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"If they Fail that First Year, it's very Hard for them to Recover": An Exploration of Factors that Support and Hinder the Transition to Mainstream School for Children with Special Educational Needs and their Families.

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"If they fail that first year, it's very hard for them to recover":

An exploration of factors that support and hinder the transition to mainstream school

for children with special educational needs and their families.

Fiona Hassett

Submitted to the Department of Social Sciences, Dublin Institute of Technology, in partial fulfilment of the requirements leading to the award of Masters in Child, Family and Community Studies.

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Declaration of Ownership

I declare that the attached work is entirely my own and that all sources have been acknowledged.

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Acronyms

DCYA   Department of Children and Youth Affairs

DEIS   Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools

DES   Department of Education and Skills

DIT   Dublin Institute of Technology

ECCE   Early Childhood Care and Education

EPSEN Act   Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (Act)

HSCL   Home School Community Liaison

NCSE   National Council for Special Education

NDA   National Disability Authority

SEN   Special Educational Needs

SENO   Special Education Needs Organiser

SNA   Special Needs Assistant

Abstract

The transition to school is increasingly recognised as a significant life event for children, with a positive or negative transition impacting on their social and emotional wellbeing and academic achievements. Children with special educational needs are at an increased risk of a poor adjustment to school and their families are vulnerable to additional stresses due to the child's special educational needs. The transition to school is therefore an important period for these families, and the supports available to them to make this transition as smooth as possible are essential to provide children with the best possible start to formal education. In this study, semi-structured interviews and focus groups were carried out with parents, early years professionals, primary school teachers and a special needs assistant, to explore what factors support and hinder the transition to mainstream school for children with special educational needs and their families.

The findings from this study indicate that mainstream school is associated with a number of benefits for children with special educational needs and their parents, in particular the sense of belonging they feel within the community as they get to know other families and children attending mainstream school. Findings also indicate that schools provide a supportive role for children with special educational needs and their families with the transition to mainstream school; although schools are faced with certain restrictions that make the facilitation of this process challenging. The importance of preschool in the transition process emerged from the study as another key finding, particularly in promoting important skills for school readiness. The development of communication between both sectors emerged as an important support to the transition process. Finally, the study highlighted the ad hoc nature of resource allocation between schools for children with special educational needs, and the negative impact that difficulty with accessing educational resources can have on parents. The study concludes with some recommendations in the area of transitions to mainstream school for children with special educational needs and their families.

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction to Research Study

This study investigates the transition of children with special educational needs (SEN)[1] to mainstream primary school. To conduct this investigation, perspectives of various stakeholders involved in this transition process were sought; including parents who have been through the process, parents who have yet to support their child to start school, early years professionals, primary school teachers and a special needs assistant (SNA). This chapter gives a background and rationale of the study, and outlines the key research aim and questions, providing context for the following chapters.

1.2 Background

The term SEN is part of the legal terminology related to the definition of special education under the Education of Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004 (Government of Ireland, 2004). The Act recognises the definition of SEN as

> "a limitation of an individual's capacity to participate in education due to enduring physical, sensory, mental health or learning disability, or any other condition that impacts on a person's learning, compared to a person without that condition" (Government of Ireland, 2004:6).

Less than 1% of children in Ireland attend a special school, with mainstream school being the first preference for parents of children with SEN (National Council for Special Education, 2013a). This reflects a shift in recent decades towards mainstreaming, at policy level and in the provision of educational resources for children with SEN. The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) recommends that, in general, children with SEN should attend mainstream school, unless there is a professional recommendation specifying otherwise (NCSE, 2013a). The EPSEN Act provides for children with additional needs in the school setting in Ireland, including the appointment of Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENOs). SENOs process applications for resources, including SNAs, teaching hours, and special equipment (Armstrong, Kane, O'Sullivan and Kelly, 2010:28). Although the EPSEN Act provides a legislative

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[1] The term SEN will be used throughout this dissertation in keeping with the legal terminology within the Irish education system.

framework for SEN provision, the act has not been fully implemented due to a difficult economic climate in Ireland (Armstrong et al., 2010:1). Some provisions have been made under the Act, including the establishment of the NCSE. However key parts of the Act have not been implemented, including provisions for individual education plans, resources for early years services with supporting children with SEN, and development of inclusive training for whole schools (Citizens Information Board, 2012; NCSE, 2006). To provide recent context of children with SEN enrolled in primary school, 42,000 students with SEN were supported with additional teaching resources by the NCSE in 2013, which is 8% of the all children enrolled in primary school in 2012/2013 (Department of Education and Skills, 2013; NCSE, 2014). Significant cuts have been made in recent years to SEN resource provision, with primary schools receiving up to a 25% cut in resource hours for children with multiple disabilities between 2012 and 2013 (NCSE, 2013b).

Children with SEN can also access educational provision in early years services prior to starting school. The Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) offer a free preschool year under the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme for all children of eligible age. Children with SEN can access this over two years pro-rata if they are not ready to start school (DCYA, 2014). Moloney and McCarthy (2010), in their research of 171 early years services on the inclusion of children with SEN in these settings, cite that 3.6% of children in those mainstream services had SEN. Findings from this study indicate that only 45% of the 3.6% of children with SEN had support from a preschool SNA, and the lack of SNA support was emphasised by all stakeholders. Overall, the study highlights inadequate resources and supports for early years services for the inclusion of children with SEN.

1.3 Rationale

The transition of children with SEN to primary school is an important issue as it poses a number of challenges to children and their families adjusting to a new environment with different social and academic expectations from home, informal or preschool care (Fabian, 2007; Margetts, 2007). A positive transition is important as it results in better social and academic outcomes for children, while a negative transition

can have a lasting impact on children's development (Pianta and Cox, 1999). The transition can be particularly difficult, however, for children with SEN who are at risk of poorer adjustment (Margetts, 2007). Families also face additional challenges due to their child's SEN, therefore the whole family system is more vulnerable to a negative transition and adjustment to school if not sufficiently supported (Janus, Lefort, Cameron and Kopechanski, 2007). The researcher recognised the importance of such research findings in practice, through working with parents of children with SEN. Discussion amongst these parents raised the issue of the transition to school for their children, highlighting the struggles parents face with the process, in addition to the vulnerability of families if they did not receive adequate supports.

1.4 Research Aim and Questions

The central aim of this research is to explore what factors can support and hinder children with SEN and their families with transitioning to mainstream primary school.

Objectives:

- To investigate the perspectives of parents who have been through this transition process to identify what factors they found supportive during the transition period, what concerns they had and what challenges they faced.
- To investigate the perspective of parents who are facing this transition process with their children to identify what fears they may have about the transition and what supports they would like to receive.
- To investigate the perspectives of staff in schools and preschools to identify what they find challenging or helpful in offering support to families with the transition to school.

Key Research Questions:

(i)   What are the factors that can provide support to children with SEN and their families as they transition to mainstream primary school?

(ii) What are the factors that can hinder the transition process for children with SEN and their families?

(iii) What are the factors that schools and preschools find challenging or helpful in offering support to families with the transition to school?

Glossary of Key Terms

Transition – the process of moving from one educational environment or phase to another, including a change in teacher, curriculum or ethos (Fabian and Dunlop, 2002; Margetts, 1999).

Special Educational Needs – *"a restriction in the capacity of the person to participate in and benefit from education on account of an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or learning disability, or any other condition which results in a person learning differently from a person without that condition"* (Government of Ireland, 2004:6).

Early Years Service – any setting providing education and care for children prior to starting school, with the term preschool used interchangeably for the context of this study.

Early Years Professional – adults working within early years services supporting the education and care of children prior to starting school, with the term early years educators also used interchangeably.

1.5 Overview of Dissertation

The next chapter outlines key literature regarding SEN and provision for SEN in primary schools; in addition to children's transitions to primary school. Chapter three summarises the methodology employed to conduct this study and the overall research design. Findings from the research are presented in chapter four and discussed in chapter five in light of key themes emerging from findings and from the literature. Chapter six draws together conclusions from the study and presents some recommendations in the area of transitions for children with SEN and their families to mainstream primary school.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter examines literature related to inclusion and special educational provision in primary schools; in addition to transitions to primary schools in Ireland. Discussion takes place on evolving definitions and prevalence of SEN. Inclusion of children with SEN in primary school is explored, including discussion on medical and social models of inclusion. Bronfenrenner's (1979) ecological systems model is explained to provide a theoretical framework regarding children's transitions to school. Literature on the transition process for children to school is examined, highlighting both challenges and supportive factors for children with SEN, parents and families; in particular the role that schools and preschools can play in the transition process.

2.2 Definition of SEN

Definitions of special educational needs have changed over time to reflect societal discourse regarding SEN. Kinsella and Senior (2009) note that 'handicapped' was used to describe a person with a disability up until the late twentieth century, when it was replaced with the term special educational need upon publication of the Warnock Report in the UK (1978). Two contrasting sociological theories of disability emerge from the literature which also influence definitions of SEN. Kearney and Kane (2006) explain that the medical model of disability perceives the disability being part of the individual and requires intervention by professionals. In contrast, Oliver (1990) proposes that the social model of disability recognises that those with a disability are disabled by factors within the environment which do not cater for their needs. The Warnock Report (1978) provided significant policy implications that later influenced special education in Ireland, moving away from the understanding that a child's difficulty with learning is solely related to factors within the child; factoring in environmental, social and cultural elements that restrict the child's learning (Thomas and Loxley, 2001). This reflects a shift towards a social model of disability in understanding SEN.

2.3 Prevalence

Internationally, prevalence rates of SEN vary widely depending on the definitions of SEN in individual countries and the sources of information used to determine SEN (Banks and McCoy, 2011:2). Banks and McCoy (2011:2) note that prevalence rates can range from less than 1 percent in some European countries to over 20 percent in others. The prevalence of SEN in primary school in Ireland is difficult to establish. The NCSE commissioned a report in 2011 on the prevalence of SEN (Banks and McCoy, 2011). The report highlights that an increase in the prevalence of children with SEN has occurred due to policy change towards inclusive education, namely the EPSEN Act, which widened the definition of SEN resulting in more children falling under this umbrella definition (Banks and McCoy, 2011). Adopting this definition of SEN, the prevalence of SEN in Ireland in 2006 was estimated at 17.7% (NCSE, 2006).

However, Banks and McCoy (2011:121) acknowledge the wide variance of prevalence of SEN depending on data sets used, with the SEN prevalence rate in their report estimated to be 25%, based on *Growing up in Ireland* data. In context of children with SEN in primary school, 8% of pupils received additional teaching supports in 2012/2013 (DES, 2013; NCSE, 2014). Banks and McCoy (2011:17) note that difficulty arises with measuring prevalence depending on whether measurement is capturing diagnosis, or identification and assessment of SEN. This highlights discrepancies in understanding of SEN across different agencies, and it has to be questioned how SEN resource provision and allocation can be executed with such differences.

2.4 Inclusion

There is not one single definition of inclusion agreed within the literature, which reflects its complex nature (Winter and O'Raw, 2010). Florian (2008) defines it as the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream education, suggesting that inclusive education has merely replaced special education, with little changed in principle for students with SEN. Alternatively, Winter and O'Raw (2010:12) define inclusive education as incorporating the rights of pupils and reviewing the education system to respond the diverse needs of students. Inclusion is understood to be underpinned by human rights principles, appreciating the diversity of all students (Florian, 2008; Shevlin,

Kearns, Ranaghan, Twomey, Smith and Winter, 2009). An understanding of inclusion will differ depending on whether a 'social model' or a 'medical model' of disability is adopted. Stephen and Cope (2003) explain that the medical model will define the reason for a difficult adjustment to school as being located within the child; for example, medical needs, or temperament. An inclusive school, however, adapting the social model, will investigate the mismatch between the environment and the child's needs in order to accommodate his/her adjustment to the school environment (Stephen and Cope, 2003:270).

There are two competing views regarding the inclusion of children with SEN in the mainstream classroom. The overall consensus is that inclusion is the ideal approach that will promote the basic human rights of the child, but needs to be considered carefully to ensure that inclusion of the child in the mainstream classroom is best for all involved (Bowe, 2005; Farrell, 2009; Hornby, 1999). Inclusive education has been found to have many academic, social and emotional benefits for children with SEN and denotes a positive approach of integration of children with SEN in the mainstream classroom (Brinker and Thorpe, 1984; Woronov, 2000). Bowe (2005) explains that while inclusion is beneficial and should be considered for most pupils with SEN, it may not offer appropriate education for students with severe disabilities. Inclusion based on a social model of disability is the approach that primary schools in Ireland strive towards, yet the full realisation of inclusive education through implementation of the EPSEN Act has somewhat been hindered by a difficult economic climate (Armstrong et al., 2010; National Disability Authority, 2011).

2.5 SEN Provision – Social or Medical Model?
2.5.1 International Context

Provision for special education internationally in the early twentieth century reflected a medical model of disability (Thomas, Walker and Webb, 1998). Developments in special education provision in the UK in particular have influenced the Irish education system. While Reynolds and Ainscow (1994) acknowledge that early advocates of special education in the nineteenth century campaigned for education for children with SEN who were excluded from educational services, Pijl and Meijer (1994)

note that later segregation of children with SEN according to their disability was favoured, reflecting a medical model of disability. Booth and Ainscow (2002) point out that by the 1980's, the UK education system moved towards a social model of inclusion within schools. However, Ellis, Tod and Graham-Matheson (2012) in their survey of over 1500 primary school teachers, highlighted difficulty for schools to implement inclusion as envisaged by the government. This suggests that while the UK strives to provide inclusive education that reflects a social model of inclusion, government policy and provision fails to fully support this vision.

2.5.2 Irish Context

There is limited research and analysis in the Irish context into whether current educational inclusion of children with SEN is based on a social or medical model of disability. The National Disability Authority (NDA) conducted research in 2004 and 2005 into the perspectives of stakeholders on special education provision for children with disabilities in primary schools in Ireland (NDA, 2006). Some of the key findings of the research highlighted a lack of fundamental understanding of SEN and disability, both at local level within the school, as well as at governmental policy level (NDA, 2006). The report also emphasised that teachers felt they had inadequate knowledge regarding various disabilities and associated needs (NDA, 2006).

These findings suggest that, while schools and governmental policy support inclusion in general, in reality practice reflects more of a medical model of disability, linking the child's ability or inability to learn or access learning supports to his/her disability. The NDA (2008:chapt 2) explain that Kenny, McNeela and Shevlin (2003) reviewed the experiences of young people with disabilities in school and subsequently support this argument, highlighting their view that Irish government policy has previously prevented integration in secondary schools "largely because it is based on the medical model of functional deficiency rather than the social model of disability". By failing to make changes to the education system, the government has not provided access to education for young people with severe disabilities (NDA, 2008). While the introduction of the EPSEN Act in 2004 addressed this to some extent, the act has not been fully implemented as intended (NDA, 2008). Therefore, while the Irish government

has taken steps towards an inclusive approach in schools based on a social model of disability, this has yet to be fully realised.

2.6 Parental Views on SEN Provision

Several studies have taken place to investigate parental satisfaction regarding SEN provision, with parental expectations of SEN supports and their aspirations for their children varying widely. Bornfield (1994) completed a survey of 250 parents in US, which reflected low parent aspirations with only 4% of respondents believing their child would be able to progress from high school. The US National Household Education Survey consisted of longitudinal studies with a sample of 11,000 parents and concluded that parental satisfaction with school provision for children was high, with 90% quite or very satisfied with their school (Newman, 2005).

The NCSE in 2010 commissioned a report on parental experiences of special educational services in Ireland (Armstrong et al., 2010). Nearly 1,400 parents of children with SEN were surveyed, with 75% of parents reporting that they were quite or very satisfied with their child's education and support within the school (Armstrong et al., 2010:6). Parental satisfaction included being happy with supportive teachers, adequate planning in the classroom for their child's needs, and good communication between parents and the school (Armstrong et al., 2010). Of the 12% of parents that expressed dissatisfaction, this was related to how the child was taught, teachers not having adequate understanding of the child's needs, and lack of parental involvement in the child's education (Armstrong et al., 2010). Shevlin, Noonan Walsh, Mc Neela Kenny, Mc Neela, and Molloy (2003) carried out a small scale study of seven parents of children with Down syndrome in mainstream education, with parents noting a number of benefits of inclusion for their children, including socialisation with peers and more developed relationships outside of the school environment.

2.7 Theorising Transitions to School

From a lifecycle theory perspective, the transition to school is one of the first critical transition periods in a child's lifecycle, and according to Dockett and Perry (2007), considerable support is required to assist the child and family through this

transition. Fabian and Dunlop (2002) define the transition to school as a process, rather than one single event. This process begins before the child actually starts school, at home or in preschool, continuing through the settling-in period, and persisting until the child is well settled into the school environment (Fabian and Dunlop, 2002). Several theoretical approaches have been engaged to explain children's transitions to school. Griebel and Niesel (1997) adopted Cowan's (1991) family transition model when discussing this transition. This model considers the different perspectives of each family member and the numerous demands of various family transitions (such as divorce) on the child (Cowan, 1991). Griebel and Niesel (1999) have also employed Bowlby's (1951) attachment theory to explain children's transitions to school, relating children's successful or unsuccessful transitions to school to their early attachment to a primary carer and their subsequent internal working model for developing relationships.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1992) ecological systems model has been utilised by several theorists to delineate children's transitions to school (Brostrom, 2000; Margetts, 2007; O'Kane, 2007; Pianta and Walsh, 1996). Fabian and Dunlop (2007) describe transition itself as an ecological concept. A child transitions from one environment (home) to another (school) on a regular basis. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) model examines the impact that the relationship between different environments can have for the child. This will allow an understanding of the influence of supportive or unsupportive relationships between home and school and preschool settings on a child's transition to school. The model also looks at factors in the child's wider environment which can indirectly impact on his/her development; including parental influences such as unemployment, government policy and cultural values, all of which have potential to influence a child's transition to mainstream school. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) model is therefore valuable for providing a holistic understanding on the many influences on the transition to mainstream school for children with SEN, and will thus be adopted for this research.

2.7.1 Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) original theory proposes that the child is at the core of four environmental systems, with the child a participant in the interactions and

experiences within each of the four systems, influencing his/her development. The microsystem is the innermost system of this layered model, which is the context that is closest to the child, including the home environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The microsystem also includes individuals, interpersonal relationships and interactions within immediate surrounds, therefore family members are very much part of the microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Preschool and school are also considered a microsystem, therefore when the child is transitioning to school, he/she is adapting to a new microsystem (Margetts, 2007). Brostrom (2002:2) acknowledges that the most important aspect to support children in preparing and getting ready for school is the "support from parents, family and community", reflecting the vital influence the child's home microsystem has on his/her transition to school.

The mesosystem is the second system in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) model, which O'Kane (2007:42) describes as links between two different microsystems. Margetts (2007) further explains this system in terms of the child's transition to school, where the child or his/her parents have good experience or knowledge of the school microsystem prior to the child starting. O'Kane (2007) emphasises that support from teachers for children and parents with the transition creates a supportive home-school mesosystem for the family, increasing the likelihood of a positive adjustment. Pianta and Walsh (1996) furthermore highlight the importance of the relationship between the home and school setting for the child, particularly for children with SEN at risk of poor adjustment. Fabian and Dunlop (2007) note that involving parents in the transition to school at an early stage of the process is crucial for a more successful transition. The home-preschool-school mesosystem and positive relationships developed between each microsystem is therefore important for parents and children in the transition process.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) third system, the exosystem, does not directly involve the child, yet influences their development through elements present within their environment, such as low socio-economic status. Fabian and Dunlop (2007) note that disadvantage in areas such as parental unemployment can greatly increase stress upon parents and subsequently the family unit. This can result in increased vulnerability of children, with the potential for a poorer adjustment to school and later educational disadvantage (Fabian and Dunlop, 2007). Margetts (2007) cites government policies as

another aspect of the exosystem which can impact indirectly on the transitions of children with SEN to school. Armstrong et al. (2010) note that government policy has an important impact on inclusion in mainstream school, directly influencing resource allocation within schools. The exosystem therefore can provide a powerful influence on the child's education and transition to school.

The fourth and final system in the ecological systems theory is the macrosystem, the outermost layer in the model, which consists of cultural beliefs that impact on an individual's environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). O' Kane (2007:42) explains that how children's needs are prioritised within the macrosystem will affect the support they receive within the other levels of the ecological system. Paquette and Ryan (2001) give the example that where a society believes that parents have main responsibility for child rearing, it is probable that less resources will be provided by that society to support parents. This in turn impacts on parental capacity to parent, thus influencing the child's microsystem and mesosystems (O'Kane, 2007:42). Bronfenbrenner's (1979) provides an understanding of the many elements in a child's environment that directly and indirectly influence transitions to school for children with SEN.

2.8 Empirical Evidence on Transitions to School

The literature acknowledges that transitions for children in general to school can be complex, with outcomes for children's long-term well-being and education impacted if a child does not adjust successfully to school (Dockett and Perry, 2007; Dunlop, 2007; Griebel and Niesel, 1997). Pianta and Cox (1999) advise that while successful transitions to school can result in positive social and academic outcomes for children, poor transitions can result in negative outcomes, with negative long term consequences. Margetts (2007) maintains that risk factors, including SEN, increase the likelihood of children adjusting inadequately to the new school setting.

In Ireland, the transition to primary school for children is a growing area of research, with Irish studies in this area only emerging in the last decade (O'Kane, 2007; Walsh, 2003). The White Paper on Early Childhood Education (Department of Education and Science, 1999) points out that a difficult transition to school will have a lasting impact on children's development and can result in them falling behind their peers. The

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National Disability Authority (2011) explains that the transition of children with SEN to school in Ireland can be challenging. Armstrong et al. (2010) did report high parental satisfaction with children's transition to mainstream school, with 92% of parents surveyed in the NCSE report happy that their child was welcomed to school (Armstrong et al., 2010). Positively, Rose, Shevlin, Winter and O'Raw (2010) explain that children with SEN progress socially once they are enrolled within school. While parental preference for the inclusion of children with SEN in mainstream education is evident, children with SEN making the transition to school for the first time can nevertheless be faced with additional challenges compared to their non-disabled peers (NDA, 2011).

2.8.1 Challenges for the Child

The literature highlights a number of challenges that the transition to school poses to children, as they adjust to a new microsystem with different social and academic expectations from home or preschool care (Fabian, 2007; Griebel and Niesel, 2007; Margetts, 2007). Fabian (2007) discusses the change in physical environment for children, as primary school is physically bigger than preschool, for example, with more peers resulting in increased complex interactions compared to informal care or preschool settings. O'Kane and Hayes (2006) note the different academic expectations of children in primary school compared to their previous setting prior to starting school. The difference in curricular approaches between preschool, where children are encouraged to be independent learners through play, and primary school where there is more emphasis on structured learning, can result a lack of continuity for children (O'Kane and Hayes, 2006).

Children with SEN require extra support to adapt to the new school environment, as well as additional support to achieve the level of academic learning required of their peer group (Janus et al., 2007). Margetts (2007:108) highlights the additional developmental challenges that children with SEN face upon starting school, noting that children with cognitive immaturity or impaired self-regulation abilities compared to their peers can display behavioural difficulties arising from frustration with falling behind academically. Janus, Kopechanski, Cameron and Hughes (2008) note that the

accessibility of supports within the school to assist the child's needs will greatly influence the success of the child's transition.

2.8.2 Challenges for Parents and Family

McIntyre, Eckert, Fiese, DiGennaro Reed and Wildenger (2010) acknowledge the challenges the transition to school can pose on the family system, with family members facing different expectations as they learn how to support their child's learning, deal with new interactions with teachers and adopt new school routines. Janus et al. (2007) acknowledge the specific challenges that parents of children with SEN face even prior to this transition, noting that parenting of children with SEN creates additional stress for families, thus increasing the risk of a difficult transition from the outset. McIntyre et al. (2010) also identified that families of children with SEN have considerably more concerns regarding the child's transition to school, including the child's general readiness for school, behaviour, communication and academic ability.

Russell (2005) notes that children with SEN are intentionally identified by schools so that resources can be allocated to the child. This singling out can subsequently impact on the parent, as they feel socially isolated from other parents, and have to come to terms with the different school systems and procedures that belong to SEN provision (Russell, 2005). The NCSE (2013b) note that children travelling further to special school are at increased risk of becoming isolated from peers and families in their communities. Janus et al. (2007) acknowledge that parents of children with SEN must develop new support networks during this transition period and are at increased risk of isolation from other parents. Parents of children with SEN may be supported well through early intervention agencies, yet upon starting school, the school may come to rely on the parent to understand the child's needs and allocate appropriate resources (Janus et al., 2007).

2.8.3 Role of Schools in Supporting Transitions

The literature acknowledges the supportive role that schools can play in supporting parents and children to overcome any challenges. Fowler, Schwartz and Atwater (1991) advocate parental involvement in the child's transition to school where possible in order to ensure that appropriate supports are allocated to the child. Janus et al.

(2007) and Russell (2005) however, emphasise the importance of developing realistic expectations with parents from the beginning of the transition to school, to avoid parents misunderstanding the level of support the school can provide. The school therefore has an important role to engage parents from the very start of the child's transition to school and encourage their involvement in the child's adjustment to school. The NCSE (2013b) recommend that parents visit the school with the child prior to starting, which can be a simple yet effective way for schools to develop the parent-school relationship and prepare the parents and child for the transition to the new school environment.

Primary schools also have a responsibility to support teachers in teaching children with SEN in the classroom, with training in the area of inclusion important. Avramidis and Norwich (2002) stress that professional development is essential to influence positive teacher attitudes towards inclusion, while Horne and Timmons (2009) reinforce this point, noting that positive attitudes are essential amongst teachers to promote inclusion. Indeed, Avissar (2000) notes that the reason for resistance to inclusion from teachers is due to their lack of confidence with teaching children with SEN and lack of adequate training in this area. The NDA (2006) suggest that developing the whole school with regards to inclusion is important, and is perhaps more effective than supporting the professional development needs of individual teachers. Schools therefore must go beyond supporting individual families and examine their overall ethos and practice of inclusion.

2.8.4 Role of Early Years Sector in Transitions to Primary School

Barbour and Seefeldt (1993) highlight the importance of information sharing between preschools and schools to improve the child's transition to school. While some work has taken place on transferring of information between the preschool and primary school sectors, this is not yet embraced nationally (O'Kane and Hayes, 2010). O'Kane and Hayes (2010) recommend development of such a transition programme with joint planning and information sharing to provide smoother transitions for children. Funding is one potential factor that may hinder preschools from developing such a programme, which will increase demands on services with administration and non-contact time to communicate with primary schools. Moloney and McCarthy (2010) highlight inadequate

resourcing, training and supports for early years services for inclusion of children with SEN, without the additional demands of linking with primary schools.

The importance of preschool on developmental outcomes for children with SEN is recognised in the literature (Currie, 2000; Nutbrown, Clough and Atherton, 2013; Rogow, 1991). Docket and Perry (2007) advise that preschools play an important role in developing children's independence skills, which will benefit them in the school environment as they get less support from adults. Fabian and Dunlop (2007) cite the importance of developing resilience in children, which could include these independence skills, to prepare them to be as self-sufficient as possible in the unfamiliar school environment. Margetts (2007) emphasises the importance of social skills for children in transitioning to primary school. These skills help children with developing strategies to enter group play, engage in social interactions with peers and manage their own conflict, all of which contribute towards their adjustment to school (Margetts, 2007). Belsky and MacKinnon (1994) maintain that children who transition with a friend in their class will be more likely to have developed social skills and less problematic behaviour. The early years sector therefore has a considerable role to play in the transition process for children with SEN to primary school.

2.9 Conclusion

A number of key themes emerge from the literature in relation to children with SEN transitioning to school. The transition is an important process for these children, with a positive transition supporting better adjustment to their new microsystem, in addition to better social, emotional and academic outcomes. Children with SEN are at risk of poor adjustment due to additional stresses within the family system. It is agreed within the literature that parental involvement in the child's transition to school is essential for successful adjustment to school and later success.

It is clear that a relationship between the preschool, school and family is vital to support parents and their children with SEN through this process, providing supportive mesosystems between the child's microsystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Both the school and preschool have an important role to play in the transition process, yet they face their own challenges with supporting children with SEN and their families. Important themes

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from the literature will be explored further within this research through consultation with parents, teachers, preschool professionals and an SNA, as key stakeholders in the transition to school for children with SEN.

3. Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The central focus of this study is to explore the factors that support and hinder children with SEN and their families transitioning to school; through examining insights of parents, early years professionals, primary school teachers and an SNA. This exploratory study, therefore, has adopted qualitative research methods which allow the researcher to understand the subjective experience of the respondents (Sarantakos, 1998).

3.2 Research Design

In this study, the researcher aims to investigate the first-hand experiences of parents and educators with the transition to mainstream school for children with SEN. Both the supportive aspects of the transition, in addition to the personal concerns and challenges faced by parents, early years professionals and teachers, will be explored. In order to investigate the personal experiences of stakeholders on this potentially sensitive topic, qualitative research methods were identified as most suitable. Qualitative research methods have a number of strengths which are more suited for this research study in comparison to quantitative methods. Denzin and Lincoln (2003:603) note that qualitative methods allow "direct engagement" with research participants to collect information about participant experiences in their own words, while Oakley (1999) explains they can also reveal insights which may not be foreseen by the researcher. This subjectivity is lacking in quantitative research methods, which favour more specific measurable outcomes than qualitative research (Blaxter, Hughes & Tight, 2010).

Blaxter et al (2010:65) point out that quantitative research usually involves large-scale studies in order to achieve "breadth", as opposed to smaller scale qualitative research that aims to achieve "depth". Adopting qualitative methods for this research will not allow the scientific large-scale approach that quantitative methods permit. Nevertheless, it is intended that by using qualitative research methods, stakeholders involved in this study will bring their own unique experiences of the transition to school, subsequently providing more profound insights into the transition process which would not be afforded through quantitative methods such as a survey.

3.3 Data Collection Methods

The researcher employed two qualitative research instruments in order to collect data for this study, semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Interviews were held with five parents and one SNA, one focus group was held with three early years professionals and a second focus group took place with three primary school teachers.

3.3.1 Interviews

The researcher aims to explore the hopes and concerns of parents whose child has not yet transitioned to get a candid insight into the reality of what parents are facing before their child starts mainstream school. The study also intends to investigate the reality, positive and negative, of how the transition transpires for parents who have been through the process. Blaxter et al. (2010:193) note several advantages to the interview format, which will support these research aims. They describe semi-structured interviews as a middle ground between a highly structured format with a specific set of questions similar to a questionnaire, and a very open-ended interview, which is more like a discussion. It was intended that by holding one-to-one interviews rather than a focus group, for example, it would allow for parents to discuss their struggles with honesty, without any worry that might arise with discussing a sensitive topic in front of others (Blaxter at al., 2010:193). An interview was held with an SNA for pragmatic reasons. The value of involving SNA's in the research study emerged after the focus groups had started and due to limited time available, it was only possible to recruit and interview one SNA.

There are some limitations to the interview technique. Flick (2011) and Wimmer and Dominick (1997) note that interviews can be time-consuming to set up, carry out, and particularly to transcribe and analyse. Also, one-to-one interviews might inhibit parents sharing personal views which they might find easier to record in a survey, for example. Nevertheless, interviews were identified as the most appropriate research technique for this study based on the research aims, allowing the researcher to complete exploratory research; capturing insights and concerns within parents through posing prepared questions, while allowing for different responses and discussion from individual parents from the semi-structured format.

3.3.2 Focus Groups

The focus group is the second method to be employed in this research study, with two separate focus groups taking place with early years professionals and teachers. The researcher intends to explore their professional experiences to understand how schools and preschools can support families with the transition, in addition to the challenges they face. A number of advantages of the focus group have been identified in the literature which will support these aims. Flick (2011:118) observes that participants in a focus group are "likely to express more and go further in their statements than in single interviews". Blaxter et al. (2010) explain that focus group discussion can lead to unexpected findings as a result of discussion points influencing the thoughts and feelings of group members. The researcher did not have the same concerns regarding the sensitive responses that parents might have, therefore a focus group was chosen in anticipation that the professional educators would motivate each other through discussion about their own professional experiences of the transition process.

The researcher is aware of the limitations of using the focus group method. Flick (2011) notes that coordinating the timing of the focus group can be difficult, therefore it may not be any less time consuming than carrying out individual interviews. Another drawback is the potential that group dynamics may intimidate participants from demonstrating their true thoughts, or alternatively may exaggerate certain perspectives (Blaxter et al, 2010:194). It is also possible that one or two participants may dominate the discussion within a focus group. Nevertheless, the researcher conducted a focus group to allow both similar and conflicting views on the transition process to be expressed throughout the group discussions.

3.4 Research Sample

This study required recruitment of four different groups: parents, teachers and early years professionals, and an SNA.

3.4.1 Parents

Parents were primarily recruited through purposive sampling. Denscombe (2010) explains that purposive sampling allows the researcher to target key informants who have

knowledge of the issues under exploration. Upon planning this study, the researcher identified a network of parents of children with SEN that is primarily facilitated by her colleagues for potential participation in the research. The researcher has facilitated this group at times, but does not lead the full group. Parents could have been recruited through schools; however these parents participate in a support network, therefore should any issues arise for parents they are linked into a support structure. The researcher's colleague explained the research study to the group and four parents volunteered to participate. One parent was also recruited through snowballing, which requires the researcher to identify a sample through contacts in the field of study (Foster, 1996). A colleague put the researcher in contact with a parent of a child that has yet to transition to mainstream school, who was not part of the parent network. Of the five parents that participated in the study, three parents have already been through this transition with their child, while two parents will go through this process in September 2014. The table in Appendix A gives further detail on all research participants.

There are a number of limitations to recruiting parents through these methods. The fact that the researcher has facilitated the group on occasion brings a degree of researcher bias, and the researcher's views may have influenced the parents (Kerlinger, 1986). Four of the parents participate in the same group; therefore the range of diversity of parents is lessened and it is possible that parents have similar views from attending the same group. It is hoped that individual interviews with open-ended questions will bring out the unique experiences of the parents and will overcome these limitations.

3.4.2 Primary School Teachers

Purposive sampling was also used to recruit primary school teachers. Patton (1990) points out that the researcher can employ purposive sampling if he/she can identify a professional with knowledge on the topic as a representative sample. The researcher used professional contacts to recruit the teachers, with the support of a gatekeeper. Blaxter et al (2010:159) explain that gatekeepers can be essential in order to recruit participants for interviews. A Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) teacher volunteered to recruit other junior infant teachers for the focus group, upon hearing about the study. The primary teachers interviewed work in schools in a similar geographical

area in Dublin City, and have various experience working with junior infants, as a HSCL teacher and with resource or special needs classes. The research was explained to the three focus group members and each had the opportunity to ask questions or disengage. The SNA was recruited through a gatekeeper also, with one of the primary school teachers recruiting an SNA through her professional contacts.

3.4.3 Early Years Professionals

Early years professionals were also recruited through purposive sampling. The researcher used professional relationships to approach educators that have experience working with children with SEN to participate in the research. Two of the early years professionals work in preschools co-located within primary schools, while one works in a stand-alone preschool. The professional relationship between the early years professionals and the researcher may influence the information shared in the focus group, with participants possibly reluctant to give negative feedback. However, it is hoped that the group environment will encourage participants to share information on their experiences.

3.5 Data Collection Procedures

Flick (2011) recommends the use of piloting to ensure questions are appropriate for the participating audience. Prior to commencing the interviews and focus groups, the researcher tested the recorder and piloted the research questions with a colleague to ensure the questions were clear, open-ended and sought information relating to the primary research questions. The parent interviews were conducted in a community meeting room convenient for the parents, offering a neutral, private space. Both focus groups and the SNA interview took place in empty staff rooms of participating services, which were in a convenient location for all to attend. The interviews and focus groups were between thirty and thirty-six minutes in length. A recorder was used to document each of the interviews and focus groups, with notes also taken throughout the interviews. This presented a challenge for the researcher as a second person was not available to assist with the recorder and note-taking, although the researcher was very familiar with the material as a result.

3.6 Data Analysis

Once all data was collated, the researcher utilised several of Braun and Clarke's (2006:87) steps of thematic analysis in order to analyse the data. Their first step of analysis is to familiarise oneself with data and transcribe any "verbal data" (Braun and Clarke, 2006:87). Each of the interviews and focus groups were transcribed and re-read by the researcher to order to become familiar with the content. This also allowed the researcher to identify recurring issues amongst the transcripts. Braun and Clarke (2006:87) suggest "generating initial codes" as phase two, and recurring data from the transcripts was colour coded. Steps three and four suggest looking for themes and then reviewing themes from the data (Braun and Clark, 2006). The researcher grouped quotes from the different transcripts under broad thematic headings which corresponded to the research questions and the literature. The researcher also revisited the data several times to provide a fresh perspective before finalising themes and drawing up a report of findings (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Findings from the research are presented under thematic headings in chapter four.

3.7 Ethics

Ethical considerations are of utmost importance for social research to ensure that careful thought is given to whether any participant may be harmed during the research process (Sapsford and Abbott, 1996). The researcher adhered to Dublin Institute of Technology's (DIT) ethical processes before commencing the research. A research ethics and risk assessment was submitted to DIT outlining potential ethical issues and risks for participants, including the proposed research questions. Ethical approval was obtained from DIT before any research began. Murphy and Dingwall's (2001:339) principle of autonomy in ethical research applies to this research study, involving the research participants giving informed consent to participation. Each participant for this research study signed a consent form, after the aim of the study was explained, with participants given an opportunity to opt out of the study.

Confidentiality and anonymity are two further important ethical issues for a qualitative research study (Blaxter et al, 2010). Both were ensured for this study – participant names were not used and early years services and schools could not be identified. Blaxter et al. (2010) cite professionalism as another area of ethical concern. The researcher should consider the potential of "unprofessional conduct" becoming apparent during the research (Blaxter et al, 2010:164). The researcher did not anticipate any areas of concern arising during the interviews and focus groups, based on the questions developed for the study. However, the researcher remained cognisant of the requirements under Children First Guidance (DCYA, 2011) to act upon any cause for concern regarding safety and welfare of children. While confidentiality should be maintained for research participants, this should be confidentiality within limits, with concerning practices regarding the welfare of children reported if necessary (DCYA, 2011).

Schnell and Heinritz (2006:21) suggest that researchers should be able to evaluate whether the research methods will have positive or negative consequences for research participants. The researcher was aware that interview questions might raise sensitive issues for parents. There is also some ethical consideration regarding the researcher's contact with the parents in professional capacity, as occasional co-facilitator of the parents' support network. Murphy and Dingwall (2001) note that voluntary participation is an important ethical requirement of qualitative research. There was potential for parents to feel pressurised into participating in research being led by their group facilitator, therefore the researcher attempted to minimise this. Information on the research study was given to parents so that parents had time to go away and consider whether they wanted to participate. Parents also had the opportunity to ask the researcher questions about the study and interview process. The researcher also explained that they could stop the interview or opt out of the study at any stage.

3.8 Potential Limitations

There are several limitations to this research. The study was not intended to be representative of a wide sample, and the use of qualitative methods will therefore provide experiences of a small group. Nevertheless, it would have been useful to get a gender

balance amongst participants. All respondents were female; two male parents were offered the opportunity to participate in the study, however both declined. It would also have been useful to recruit a sample from different geographical areas. The sample of respondents was from a relatively small area in Dublin; different issues may arise from parents in a rural area, for example. The researcher's professional relationship with parents and early years professionals may also influence or inhibit their responses throughout the interviews. There were limitations to the researcher conducting the focus groups without assistance from a second person, with note taking and facilitation of the group a challenge. Despite the limitations, however, it is intended that the research methods employed will highlight the every-day personal experiences, both positive and negative, of transitioning to mainstream school for parents and children with SEN, primary school teachers, the SNA and early years educators.

4. Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents findings from qualitative research carried out in June 2014. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with five parents and one SNA. Three early years professionals participated in one focus group, while three primary school teachers took part in a second. Findings are presented under four overarching headings emerging from the transcripts. The first heading presents findings that emerged on respondents' views of the benefits of mainstream school. The second heading presents findings in relation to the various factors within the primary school environment which support and challenge the transition of children with SEN to mainstream primary school. The third heading presents findings of supports and challenges within the preschool environment. The final heading explores access to resources and how that presented as both a support and a challenge to all research participants.

Quotes from participants include brackets [] to provide clarity and context for some of the quotes. Codes are used to identify the source of quotes from interviewees in order to protect their identity. Parents are coded with P1 (Parent 1) up to P5 (Parent 5). Early years professionals have been coded as EYP1, EYP2 and EYP3, while primary school teachers are coded as PT1, PT2 and PT3, and the special needs assistant is identified as SNA.

4.2 Views on Mainstream School

Findings emerged from the interviews and focus groups which highlighted the benefits of children with SEN attending mainstream school.

4.2.1 Sense of Belonging

Findings highlighted the sense of belonging that families have from attending school located in their community as opposed to sending their child to special school, which is less likely to be nearby.

> *"We've gotten to know the neighbours much more, when you are over and back the road the whole time, collecting them." (P5)*

The narratives identified that friendships children make when starting school is a very important positive aspect of transitioning to mainstream school for parents and children.

"Making friends, because outside of school he doesn't have a lot of friends." (P1)

The narratives suggest it is important to parents that their child has the same opportunities as any other child. The sense of stigma attached to special school was also raised.

> *"She's a big girl in the same school that her sister is in...really the reasons why every child goes to school."* (P4)

> *"There's quite a big stigma around going to another school, having to get the special bus".* (PT1)

4.2.2 Children's Progression and Achievement

Another positive aspect of mainstream school for parents includes the opportunity for their child to progress academically, which appears to encourage positive parental expectations for their child's future.

> *"In a special unit she may not get the academic opportunities she needs, she wouldn't get any social opportunities."* (P4)

4.3 Role of Primary School in the Transition Process

The findings identify that primary schools provide both supportive factors as well as challenges for families regarding the transition to school.

4.3.1 Welcome and Support for Family

Parents acknowledged that schools can provide a supportive role from the very start of the transition by welcoming the child.

> *"They [school] are brilliant in that they seem really excited about C coming to the school."* (P4)

Findings also demonstrate that schools provide ongoing supports for parents throughout the year, including training on areas such as supporting behaviour.

> *"I deliver Parents Plus...it can be really good in terms of telling parents 'this is what we do as a school and these are the things that you can do at home'."* (PT1)

4.3.2 Challenges within the Primary School Environment

Several challenges within the school environment that can potentially make the transition more difficult emerged. Parents suggested that schools haven't fully thought

through their approach to inclusion, perhaps with reality differing from schools' good intentions.

> *"How do they have their ethos ground in inclusion? Is it something they* have *to do because they have to take your child because the child lives across the road?" (P5)*

Parents raised the issue that teachers can lack experience in how best to support children with special educational needs.

> "*There are challenges around teachers who have never taught a child with special needs...and then approaching things maybe not the best way." (P5)*

Teachers suggested a struggle to access support from the wider school environment to promote inclusion for children with SEN.

> *"It's fair enough that the school accept children with special needs, but they do have to realise that we need to be supported properly." (PT3)*

Parents discussed the idea that teachers can bring personal attitudes of special needs which negatively influence their approach in supporting the child.

> *"She doesn't know anything about Autism. To her, Autism is what most people see it as...a child who can't talk, aggressive, hitting their head off the wall." (P4)*

4.4 Role of Preschool in Transition to Primary School

Preschools were identified as providing both supports and challenges also to families with a child starting mainstream school.

4.4.1 Promoting School Readiness

The importance of preschool with supporting children's transition to mainstream primary school was highlighted, emphasising the growing recognition of the role that the early years sector has in this transition.

> "*Preschool is a big help, it prepares them well, talking about the uniform, talking about what's going to happen."* (SNA)

The narratives suggest that preschool plays an important role in developing the various independence skills which children require for school.

"Try and have them as independent as possible. Be able to put on a coat...zip up a bag...hold a crayon, hold a pencil...identify colours...be able to go to the toilet by themselves if there's no one available to bring them." (SNA)

It appears that parents welcome the development of as many independence and academic skills as possible prior to starting primary school so they have one less thing to struggle with.

"If a child is going into school and is stressed with work, stressed with having to learn how to socialise...if there is anything you can do to prepare them, try your best to do that." (P1)

The friendships children make in preschool emerged as an important advantage for children with transitioning to school. This can particularly help if the preschool is located within a school and most of the children move together.

"The relationships they make in preschool...help them settle into school." (EYP3)

4.4.2 Support for Families

Preschool staff also act as a support to parents when children with SEN transition to school.

"Being able to build relationships with parents is so important for children with special needs." (EYP1)

Some parents did, however, note their doubts about the role preschool had to play with their child's transition to school.

"I don't think that [supporting the transition] *is their role anyway." (P3)*

Some parents explained that the preschool was no help at all with the transition to primary school, indicating the varying experiences between parents depending on the preschool itself.

"The preschool has been singularly useless...a very nice preschool...very good to the kids once they fit into the pattern, but...completely and utterly useless." (P3).

Early years professionals raised the issue that:

"Early years workers aren't valued as much as teachers by parents" (EYP2)

4.4.3 Relationship between Preschool and Primary School

One of the early years professional's mentioned her role in liaising with the school as an important strategy to support the transition to mainstream school, even though her preschool was not located within school grounds.

> *"With the transition forms, we give the teacher information on the child." (EYP3)*

All participants identified that preschools co-located within a primary school had additional benefits over preschools not located within school ground, as it familiarised children with the school environment before starting school.

> *"The transition was quite seamless, as she was used to the whole school environment...it helps if they are familiar with the layout of the school."* (SNA)

4.5 Access to Resources

Access to resources is an important aspect of the transition to mainstream school which emerged from the findings. Parents found some resources supportive as their child transitioned; however difficulty with accessing resources hindered the transition process for them. Resources include early intervention resources upon diagnosis, as well as state resources allocated upon starting school, such as an SNA, support from a SENO, and resource hours.

4.5.1 Support from HSE Services Prior to Starting School

Parents cited early intervention resources that families access before starting school as supportive. It appears that parents feel their opinion or knowledge of what is best for the child is not taken seriously by the school and support from early intervention professionals help them communicate their child's needs to the school.

> *"Once your child goes into mainstream school...you're kind of on your own...The school are saying one thing and you're saying another... When we transitioned into primary school, we kept our [early intervention] service provider for a year. And that was really, really useful because it meant you were bringing along some other back-up with you." (P5)*

The Special Educational Needs Officer [SENO] was also mentioned as being supportive for families with transitioning to school.

> *"The local Special Needs local officer [SENO] was very helpful." (P3)*

4.5.2 Difficulties with Accessing Resources and Funding

The inadequacy of provision of state resources for both schools and preschools was recognised as a challenge with supporting children's transitions to primary school. The narratives suggest that both early years professionals and teachers are stretched to perform additional tasks needed to support children with SEN within their main roles.

> *"We don't have SNA's in preschool...there's so much to do, admin, reports, meeting the child's psychologist. We're not paid for that non-contact time...with special needs children, maybe extra funding is needed." (EYP1)*

> *"Sometimes the quieter kids, you don't know some of them that well and it's not intentional, it goes back to resources." (PT1)*

The ad hoc nature of allocation and access to funding and resources is raised by parents, emphasising the inequality experienced by families.

> *"It's all very broken up...even things like each child is supposed to have an Individual Education plan...it's really hit and miss from what I can see how schools are doing that." (P5)*

4.5.3 Burden on Parents

Participants' raised awareness of the struggle that parents face with the state system for children with SEN. For several of the parents, the system involves fighting for what the child needs, suggesting an exhausting process for parents. The idea that resources vary from one school or one area to another is raised.

> *"I'm fighting tooth and nail to get him re-diagnosed." (P1)*

> *"I think that it can be a challenge that it's [resource allocation] is just pot luck."* (P5)

> *"We've nearly been on a roller coaster ride to go around the whole system [of assessment]" (P1)*

4.6 Conclusion

This concludes the key findings from the study. The first broad theme presents views on the benefits of attending mainstream school, which emerged as research participants discussed the transition process. Some of the positives include the sense of

belonging that families gain from attending school in their community; as well as parents' sense of progression as they observe their children doing well at school. It was suggested that a sense of stigma can be attached to special school. The second heading presents findings which highlight factors that support and hinder the transition process within the school environment. Supportive factors include the welcome that schools provide for families, in addition to ongoing support for parents with their child's transition. Significantly more challenges were identified within the school environment, including the school's ethos of inclusion and lack of training for teachers.

The third theme portrays the supportive and challenging factors within the preschool environment regarding the transition process. Preschools can promote school readiness and different skills in children, as well as providing support for parents. Some parents did question how much support preschools provide with the transition process. The importance of the relationship between preschool and primary school was also discussed. The final theme presented findings that emphasised how accessing resources can influence the transition process. Research participants identified significantly more challenges with resources, particularly the stress placed on parents with advocating for resources as their child starts school. The next chapter will discuss these findings in light of literature and key research questions.

5. Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses key findings from two focus groups with early year professionals and primary school teachers, in addition to interviews with five parents and one SNA. The findings are discussed according to themes that emerged from the research and also in light of the literature. The key findings are discussed under headings of: Views on Mainstream School, Role of Primary School in the Transition Process, Role of Preschool in Transitions to Primary School, and Access to Resources. They include both supportive factors and challenges for children with SEN and their families transitioning to mainstream school. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory will be applied during discussion of findings, exploring the influence that each of the various ecological systems and the connections between each system can have on the child's transition to school.

5.2 Views on Mainstream School

The literature highlights several benefits of mainstream school for children with SEN which were also raised by research participants, including increased academic prospects and social opportunities (Brinker and Thorpe, 1984; Woronov, 2000). Findings demonstrate that mainstream school can develop supports within the child's microsystem, increased supportive mesosystems between the home, school and community, and also portrays the influence of the macrosystem on the child's inclusion at school.

5.2.1 "We've gotten to know the neighbours much more."

One benefit of mainstream school is the sense of belonging that families experience, from getting to know families in the community, to meeting other parents of children with SEN. This finding is reiterated by Shevlin et al. (2003), who note that one benefit of inclusion is increased relationships outside of the school environment. This sense of community and support from other families is important, with the NCSE (2013b) noting that isolation can arise for children and families upon attending special school located outside of their community. This finding highlights the important role provided by supportive mesosytems in the child's environment; in particular a developed home-school mesosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The school environment can broaden

families' connection with their community and develop essential support networks for these families who may be vulnerable to increased stress.

The friendships that children make in primary school were also identified in the findings as a positive aspect of attending mainstream school. The literature reflects this finding, as children with SEN are noted to develop well socially in the mainstream environment, and benefit from interactions with peers at school (Rose et al., 2010; Shevlin et al., 2003). Developing friendships provides a support network for the child within his/her own microsystem, while also perhaps offering parents a positive outlook on the child's future progression and happiness at school.

Parents highlighted that their children having the same opportunities as any other child is another benefit of mainstream school which, in turn, encourages parents to have more aspirations for their child's future. Bornfield (1994) points out that parents of children with SEN can have low aspirations for their children's future education, therefore this sense of progression for their child is important to parents. Throughout discussion of the benefits of mainstream school, parents and teachers openly expressed their views that there is a strong stigma attached to special school. The NCSE (2013) indicate that most parents choose mainstream over special school, therefore this stigma could perhaps be a determining factor in how parents decide on mainstream, however small. This demonstrates how the macrosystem can impact indirectly on the child, with current cultural values appearing to stigmatise special education and influencing parents' decision to choose mainstream. It is important that the stigma of special school in society is reduced to ensure families can choose the best opportunity for their child's needs, which reflects the human rights facet of the inclusion versus non-inclusion argument (Hornby, 1999). The findings are thus far demonstrating the benefits of mainstream education and the influential factor that the various ecological systems within the child's environment can have on their adjustment to mainstream school.

5.3 Role of Primary School in the Transition Process

Some important findings from this study highlight the various supportive factors as well as challenges within primary schools that can influence children's transitions to

mainstream primary school. The influence of a supportive home-school mesosystem and unsupportive exosystem on children's transition to school will be discussed.

5.3.1 "The school are really trying their best as much as possible."

The welcome that schools have for children with SEN was one significant finding, demonstrating a supportive mesosystem for families in the home-school transition. This is similar to results from research carried out by the NCSE on parents' experiences of special education services (Armstrong et al., 2010). This provides a positive start to parents and children, who face many difficulties before they ever start the school transition; with facing up to their child's disabilities and struggles with assessment. Further findings from teachers advised future parents making this transition that early contact with the school and meeting the teacher in advance is important, which is advice also reiterated for parents by the NCSE (2013b).

Findings also indicate that schools provide on-going supports for families throughout the school year. This includes teachers discussing the child's needs and development with the parents, as well as training for parents. This is positive as Fabian and Dunlop (2002) stress that the transition is a process that lasts from before the child starts school until the child is well settled into the environment. It is important, therefore, that parents can continue to receive support from the school beyond the first month, as their children are likely to continue to adjust throughout the first year in school. Regular communication between the school and home setting is evidently very important to support smooth transitions to mainstream school.

One school provided 'Parents Plus' training, which provides support for parents with parenting skills and managing difficult behaviour. The teacher explained that this is provided in every school in the community in Dublin where she teaches, which are all DEIS schools receiving additional funding to tackle educational disadvantage (Department of Education and Skills, 2005). However, non-DEIS funded schools do not provide similar training for parents, suggesting an inequality of opportunities for parents to get additional support on parenting depending where the school is located.

The on-going support that schools provide to parents throughout the child's first year at school is positive. Pianta and Walsh (1996) emphasise that the relationship

between the home and school environment has a significant impact on the child's adjustment to school, therefore this continued contact can provide additional support to vulnerable families and increase the likelihood of the child settling well into school. It also suggests that Irish primary schools do embrace inclusion in theory as they welcome children with SEN readily. This support from the school from the very beginning of the transition is indicative of a supportive mesosystem for parents, with teachers helping parents and children transition smoothly from the home or preschool microsystem and adjust to the new school environment (O'Kane, 2007).

5.3.2 "Proper inclusion" or "Muddling along"?

A number of challenges within the school environment also emerged from the transcripts, including the school's ethos of inclusion of children with SEN. Strong suggestions were made by parents that schools do not carefully reflect on their overall ethos of inclusion and how this ethos works in practice. This is in keeping with research carried out in 2004 and 2005 by the NDA, which suggests that while schools generally embrace the philosophy of inclusion, their practice reflects a more medical model of disability (NDA, 2006). Armstrong et al.'s (2010) recognition of the restrictions of full implementation of the EPSEN Act in Ireland perhaps remains relevant in 2014. The lack of governmental ambition to implement the EPSEN Act, which provides for positive principles of inclusion means that, in reality, there are a lack of resources in schools and practically it is difficult to implement inclusion as it is envisaged under the Act. It must be questioned that when there is not a fully embraced philosophy of meaningful inclusion at policy level, how can schools be expected to do so? This provides an example of failure within the exosystem at governmental level to sufficiently provide for a social model of inclusion, which impacts on the child as schools subsequently fail to provide for meaningful inclusion.

Another challenge emerging from the findings indicates that teachers often have a lack of understanding of a child's particular disability, with narratives suggesting it is up to the initiative of individual teachers to undertake training to develop their practice with SEN. This is in line with the literature, with NCSE and NDA research reports acknowledging that teachers' inadequate understanding of children's needs creates

challenges for parents; in addition to recognition that teacher training courses available to support them with inclusion are inadequate (Armstrong et al., 2010; NDA, 2006). The EPSEN Act reinforces this challenge, as the very piece of legislation providing for integration in primary schools in Ireland provides a very broad definition of SEN, yet without adequate enacting and resourcing of it (Government of Ireland, 2004). Training for teachers with SEN should be provided as a standard nationally to recognise the reality that most parents of children with SEN choose mainstream (NCSE, 2013b).

Inadequate training for teachers with SEN can have an effect on teachers' attitudes towards inclusion. Parents spoke emotionally of the challenge that teachers can bring personal attitudes of special needs into the classroom which can influence their expectations for the child, suggesting the powerful impact lack of knowledge in the area can have.   This is in finding with the literature, which explains that professional development is essential to foster positive attitudes regarding inclusion amongst teachers and that positive attitudes are an important foundation to developing inclusive practice (Avramidis and Norwich, 2002; Horne and Timmons, 2009). This highlights again the importance of a supportive exosystem, in which policy provision reflects the training needs of schools and teachers to deliver a social model of inclusion in practice to reflect policy intentions.

5.4 Role of Preschool in Transition to Primary School

Findings presented a number of supportive factors as well as challenges within the preschool environment for children transitioning to mainstream school.   The influence of a developed home/preschool/primary school mesosystem on children's transitions to school will be discussed.

5.4.1 "The preschool is an important step in getting them ready for school."

Educators emphasised the importance of preschool in supporting children and parents with the transition to mainstream school, with the development of skills that children need for primary school as the key area of support identified.   These include practical independence skills such as being able to go to the toilet by themselves, for example; and social skills.   Docket and Perry (2007) emphasise the importance of independence skills to prepare children for school and the increased expectations that

children will take responsibility for their own needs.   Fabian and Dunlop (2007) highlight the importance of building children's resilience before starting school. Social skills provides resilience for children, with the literature emphasising their importance in developing strategies to interact socially with others and manage their own conflict, thus reducing problematic behaviour and supporting adjustment to school (Belsky and MacKinnon, 1994; Margetts, 2007).   The emphasis on developing children's independence skills may reassuring for parents as they can support tangible skills for the child, developing their resilience before they go into the unknown environment of school.

A related theme emerging from the narratives is the strong supportive factor that attending a preschool located within the grounds of a primary school can have. Children that transition from such a preschool are likely to do so with friends they have made. Another advantage is that children are familiar with their surroundings and teachers before they start school.   The literature identifies several areas of discontinuity between preschool and school settings which can impact on children's adjustment as they transition from a smaller environment which provides opportunities for independent learning through play, to a much larger building with more children, different academic expectations and less support from adults (Fabian, 2007; O'Kane and Hayes, 2010). Therefore, a child with SEN whose preschool is located within the school environs may perhaps be less unsettled as they transition because they are already familiar with the school surroundings.

The early years professionals raised the importance of developing a relationship between primary schools and preschools to improve the transition to school. Findings also highlight that the continued support early years professionals can give parents after they move to primary school is important, as a relationship has developed between parents and preschool staff.   O'Kane and Hayes (2010) emphasise the importance of a developed relationship between parents, early years professionals and teachers to encourage a smooth transition and strengthen the links between all three microsystems (home, preschool and school).   This will provide supportive mesosystems and increase the support network for parents from trusted professionals and promote better adjustment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; O'Kane, 2007).

5.4.2 Challenges for Early Years Services with Supporting SEN

Some parents expressed doubts about the role preschool had to play with their child's transition to school. Findings suggest that it was more lack of parental understanding of the role preschools can provide in developing connections with the school, although two parents did emphasise that the preschool was no help at all with the transition. O'Kane (2007) points out that the transition from preschool to primary school is a growing area of research in Ireland, therefore understanding of the importance of this process may still be developing amongst many early year professionals.

While the early years professionals discussed the ongoing support they have provided to parents once their child starts school, it appears that this supportive role is undervalued by other stakeholders in the transition process. O'Kane and Hayes (2010) recommend the development of the transition process between the preschool and primary school sectors. Their recommendations include the use of a 'snapshot form' to transfer information on children's development between both sectors, and joint training between early years and primary educators in the area of transitions (O'Kane and Hayes, 2010:107). Development of such a transitions programme could increase respect and continuity between both sectors and strengthen supports for parents further. Preschools that are separate to school grounds could also take steps with such a programme to develop a good relationship with schools to communicate the child's needs. However, a formal transition programme or tool for transferring information has yet to be fully embraced by the Department of Education and Skills. The transfer of information between preschools and primary schools on children's developmental needs is important to prepare the school, particularly where children have complex needs, and support parents and children with SEN who may be at greater risk of a difficult adjustment.

A formal transitions programme will nonetheless have significant resource implications for preschools regarding administration and non-contact time to communicate with primary schools and will need to be resourced appropriately. Findings indicate that preschool services are struggling to provide support to parents and children with SEN attending their services, without the added responsibility of making links with primary schools. The ECCE programme offers a free year of preschool for all eligible children, with the opportunity for children with SEN to avail of this pro-rata over

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two years if they are not ready to start school (DCYA, 2014). No research on parental experiences or the impact of this two year, part-time provision in preschool for children with SEN was identified. However, full-time preschool education over two years could greatly increase early intervention for these children, with the importance of preschool attendance on the development of children with SEN widely acknowledged (Currie, 2000; Nutbrown et al., 2013; Rogow, 1991).

Findings from this study indicate that children without a diagnosed assessment of need have difficulty in getting additional resources, such as an SNA, in preschool, further increasing difficulty for preschools in supporting children adequately. This is reflected by Moloney and McCarthy (2010), who highlight inadequate resource provision for early years services to support children with SEN. Consequently, there is a potential need to review inclusion in the early years sector and policy provision for supporting children with SEN at this level, in order to ensure children have the earliest intervention possible. Support for preschool services to include children with SEN will also strengthen early education and support within the preschool microsystem, increasing outcomes for children prior to transitioning to mainstream school.

5.5 Access to Resources

The final overall theme in which findings will be discussed is access to resources, which can both support and hinder children's transitions to mainstream school. The impact of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) exosystem, in particular government policy and provision, on children with SEN transitioning to mainstream school will be examined.

5.5.1 Support from Early Intervention Services with Transition Process

Interviewees cited the therapeutic intervention that children received upon assessment as a supportive factor with the transition, with parents making an interesting point that professionals such as speech and language therapists can provide moral support for parents in communicating the child's needs to schools. Two parents implied that their opinion on what the child needs is not respected by the school. This is somewhat at odds with the NCSE survey on parental attitudes, which portrayed significant satisfaction amongst parents that schools sought and valued their views (Armstrong et al., 2010). The findings do make it clear, however, of the very ad hoc nature of special educational

resource provision from one school to the next, which is noted by Armstrong et al (2010:4): "their experiences are…deeply personal and related to the very specific needs of their child". A powerful underlying theme is the emotional struggle that parents are experiencing while going through this transition and the importance of professional support for families from the very beginning of identification of special needs for a child.

5.5.2 "Transitioning is about fighting...to get resources...with much less around the child."

Findings indicate that accessing resources for all respondents present significantly more challenges. Several parents noted the "*pot luck*" nature of resource allocation, highlighting inequality regarding access to resources and suggesting that the supports children receive vary widely. Armstrong et al. (2010) explain that a school's ethos of inclusion is critical in determining the support schools give to parents with accessing resources for their child, once more reinforcing the importance of a meaningful philosophy of inclusion within schools. A strong sense of frustration was portrayed with the lack of resources within schools and early years services to support SEN. It suggests an attitude of coping by educational services rather than providing the best possible supports, which can impact on all children in the classroom. Ainscow et al. (2006) stress that it is imperative that schools consider whether they have the resources available in order to fully support inclusion of children with SEN so that all children's educational needs are met, something that these schools may not have fully reflected upon. While lack of full implementation of the EPSEN Act may hinder governmental resource provision, individual schools need to take responsibility also to reflect upon their ethos and approach to inclusion and consider whether they can fully meet the needs of children and families.

5.5.3 "I feel I'm nearly cornered again at this stage."

Research participants used very emotive language throughout the narratives to describe the process of accessing resources and general transitioning to school, demonstrating the emotional struggle that parents face when their child starts school. Findings suggest that parents carry considerable worry and conflicting emotions about the choice of mainstream school with terms such as "cornered", "daunting", and "torn"

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used, while several participants described accessing resources as a "fight". This is in finding with McIntyre et al.'s (2010) observation that parents of children with SEN have additional concerns about their child starting school to most parents. It appears that parents are coping with the additional emotional turmoil of constantly fighting for resources that their child is entitled to but cannot access due to funding. These parents are also expected to be carers and advocates for their children, in addition to everyday stresses of parenting and working life, which emphasises the very real pressure they are experiencing. Over 2012 and 2013, primary schools received up to a 25% cut in SEN resource provision (NCSE, 2013), therefore findings portray the genuine struggle that families contend with as a result of such cuts and the lack of overall coherence in implementing inclusive education for children with SEN nationally.

The suggestion from respondents that parents with higher capacity to advocate for their child are struggling with continuously fighting for resources, raises the question of how can less able parents advocate on their child's behalf? Consistency of inclusive educational provision at a national level is important to provide equality of opportunity for every child with SEN on starting school, regardless of their family's social or economic status. The NDA (2006) reported that stakeholders interviewed about special education provision in Ireland acknowledge the inadequate capacity at all levels of SEN provision, from government department level to local schools and the resource assessment and planning services in between, in delivering inclusive education. There is also an ethical consideration of supports for lower income families who cannot afford to pay privately for resources they do not receive from the state, which can impact on the child's future and reinforcing the cycle of poverty and inequality. Inconsistency of resource provision in schools nationally portrays the impact of an ineffective exosystem which has thus far failed to adequately implement the inclusive vision of the EPSEN Act, the results of which were evident in the tangible pressure demonstrated by research participants (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

5.6 Conclusion

This concludes discussion of the research findings in light of the literature and emerging themes in relation to supportive and challenging factors for children with SEN

transitioning to mainstream school.   The first key theme presents the perceived benefits of mainstream school, including the sense of belonging that families feel as they get to know children and families in their community.   Findings demonstrate that schools do embrace inclusion and are supportive as best possible but with limitations.   Inadequate training for teachers to learn about different SEN was highlighted as one significant barrier for schools, influencing teachers' attitudes to inclusion and their skills at supporting children with SEN in the classroom. Another key theme is the importance of preschool in supporting the transition process for children with SEN, however again there are restraints within this sector to do so.   The final theme portrays how accessing resources to support children's educational needs can be difficult, adding burden on parents as they deal with added stresses of advocating for their children.

A horizontal theme recurring throughout the discussion is the importance of relationships between the home, community, preschool and school to enhance the transition for children with SEN and their families from one microsystem to the next; and the increased support networks available for families from supportive mesosystems.   The exosystem and macrosystem were also highlighted during discussion as impacting indirectly on the child's microsystem as he/she transitions to school.   Failure to adequately implement governmental policy on educational provision for children with SEN creates difficulties for schools to deliver a positive ethos of inclusion in practice. Cultural values regarding stigmatisation of special schools can have repercussions on parents and children, and their choice of mainstream over special school. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems model provides a clear understanding of the impact that different elements of the child's environment can have on his/her transition to mainstream school.   The next chapter will provide conclusions and recommendations regarding transitions to mainstream school for children with SEN.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

6.1 Introduction

This research study examined areas that supported parents and children with SEN with the transition to mainstream school and factors that made this challenging for them. The study also reviewed the role of schools and preschools in this transition, investigating areas of support both services provide with the transition, as well as factors that hinder them in facilitating the process.

6.2 Conclusions

One of the first significant findings from the research study indicates that mainstream school is associated with a number of benefits for families. This is imperative considering the concerns expressed by parents about their choice of mainstream school over special school, and the anxieties they had for their child's adjustment to school. Mainstream school can increase support networks within the community for families who are vulnerable to additional stresses due to the child's disability, and at potential risk for poor adjustment to school. The value of good relationships between the child's microsystems to provide a supportive mesosystem for supporting his/her transition to school is evident. The study does highlight, nonetheless, persisting stigma in society regarding special education, therefore cultural values of special education within the macrosystem must be amended to remove stigma for families who need it.

Another significant finding from the study is the supportive role that schools provide for families transitioning to mainstream school; although this is with certain restrictions that limit how much schools can support children with SEN, and in fact make the facilitation of this process challenging for schools. Schools do embrace inclusion of children with SEN, welcoming families and providing ongoing support throughout the year. Schools therefore play an important role in developing a supportive home-school mesosystem to ensure families transition smoothly from one microsystem to the next. Significant challenges present within the school environment, however, which can hinder how sufficiently schools support children with SEN to transition. Training for teachers to understand complex special needs was highlighted as inadequate, thus producing poor

attitudes of teachers regarding inclusion of children with SEN. Unsatisfactory training and supports for teachers demonstrates an unsupportive exosystem, with governmental policy and provision failing to support schools to implement a meaningful ethos of inclusion.

The importance of preschool in the transition of children with SEN to mainstream primary school is another key finding. Preschool services are significant in promoting school readiness for children with SEN, including development of independence and social skills needed for school. Preschools co-located within primary school grounds were highlighted as particularly beneficial, as early years professionals have more communication with teachers regarding children's needs and children are more familiar with the school environment before starting. The development of communication between both sectors, regardless of whether the preschool is located beside a school, emerged as an important support to the transition process. There is no standard information transfer tool currently used nationally between both sectors, and contact with schools varies between preschools depending on resources. Early years services appear stretched to support children with SEN in their services on a day-to-day basis, without the additional responsibility of connecting with schools. Review of governmental provision for inclusion of children with SEN in preschool services is therefore perhaps necessary. Nevertheless, increased communication between preschools and schools will strengthen the home-preschool-school mesosytem and allow families to transition to the school microsystem more smoothly.

The final broad theme emerging from the study is the impact that difficulty with accessing resources can have on parents. Early intervention resources provided to families prior to starting school were cited as supportive to parents. It appears that early intervention professionals provide a supportive role which may be lacking in special educational supports received at school, perhaps related to the lack of training for teachers in this area. Findings indicated that resource allocation for children with SEN is very ad hoc from one school to the next. The ongoing struggle for parents fighting for resources that their child is entitled to in addition to the stresses of raising a child with SEN was evident. The negative impact of the exosystem, namely delayed implementation of the EPSEN Act, which outlines positive policy recommendations for

supporting inclusion of children in mainstream school, was tangible amongst parents, early years and primary school educators alike. Overall schools and early years services are supporting children with SEN and families as best possible with the transition to school, however failure at governmental level to support this hinders this process significantly.

6.3 Recommendations

This research will conclude with some recommendations in the area of transitions for children with SEN and families to mainstream primary school, in light of findings from the study:

- Development of a standardised transitions information transfer tool to ensure information can be shared with consent between preschools and schools would support the transition for children with SEN. At the very least, this information can be easily communicated to schools through email/post, for example, ensuring that information on the needs of children is transferred, without greatly increasing administration for already stretched services.

- There is potential for research into the influence of the ECCE programme for children with SEN in general. In particular, a research study could also investigate the impact of two year ECCE provision pro-rata, rather than two years full-time, for children with SEN. Any extension of ECCE provision for children with SEN over two years, however, would have to be considered carefully with supports for inclusion of children with SEN in early years services reviewed first.

- It is recommended that schools make contact as early as possible with parents and families of children with SEN prior to starting school, to provide additional support to the family and to support the school in understanding the child's holistic needs.

- There is potential for reviewing training provision for primary school teachers, and perhaps early years educators, in the area of inclusion and supporting children with SEN in the mainstream setting.

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Appendix A

Details of Parents & Child; Experience of Primary School Teachers, Special Needs
Assistant & Early Years Professionals

	Status of Child Transitioning to School	**Child's Special Educational Needs**
Parent 1	Child transitioned to school September 2012	Aspergers
Parent 2	Child transitioned to school September 2013	Spastic Diplegia – Physical disability
Parent 3	Child to start school September 2014	Autism
Parent 4	Child to start school September 2014	Autism
Parent 5	Child transitioned to school September 2012	Down's Syndrome

	Number of Years Teaching Experience	**Experience with Junior Infants/Special needs**
Primary Teacher 1	11	Currently Home School Liaison Teacher (2 years) 2 years Resource Teacher,
Primary Teacher 2	11	3 years Junior Infants 2 years Resource Teacher
Primary Teacher 3	10	2years Junior Infants 2 years Special Needs Class
Special Needs Assistant	7	7 years Junior Infants

	Number of Years working in Early Years Sector	**Type of Preschool Setting**	**Number of Years in Current Preschool**
Early Years Professional 1	12	Preschool located within a school	4
Early Years Professional 2	4	Preschool located within a school	2 months (2 years previously preschool for children with Autism)
Early Years Professional 3	30	Stand-alone preschool	15

Appendix B

<u>Interview Schedule</u>
<u>(Parents with child starting school in September)</u>

<u>Warm up questions</u>
1. Tell me a little about your child:
   Tease out - what's your child's name? How old is your child?

<u>Lead in questions:</u>
2. Your child will be starting school in September, how do you feel about this transition?

3. How does your child feel about starting school in September?

4. What are the good things that you think your child will experience when starting school?

5. What are the challenges you think your child may face?

6. What are the good things you as a parent will experience because of this transition?

7. What are the challenges you think you might face?

8. Do you have any concerns about the transition?

9. Have you taken any steps to help your child get ready for the transition to school? If so, what are these?

10. Has the school provided any supports with this transition, if any?

11. Does your child attend preschool – if so, has the preschool service provided any support with this transition?

12. What supports would you like to help your child with this transition?

13. What supports would you like to help you and your family with this transition?

<u>Interview Schedule</u>

<u>(Parents with child that is already in school)</u>

<u>Warm up questions:</u>
1. Tell me a little about your child:
    Tease out - what's your child's name? How old is your child?

<u>Lead in questions:</u>

2. Your child has been through the transition to school, how did you feel about this transition before the child started?

3. How did your child feel before he/she started school?

4. What are the good things that your child experienced because of this transition to school?

5.   What are the challenges you that your child faced?

6. What are the good things that you, as a parent, experienced because of this transition?

7. What are the challenges that you faced?

8. Did you have any concerns about the transition?

9. Did you take any steps to help your child get ready for the transition to school? If so, what are these?

10. Did the school provide any supports with this transition, if any?

11. Did your child attend preschool?
    If so, did the preschool service provide any support with this transition?

12. Can you think of supports that would have helped your child with this transition?

13. What supports would have helped you and your family with this transition?

<u>Wrap up question</u>
14. Finally, do you have one piece of advice that you would give a parent that will be supporting their child with starting school?

<u>Interview Schedule</u>
<u>(Focus Group Primary School Teachers)</u>

<u>Warm up questions</u>
1. How long have you been working with junior infant children?

2. How long have you been working in your current school?

<u>Lead in questions</u>
3. Generally, how do you think children with special educational need's (SEN) find the transition to primary school in the first year?

4. How do you think their parents and families find this transition?

5. What are the positive aspects of this transition for children with SEN?

6. What are the challenges for children with SEN's with transitioning to school?

7. What are the positive aspects of this transition for parents/family members?

8. What are the challenges for parents/family members?

9. What are the positive aspects for the school with this transition?

10. What challenges do you think the school faces with such a transition?

11. What supports can help children with SEN and their families with this transition?

12. Are there any supports or strategies that could help you as a teacher to support a child with SEN with the transition to primary school?

<u>Wrap up question</u>
13. Finally, what one piece of advice would you give to parents/families with a child with SEN due to make this transition?

<u>Interview Schedule</u>
<u>(Focus Group Early Years Practitioners)</u>

<u>Warm up questions</u>
1. How long have you been working with preschool children?

2. How long have you been working in your current preschool?

<u>Lead in questions</u>
3. Generally, how do you think children with special educational need's (SEN) find the transition from preschool to primary school?

4. How do you think their parents and families find this transition?

5. What are the positive aspects of this transition for children with SEN?

6. What are the challenges for children with SEN's with transitioning to school?

7. What are the positive aspects of this transition for parents/family members?

8. What are the challenges for parents/family members?

9. What are the challenges for the Early Years service with supporting this transition?

10. What supports can help children with SEN and their families with this transition?

11. Are there any supports or strategies that could help you as an early years practitioner to support a child with SEN with the transition to primary school?

<u>Wrap up question</u>
12. Finally, what one piece of advice would you give to parents/families with a child with SEN due to make this transition?

Appendix C

Consent Form

Researcher's Name**: FIONA HASSETT**	**Title:** MS.
Faculty/School/Department**: School of Social Sciences and Law**	
Title of Study**: An exploration of the factors that can support children with special educational needs and their parents with transitioning to primary school**	
To be completed by the: interviewee/parent	

3.1 Have you been fully informed/read the information sheet about this study?
YES/NO

3.2   Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study?
YES/NO

3.3. Have you received satisfactory answers to all your questions?
YES/NO

3.4 Have you received enough information about this study and any associated health and
    safety implications if applicable?
YES/NO

3.5 Do you understand that you are free to withdraw from this study?

- at any time
- without giving a reason for withdrawing
- without affecting your future relationship with the Institute
  YES/NO

3.6 Do you agree to take part in this study the results of which are likely to be
    published?

YES/NO

3.7 Have you been informed that this consent form shall be kept in the confidence of the researcher?   YES/NO
Signed_____   Date _____   Name in Block Letters   _____   Signature of Researcher _____   Date _____

Appendix D

Transcript of Early Years Focus Group

<u>Duration: 25 minutes</u>

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