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The Transition from Preschool to School for Children in Ireland: Teachers Views

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Abstract

There is a wealth of international research on the transition from preschool to school from a range of perspectives. Following on from such research, the issue of transition is emerging as an important new construct in early childhood care and education (ECCE), with a transition-to-school framework replacing the construct of school readiness as a focus of research interest. There has been limited research into transition practices in Ireland and this study is the first comprehensive research looking at this area from an Irish perspective[1].

Phase I of this study involved conducting a questionnaire on the transition from preschool to formal schooling in Ireland. This was completed by a nationwide sample of preschool teachers[2] and primary school teachers. This paper presents some initial findings on data collected during this phase of the study.

What is Transition?

In educational terms, transition means, in the main, the process of movement from one educational setting to another. These transitions can often mean a change in location, teacher, curriculum, and philosophy (Margetts, 1999). A number of transitions occur through the early education years. Some occur across the years, for example, home to preschool, home to formal schooling, while others occur during the child's day or week, such as early morning childcare to school, or school to after-school care. This study investigates the transition from preschool to formal schooling, which has been identified internationally as being of great importance in the lives of young children (Pianta & Cox, 1999; EECERJ, 2003; Bohan-Baker & Little, 2004; Ackerman & Barnett, 2005; Dockett & Perry, 2005).

The period of transition begins while children are still at preschool, through preparation that takes place in the home during the summer months, and continues on until the child

is settled in the new setting. The actual time scale until the child feels fully settled is dependent on each individual, and the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) proposes that transition should be viewed as "a process rather than an event" (2005, p2). So rather than concentrate on the 'First Day of School' transition needs to be viewed from an ecological perspective, and considered in terms of the influence of contexts (e.g. family, preschool, school) and the connections between these contexts (e.g. family-school relationships, preschool-school relationships) across time. In international research the issue of transition is emerging as an important new construct in ECCE, replacing the construct of school readiness (Ramey & Ramey, 1999). They cite evidence suggesting that the concept of readiness is flawed in that it focuses on the competence of the child as compared to the role of the family, school, and community. They suggest that this traditional view of readiness needs to be replaced with a transition-to-school framework, which views the first few years of a child's school life as a time of adaptation for children, their families and schools.

Fabian and Dunlop (2002) remind us that this is a period of accelerated developmental demands. Although some children will adapt easily to a new educational environment, for others moving from an environment in which they are familiar and secure to a new classroom environment can be a daunting task (Brostrom, 2000). For this reason, it is suggested that attention should be given to transition procedures and practices to ensure a smooth transfer for the child from one setting to another. Continuity from one setting to the next is important so that the child is enabled to predict events and have some sense of control over her environment. Fabian and Dunlop (2002) suggest that it is essential that children are given the knowledge they need about the timings involved in the change, people involved, and the expectations of the new setting. With this in mind, practices which facilitate the transition to formal schooling by involving all the parties playing a role in the process are encouraged.

Why are Transition Practices Needed?

Bailey, (1999) in explaining why the National Centre for Early Development and Learning (NCEDL) in the United States chose the topic of transition for one of their first synthesis conferences, explained that this was because the group considered success at the first year of schooling to be critical:

Kindergarten is a context in which children make important conclusions about school as a place where they want to be and themselves as learners vis-à-vis schools. If no other objectives are accomplished, it is essential that the transition to school occur in such a way that children and families have a positive view of the school and that children have a feeling of perceived competence as learners: "School is OK, and I think that I can make it here". Unfortunately, many children and families reach alternative conclusions about school and about their fit with the school environment during this very first year. (p.xv)

Recognition is growing internationally that a successful transition to school is significant to the social and emotional welfare of the child, as well as their later cognitive achievements (Kagan & Neuman, 1999; Margetts, 2002; Datar, 2003; Dunlop and Fabian, 2003; Wylie & Thompson, 2003). The period of transition provides opportunities for growth for children and their families, however it also creates challenges for them to face. Research on children's adjustment at this critical time suggests that social and emotional difficulties in the first years of formal schooling can predict risks of educational and social problems for up to ten to twelve years hence (Margetts, 2002). Entwistle and Alexander (1999) would support this assertion, and propose that on commencing formal schooling children assume a new role, that of student. This is a role that they will occupy for many years, and how they develop into this role largely determines their future educational direction.

Rationale for this Study
Internationally the focus on transition to formal schooling has increased (Brostrom, 2002; Brooker, 2002; EECERJ, 2003; Peters, 2004; Dockett & Perry, 2005; Sharp & White, 2005). However, Pianta and Cox (1999a), referring to research on the transition to formal schooling in the United States, advise that our understanding of this period in children's lives is still very limited. We have no clear understanding of this transition in the Irish context.

The study investigates the experiences of children who have attended preschool in the transition to formal schooling, as compared to those who enter school directly from the home environment. Although some children enter school without any experience in

group settings, schools in Ireland have a long history of dealing with that situation. Children attending school straight from the home environment are now in the minority in Ireland. Hayes and Kernan (2001) found that 90% of children studied in the Irish element of the IEA Preprimary Project had attended some form of ECCE service before beginning primary school. This study addresses the now predominant situation of children making the transition from a preschool environment to the school environment. The audit of research in the area of ECCE in Ireland conducted by the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (Walsh, 2003) identified a gap in the area of research on the transition from preschool to formal schooling in Ireland. Hayes (2004) making concluding observations at the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) "Questions of Quality" conference in Dublin Castle, also spoke of how "the matching of quality at points of transition in the lives of children warrants consideration" (p.413). The results of this study will provide the first data on the policies and procedures in use in Irish preschools and schools with regard to this transition.

Methodology

This paper reports on Phase I of the study, in which a questionnaire was used to investigate the views of a total sample of 500 preschool teachers and teachers of Junior Infants classes on the impact of the transition for children.

The preschool sample was identified using lists of preschools held by Health Boards. The Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations (Department of Health and Children, 1996) propose that every preschool in operation in Ireland must notify their local Health Board. Stratified random sampling was used to identify the final proportional sample of 249 preschools. The Primary School sample was identified using the Department of Education's school listing for academic year 2003-2004 which was the most up-to-date school listing available in February 2005. As with the preschool sample, stratified random sampling was used, and again proportional allocation ensured that each county was included in the final sample of 250 schools in direct proportion to its percentage of the total national sample.

Two questionnaires were developed, one for preschool teachers and one for teachers of junior infants classes, containing related questions. The questionnaires were based on an extensive review of literature on transition to school[3]. They covered sections on the

service/school itself, general beliefs about the transition process, skills that teachers believe are important for children to possess on arrival at school, and transition practices in place at preschools and schools. The questionnaire included sections with open-ended questions to allow respondents to reply in greater detail on various issues. While finalising the questionnaires it was decided to have the instruments evaluated by an 'expert panel', a technique which has been used in previous studies of this kind (Daly, 2002). The group were asked to review both questionnaires, highlight any deficiencies, identify questions that they felt were most relevant, and comment on any areas they felt were of particular interest. The questionnaire was also piloted both before and after review by the expert panel.

It was decided to send out the questionnaires at the time of year when the transition to formal schooling would be in the forefront of each group's mind. Therefore the preschool questionnaire was sent out in April/May 2005, as this is the time of year when preschool children in Ireland are being prepared for school start in September[4]. The Junior Infants questionnaire was sent out in October/November 2005, when the teachers would have just experienced the influx of a new group of students.

The final response rate for the preschool questionnaires was 77%, and for the teachers of junior infants classes was 82%. These high response rates are mainly attributed to the use of both follow-up phone calls, and follow-up mailings to secure a high rate of responses, however it might also reflect a keen interest in the topic.

Some initial findings from the questionnaire data are now considered, although formal analysis of data is ongoing.

Initial Findings from the Questionnaire Data

Both preschool teachers and teachers of junior infants classes were asked, based on their own experiences, to estimate the percentage of children that they felt may have some difficulties making the transition to formal schooling. Sixty-one percent of preschool teachers felt that less than 20% of children are at risk of experiencing some difficulties making the transition, with an additional 23% estimating the figure as higher at between 20%-40%. Seventy percent of the teachers of junior infants classes felt that less than 20% of children are at risk of experiencing some difficulties making the transition, with an additional 24% estimating the figure as being between 20%-40%.

The two groups of teachers were then asked to rank their level of agreement that various different groups of children could be at risk in general terms of experiencing a difficult transition to formal schooling[5]. Interestingly both sets of teachers identified three particular groups of children as being most at risk of experiencing some difficulties. These were children with low self esteem, children who have difficulty sitting still and listening, and children with behavioural problems. These three types of children were considered to be more at risk than groups such as children who had not been to preschool, children from disadvantaged backgrounds, children from minority groups, and children with special needs. The two sets of teachers were also in general agreement about types of children that they would **not** consider to be at risk of experiencing a difficult transition. These were children in urban areas, firstborn children, and boys.

When asked which skills were necessary for children to succeed in formal schooling, again the two groups were in general agreement. The four general areas of social skills, independence, language and communication skills, and the ability to sit, listen and concentrate, were highlighted as being of particular importance by the two groups. Academic skills were not rated highly by either group.

Independence also featured highly in beliefs about how preschools should prepare children for primary school. Preschool teachers widely reported an emphasis on encouraging independence in children, including responsibility for both themselves and their belongings (reported in 99% of preschools in the study), and the use of classroom-type rules such as standing in line and waiting their turn (again reported in 99% of preschools in the study). The number of junior infants teachers who suggested that these practices were of particular importance at preschool level was also very high. However some concerns were expressed by teachers of junior infants classes that children were not actually arriving at school adequately prepared in terms of independence. Whether this is in itself a transition difficulty, or whether definitions of, or expectations of, independent behaviour among the two groups of teachers are different, will be examined.

Only 23% of preschool teachers reported that they had any form of communication with primary teachers in relation to transition, however 74% reported that they felt such communication should take place. Similarly only 29% of preschool teachers reported that they undertook evaluations of children which could be passed to the primary school

teachers; however 81% of preschool teachers felt that it would be a good idea to undertake such evaluations and pass them on to the primary school. Preliminary finding suggest that quite a high number of teachers of junior infants classes would welcome greater communication with preschool teachers, and would welcome evaluations (eg, strengths or support needs of individual children) from preschool teachers. However, some primary teachers reported concerns about whether preschool teachers were adequately qualified to assess a child's readiness for school.

Discussion

Figures estimating the number of children who are at risk of experiencing a difficult transition are in line with international findings (Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta & Cox, 2000; Hausken & Rathbun, 2002). Although the teachers in the current study reported transition problems in a minority of students, it is clear that as Stephen & Cope suggest, during the transition to school "some children are at risk of becoming disengaged from education at the beginning of their school career" (2003, p.262). They suggest that in the interests of inclusion no child should be left out of school, or put in a position where their success is less likely.

The two groups of teachers identified children with low self esteem, children who have difficulty sitting still and listening, and children with behavioural problems, as being most at risk of experiencing a difficult transition. A sense of self-worth, and a confidence that you can cope in the new school environment are important at the time of transition, and those children with low self-esteem are less likely to exhibit such confidence (Fabian, 2002; Bulkeley & Fabian, 2006). As Fabian notes "personal, rather than intellectual, ability is the key to giving children the best start to school. Social confidence and a sense of success play an important part in giving children self-esteem which will, in turn, help children to approach the start of school in a positive way" (2002, p.63). The issue of concentrating, sitting still and listening is a very complex one. Whether sitting still and listening is really the best way for children of this age to learn is open to question. The Revised Primary Curriculum (Department of Education and Science, 1999) proposes that children are active learners, and should play an active part in the learning process; at no point does it advocate sitting still as being useful in terms of children's learning. Fabian (2002) notes that the ability to sit still is suggested to be the most advanced stage of movement, but she also found that the ability to sit still was identified as being of

importance when starting formal schooling. It is, perhaps understandable that teachers of large classes would find the ability of students to sit still useful in terms of classroom management, and the ability to listen and concentrate as being useful in practical terms. However, whether this is in the best interests of the children is questionable.

When asked which skills were necessary for children to succeed in formal schooling, it became clear that both preschool and primary school teachers value the skill of independence, which they defined in general terms as the ability to be self-sufficient in taking care of oneself and ones property within the classroom situation. A higher percentage of teachers of junior infant classes placed a greater emphasis on independence/self-help skills than their preschool colleagues. Dockett & Perry (2004) also noted that teachers in their study valued the skills of independence (toileting, dressing themselves, and taking care of their own things) as being of importance when starting school. It is easy to see how such skills, in essence the ability to negotiate classroom life without the constant attention of the teacher, would be valued by a teacher working with a class of up to 36 four and five year olds[6]. Socially, the ability to wait turns, share, anticipate change, and 'read' the teacher will increase positive experiences within the classroom (Fabian, 2002; Haas-Foretta & Ottolini-Geno, 2006). Such skills would indeed support students dealing with the new rules and levels of negotiation which international researchers suggest children have to adhere to at school, compared to the relative flexibility and freedom of preschool (Myers, 1997; Wolery, 1999). In essence, the teachers in this study have suggested that children with the ability to negotiate classroom life independently, equipped with good social skills and the ability to concentrate and listen for short periods of time, are more likely to be successful at primary level.

The emphasis on communication and language skills is not surprising. This emphasis on communication has been noted in other studies. Lin, Lawrence & Gorrell (2003) found that 75% of the 3,305 teachers they questioned felt that ability to follow direction and to communicate needs were very important readiness skills, as compared to academic skills which they found to be less important. Communication and language skills are closely linked with literacy skills (DES, 1999). The primary school curriculum notes the importance of oral language, and an emphasis on oral language (both English and Irish) at infant stage is encouraged in the curriculum.

Rimm-Kaufmann, Pianta & Cox (2000) question whether transition problems reported by teachers might reflect disparities between teacher expectations and children's actual competencies. This would support the views of the teachers of junior infants classes that children are not necessarily arriving in their classrooms with the preparation necessary for success, leading the researcher to question if there is in fact a mis-match of beliefs between preschool and primary school teachers about how children should be prepared for school, reflecting a finding reported by Kernan and Hayes (1999). However, this must be considered in tandem with the understanding that the responsibility should not be on the child to enter school 'ready' for the demands of the infants class, but more that the responsibility should be on all professionals involved to work towards an approach that supports children during this time. Such an approach would require greater attention to continuity of services and more emphasis on seamless and continuous services for children across the preschool and primary school years of their education.

Levels of communication between preschools and schools were reported to be low, however both groups were in agreement that such communication should take place. It is recommended that bonds between the preschool and primary school sectors should be strengthened. The OECD (2002) has noted that strong links between the two sectors can have a number of advantages in terms of developing shared goals and educational methods, and also to create coherency in staff training and development. Although fears have been articulated about the push-down of teacher-led academic work rather than child-centred play-based learning (Carr, 2000; Peters 2002), if the two cultures can come together while respecting the traditions of both groups, the resulting continuity of approach could benefit children making the transition between the two educational settings. Policies are needed that would foster communication in this area.

Following on from this, possible different uses of language within the two educational spheres were noted in the findings. Differences were found in the language used in teacher responses to the skills children need for a successful transition to school. As Donnelly notes, "Language matters and the language we use to describe our work with children indicates our understanding of childhood" (Donnelly, 2005, p56). Differences in cultural expectations, and distinctions in meaning the two groups of teachers take from the same language have been identified in previous Irish research (Hayes, O'Flaherty & Kernan, 1997) and may well be the case here. As Dunlop and Fabian advise "a shared language to

describe transitions may not be a mutual one" (2002, p146). Considering the historical and cultural divergence between preschool and primary education in Ireland which covers nearly every aspect of both types of settings, it is possible that this is the case. Difference found in response rates in relation to the importance of problem solving skills, academic skills, and task completion, could have cultural or linguistic connotations. This possible gap in understanding requires further investigation, particularly if greater levels of communication between the two groups are to be encouraged. An investigation into the professional language used in the preschool and primary school sectors in Ireland could be a first step in this process.

Conclusion

As this was the first research into this area in Ireland, one of the primary considerations in the rationale in the design of the study was to provide much needed information on the beliefs of teachers at both preschool and primary school level on various issues surrounding the area of transition to school. Although there were many areas in which the two groups were in agreement, further investigation is needed into possible differences in the expectations of the two groups, and possible different uses of language.

Certainly, we cannot assume that all participants in a child's mesosystem have the same ideas about what is important on transition to school. Preschool teachers and the teachers of junior infants classes fill two very powerful and influencing roles in the period of transition, so it is important to compare and contrast their views. Indeed, differences between the opinions of preschool and primary school teachers with regard to adjustment to school have been identified in other international research (Dockett & Perry, 2004). Perhaps due to these differences, the OECD have noted that in Early Start[7] units in Ireland where primary school teachers and preschool teachers work together, both groups reported that this was a "partnership challenge" (2004, p.60) partly because of the differences in professional perspectives.

Nationally and across a variety of settings, these two groups of teachers create the environments to and from which children are making transitions, and their views on transitions and readiness will be translated into practice in their classrooms. The emphasis of the teachers in this study on independence, social skills, and language and communication skills reveals that their primary concern is with children's social

behaviours on entering school, rather than academics. This is in line with much international research into the concerns of primary level teachers' concerns about children's readiness (Piotrkowski, 2001; Lin et al, 2003; Wesley & Buysee, 2003; Dockett & Perry, 2004).

Findings reported in this paper represent preliminary data analysis of a wider data set. Full analysis will be complete by mid-2007, and will include additional data from parents and children themselves.

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