.40 (.50)	$_{c}$6.13 (.71)	$_{ab}$6.51 (.76)	$_{a}$6.53 (.51)	$_{bc}$6.20 (.73)	$_{d}$5.85 (.67)	18.56***	.14
Social competence	$_{ab}$5.93 (.65)	$_{ab}$6.01 (.75)	$_{c}$5.29 (1.06)	$_{bc}$5.52 (.93)	$_{a}$6.19 (.85)	$_{b}$5.64 (.96)	$_{bc}$5.38 (.98)	16.73***	.12
Good character	$_{b}$5.77 (.79)	$_{b}$5.84 (.68)	$_{c}$5.33 (.83)	$_{ab}$5.74 (.89)	$_{a}$6.16 (.72)	$_{c}$5.34 (.81)	$_{b}$5.87 (.67)	18.29***	.13
Difficult temperament	$_{a}$3.38 (.71)	$_{a}$3.39 (.74)	$_{a}$3.40 (.78)	$_{b}$2.79 (1.05)	$_{ab}$3.19 (.90)	$_{a}$3.33 (.90)	$_{a}$3.39 (.83)	3.51**	.05

Note. Means with different subscript are significantly different at $p < .05$ level.
**$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

Table 7.4. Effect of Parental and Child Characteristics on the Four Common Factors

Common factor	*Effect*	*Means*	F	df	P	η^2
Cognitive competence	Parent's gender	$M_{mothers} = 6.27$ $M_{fathers} = 6.13$	6.35	1,545	.01	.01
Social	Child's age	$M_{6mos} = 5.79$ $M_{18mos} = 5.70$ $M_{3yrs} = 5.56$ $M_{5yrs} = 5.91$ $M_{7yrs} = 5.65$	2.81	4,544	.03	.02
Good character	Parent's gender	$M_{mothers} = 5.83$ $M_{fathers} = 5.66$	6.19	1,535	.01	.01
	Child's gender	$M_{female} = 5.66$ $M_{male} = 5.82$	6.72	1,535	.01	.004
Difficult temperament	Child's gender	$M_{female} = 3.38$ $M_{male} = 3.61$	10.72	1,533	.001	.02
	Parent's education	M1-low = 4.72 M2 = 3.50 M3 = 3.18 M4 = 3.22 M5 = 3.47 M6 = 3.23 M7-high = 3.14	4.02	6,533	.0006	.04

medium size were found. Mothers (compared to fathers) rated both Cognitive Competence and Good Character as more important to school success (see Table 7.4). The Social factor was seen as especially important by parents of focal children around 5 years old, that is, near school entry age in most of the samples. Parents in families where the focal child was female (compared to male) rated Difficult temperament as more problematic, and Good Character as less important for school. Finally, more educated parents tended to rate Difficult Temperament as more problematic. Overall, however, these background measures are much less powerful than Culture in their effect on Cognitive Competence, Social Competence, and Good Character; for Difficult Temperament, they are roughly equivalent in power. All considered, a substantial portion of the variance remains unexplained, but we lack other measures, such as personality or personal experience, that might be involved.

In sum, we found modest relationships between the qualities ratings, on the one hand, and standard demographic measures on the other. Most of these are sensible at face value (e.g., mothers see Good Character as slightly more important than fathers). Most importantly, however, it is evident that whatever sample differences there may be in these demographic factors, they do not lie behind the much larger effects of Culture.

Table 7.5. Results from Consensus Analysis

	Site						
	Australia	*Italy*	*Netherlands*	*Poland*	*Spain*	*Sweden*	*USA*
% Variance explained by the 1st factor	42.7	46.0	59.4	64.5	46.0	47.6	60.8
Ratio of 1st to 2nd eigenvalue	2.47	3.96	8.02	8.19	4.96	5.08	7.95
% of negative loadings on 1st factor	10.3	2.5	4.5	3.5	1.6	7.4	2.9
% of loadings (+/− .5 or higher) on the 2nd factor	31.0	12.6	5.4	8.2	8.1	10.2	7.1

Consensus Among Parents Within Each Cultural Community. Finally, we carried out a consensus analysis in order to assess the level of agreement about the cultural models within each sample, as indicated by our previous analyses—in other words, the extent to which parents in each group agreed with each other about the relationships among the various child qualities, specifically their patterns of co-variation. Consensus analysis is in essence a principal components of respondents (parents) rather than variables (the forty-one child quality ratings). Conventional principal components analysis provides a direct examination of the hypothesis that a set of scale items (variables) constitutes a cohesive measure of a latent construct. In contrast, for the consensus analysis used here, the "items" are the parent respondents and the latent construct in question is a predefined group with a (culturally) shared understanding of the covariation of qualities that lead to a child's success in school. In other words, the results of the consensus analysis show to what extent each participant's responses covary with those of the rest of the sample. The suggested standard for cultural consensus is a single, dominant factor, as measured by the following criteria: (1) The first factor accounts for 50% or more of the variance; (2) The ratio of the first eigenvalue to the second eigenvalue is at least 3 and preferably greater than 5; (3) There are no (or very few) negative loadings on the first factor; and (4) There are no (or very few) high loadings (+/− .50 or higher) on the second factor (Handwerker, 2002; Romney, Weller, & Batchelder, 1986).

For each of the seven samples, a principal components (consensus) analysis was performed on the similarity matrix of subjects, and two factors were retained. As shown in Table 7.5, the Dutch, Polish, and U.S. samples meet the first criterion (proportion of variance accounted for by factor 1), while all the others (except possibly Australia) are close. The Dutch, Polish, Swedish and U.S. samples yield Eigenvalue ratios that meet the strong version of the second criterion (5:1); the Spanish and Italian samples meet the

weaker version (3:1). For the third criterion (percent of negative loadings on the first factor), the Spanish, Italian, and U.S. samples are very low (indicating high consensus), with the Swedish and especially the Australian samples showing considerably more negative loadings, while the Netherlands and Poland are at an intermediate level. For the fourth criterion, Australia shows loadings of almost one-third on the second factor, again indicating lower consensus. Overall, we can conclude that there is moderate to high cultural consensus among members of each cultural sample except for Australia.

Summary and Conclusions. In summary, these results indicate both similarities and differences across the seven cultural samples in the qualities thought to be important for success in school. The cross-cultural correlations of parents' ratings of the forty-one descriptors indicate general agreement among all seven cultural groups, especially between pairs from the same cultural region (i.e. Italy and Spain; the Netherlands and Sweden) or the same cultural "family" (United States and Australia). Four common factors, defined by core qualities, were attributed to school success/problems in all samples, but the samples varied in the importance that they attributed to these factors, again with evidence of higher agreement among the culturally closer samples. Analysis of parental background and child predictors of ratings showed that some of them contributed to small differences in ratings, but the cultural differences remained highly significant even after controlling for these potential confounds. This is especially true for the Cognitive and Character factors. Further, despite such other sources of variance, moderate to strong within-sample consensus was found for the Dutch, Polish, Swedish, Spanish, Italian, and U.S. samples, leaving only the Australian sample with low consensus. Additional research is needed with larger samples in order to test, through confirmatory factor analysis or other methods, the extent to which the results from this sample can be replicated and generalized more broadly.

Helping children to succeed in school is a near-universal task of parenting, yet cultures vary in what success in school entails and what child qualities are thought to lead to success. While much research has focused on contrasts between Western and non-Western cultures in their conceptualizations of intelligence and learning, this study adds to the existing literature by further differentiating among cultural models that have been subsumed under the "Western" umbrella. The results provide evidence for the internal coherence of cultural models within any given social group, evidence that is supported with convergent results from our other reports. The broad contrast between the U.S. emphasis on cognitive competence and a greater focus on social or emotional competence in non-Western cultures (Okagaki & Sternberg, 1993; Sternberg & Grigorenko, 2004) is mirrored here in a similar contrast between our U.S. sample of parents and the European samples, particularly the Italian and Spanish parents. Our findings also suggest, however, that differences in cultural models of the

successful schoolchild are more complex than the cognitive versus social competence contrast. The Dutch parents' cultural model differs from the American model on yet another dimension—self regulation. Dutch parents seem to place importance on qualities in the Difficult Temperament factor, those that represent behavioral and emotional regulation (or lack thereof). The Swedish parents' ethnotheories of a successful schoolchild also differ from those of the American parents in that Self-actualization figures more prominently than Cognitive Competence. Like the Dutch parents, the Swedish parents apparently valued assertiveness and openness to experience, but unlike the Dutch parents, they did not seem very concerned about their children's temperaments. The Polish results differ from all the other samples in presenting a balance of both traditionally valued qualities such as obedience and respect, in contrast to currently more desired qualities of entrepreneurship—both within the same dominant factor. This pattern may reflect the unique reality of rapid social and economic change in Poland.

The results of this study also suggest subtle yet significant cultural differences about the relative importance of various qualities for children's success in school. Similarities between the two southern European samples (Italy and Spain) are evident in several of our analyses, as are similarities between the two northern European samples (Sweden and the Netherlands), and the two Anglo-heritage cultural groups (the United States and Australia). Yet even within these pairs, there are distinctive patterns of emphasis. For example, in both the Italian and Spanish samples, the Good Character factor was the most important cluster of qualities. The Italian and Spanish parents' cultural models of the successful student both entail being responsible, reliable, and well-behaved; yet the Spanish Good Character factor has almost no overlap with the Italian factor beyond the core items, and it pulls in a variety of qualities (notably cognitive qualities) that are assigned elsewhere in all the other samples.

Understanding parents' ethnotheories about school success may have important implications for children's formal education. First, recognition of divergent cultural models of school success may help increase awareness of multiple pathways to achievement and well-being. Each cultural model presented in the current study points to a different perspective on good practice both at home and at school. Second, identifying cultural models of school success may help educators to understand parental socialization at home to work with parents to coordinate teaching efforts in both contexts. Standardized school curricula may not function equally well for all children, particularly if they are not congruent with parents' cultural models of success and related socialization efforts carried out at home.

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XIN FENG is Associate Professor in the Department of Human Sciences at the Ohio State University, U.S.A. Her research focuses on early emotional development across cultures and at-risk populations. She is particularly interested in the development of emotion regulation and its role in adjustment outcomes.

SARA HARKNESS is Professor of Human Development and Pediatrics, and Director of the Center for the Study of Culture, Health, and Human Development, at the University of Connecticut, U.S.A. Her research focuses on the cultural construction of parenting, especially parental ethnotheories and their influence on children's development in varied social contexts.

CHARLES M. SUPER is Professor of Human Development and Pediatrics, and Co-Director of the Center for the Study of Culture, Health, and Human Development, at the University of Connecticut, U.S.A. He is interested in cultural variation in early development, and advancing theoretical approaches – in particular the Developmental Niche - to accommodate global findings and facilitate their application to programmatic interventions.

BARBARA WELLES is Emeritus Professor at Fairfield University, U.S.A; previously, she taught at the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm. Her research interests include the effects of swaddling on infant health and development and maternal attachment in Russia, and cross-cultural variation in co-sleeping.

MOISES RIOS BERMUDEZ is an Adjunct Professor in the Department of Developmental and Educational Psychology at the University of Seville, Spain. His research interests focus on cultural regulation of human development during infancy, childhood, and adolescence, and interventions with families and schools to promote positive development and mental health at the household and community levels.

SABRINA BONICHINI is Associate Professor of Developmental Psychology at the University of Padua, Italy. Her research interests include cultural differences in parenting, assessment of development, and pediatric psychology.

UGHETTA MOSCARDINO is Associate Professor in Cultural Developmental Psychology at the University of Padova, Italy. Her research interests include the role of culture in child and adolescent socio-emotional development, and risk and resilience processes in immigrant youths' psychological adaptation.

PIOTR OLAF ZYLICZ is Associate Professor in Organizational Psychology and Director of the International Center for Research on Leadership at SWPS University, Warsaw Poland. His research interests include leadership, and the cultural and ethical context of adult and children behavior.