

Abstract

The overarching aim of this study was to provide an information base on the transition from preschool to formal schooling in Ireland, and to improve understanding about how best to support children's learning during this time. The theoretical framework for the project was based on the ecological systems model of development proposed by Bronfenbrenner. As there was no previous Irish research in this area, the study took an exploratory approach, and drew on a variety of sources to present the perspectives of preschool practitioners¹, primary school teachers², parents, and children themselves.

Phase 1 involved a questionnaire being completed by a nationwide sample of preschool practitioners and teachers of junior infants classes. Both groups agreed that children with the ability to negotiate classroom life independently, equipped with good social skills and the ability to concentrate and listen for short periods of time, are more likely to be successful at primary level. Phase II took a more qualitative approach to the subject, following a case study sample of seven children through their first year in the primary school system. This phase investigated the perspectives of the children themselves, their parents, teachers and classmates, using observation data, semi-structured interviews, and child discussion groups to gather information about the process. Differences were noted by the children between the more formal 'work' based pedagogy of the junior infants classroom as compared to their preschool experiences. The issue of cultural capital being transferred across the home-school environments was also apparent.

The findings from the study concur with the notion that transition to school is an adaptive process for children and their families, and that all stakeholders should be involved in communication about the process (Pianta et al, 1999). The study also confirmed the value of involving multiple stakeholders, particularly the children themselves, in the research process.

¹ The term 'Practitioner' is used throughout this report for consistency, when referring to practitioners at preschool level, although it is acknowledged that in practice a variation of titles are used.

² Teachers who took part in the study were all teachers of junior infants classes.