

## CHAPTER 1:

### INTRODUCTION

*“For some children the winds of change blow fair,  
for others the passage can be stormy,  
for others still they drift into the new,  
and for some they set off on a huge adventure,  
as explorers in search of something new.”  
(Dunlop, 2007a, p156).*

## **1.1 Introduction**

The transition from preschool<sup>1</sup> to formal schooling has been identified internationally as being of great importance educationally in the lives of young children (Bernard Van Leer Foundation, 2006). This study set out to investigate this transition for children in Ireland. The review of literature on transition undertaken for this study identified a growing concern with the issues of differences in culture and curricula in preschools and schools, and the issue of school readiness. The literature also supports the idea that achieving a successful transition may be contingent on a degree of continuity between preschools and primary schools, and this issue is explored in the thesis. It was also noted that the inter-relatedness of the individual systems within which the child exists are important at the time of transition, and the impact of social, cultural and transitions capital are important. With this in mind, the importance of communication between stakeholders was noted.

## **1.2 Aim of this Study**

The primary aim of the study was to provide a general picture of the transition from preschool<sup>2</sup> to primary school in Ireland. Therefore this study has been the first step in the process of understanding this very important transition in the Irish context. The study intended to provide an information base on this transition, and to improve understanding about how best to support children's learning during this time. It was also intended to establish what policies and practices are currently in place in Irish pre-schools and schools to aid the smooth transition between the two settings. Finally, some ideas that might minimise adjustment problems for young children on entry to the formal education system were to be identified.

---

<sup>1</sup> The term Preschool is used in this study to refer to the range of services children attend before commencing formal schooling in Ireland, such as playgroups, naionrai and other preschool programmes, regardless of their administrative auspices, funding arrangements or programme emphasis. Further details of these services are outlined in Chapter 2.

<sup>2</sup> The study investigates the experiences of children who have attended preschool in the transition to formal schooling, it does not examine the transition for children who enter school directly from the home environment.

A variety of methodological approaches were used to endeavour to understand this important transition. Questionnaire data, observation data, semi-structured interviews, discussion groups, and pictures drawn by children were used to gather information about the process. Taking an ecological perspective, the study also investigated the relationships between the stakeholders in the process. Following on from the above aims of the project, the specific research questions posed at the outset of this thesis were:

- What are the attitudes of preschool and primary school teachers towards the transition from preschool to primary school?
- What are the policies and practices that preschool and primary school teachers have in place to smooth the transition from preschool to primary school?
- How did the seven case study children experience the transition from preschool to primary school?
- What are the attitudes of their parents and teachers towards the transition?
- What are the views of their classmates on the process of transition from preschool to primary school?

### **1.3 Rationale for the Study**

*“We have focussed on school outcomes, forgetting that if children do not have a good beginning – if they are not well nurtured and well loved during the first years of life – it will be difficult, if not impossible, to compensate fully for such failings later on”*

(Boyer, 1991, p.4).

Boyer, quoted above, reminds us of the importance of ‘good beginnings’ and of the difficulties inherent in compensating for difficulties experienced in the first years of life at a later stage. The importance of the early years in educational terms should not be underestimated. These years lay the foundations for future educational experiences, and need to be of sound structure if positive educational experiences are to be built upon them. The educational system faces children with

---

some major transitions and it is often stated that successful first transitions contribute to later school success and the capacity to negotiate further transitions (Dunlop, 2007).

There are a number of reasons for undertaking this study. Internationally the focus on transition to formal schooling has increased (Peters, 2004; Bohan-Baker & Little, 2004; Cassidy, 2005; Margetts, 2005; Bernard Van Leer Foundation, 2006; Dunlop & Fabian, 2007). In Ireland however, there has been no comprehensive research looking at the area of transition from preschool to school. The audit of research in the area of early childhood care and education in Ireland conducted by the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education prior to the commencement of this research (Walsh, 2003)<sup>3</sup> also identified a gap in this area. He suggests that gaps in the research highlighted in the report, such as transition to formal schooling, should provide a basis for further research<sup>4</sup>. Hayes (2004) making concluding observations at the “Questions of Quality” conference in Dublin Castle, also spoke of how “*the matching of quality at points of transition in the lives of children warrants consideration*” (p413). She highlighted the issue of group size requirements for four-year-olds in preschool settings as compared to school settings, and wondered how best these two educational environments might move closer while still maintaining quality. The Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO, 2006) have also called for research into the area of infant and early childhood education in Ireland, citing a dearth of such research at present. They have also called for involvement of primary teachers in such research, as is the case with this study. The results of this study will provide the first data on the policies and procedures in use in Irish preschools and schools with regard to the transition from preschool to Junior Infants class.

Secondly, the number of children availing of ECCE in Ireland is increasing rapidly. Historically in Ireland preschool provision was seen as the responsibility of the family, and state involvement was principally limited to provision of places

---

<sup>3</sup> The updated audit of research (Walsh & Cassidy, 2007) found that all but one publication since 2003 on this transition in Ireland was work published by O’Kane and Hayes (2005, 2006, 2006a) as part of this study.

for children seen to be at risk. However, as the OECD (2004) note, recent demographic, social and economic changes in Ireland have resulted in increased demand for preschool provision. The CECDE have highlighted that the greater demand for labour during this period of economic growth in Ireland, combined with a rise in the cost of housing (necessitating dual income households), and relatively short maternity leave entitlements in Ireland, have led to an increase in female work force participation rates (CECDE, 2005). Indeed the OECD has noted that the number of women in the work-force in Ireland has risen from 35.8% in 1990, to 41.4% in 1996, to 48.8% in 2002 (2004). Quarterly National Household Survey figures for 2007 report that the number of women participating in the Irish workforce has further increased to 55% (CSO, 2007). The CECDE (2005) note that because of the circumstances outlined above, more children need to be cared for outside the home, and this has resulted in a greater demand for preschool places. So the majority of children in Ireland are entering now formal education from the preschool environment. These changes in preschool attendance that have taken place in Ireland over the past two decades mean that the impact of preschool experience on children's experience of primary education has become an important issue. The expectations of the school teacher may differ from the preschool teacher, and cultural, curricular, and academic differences between the two environments will impact on transition for the child (Cassidy, 2005). It is suggested that the greater the understanding and continuity between the two settings the better for the child and their smooth transfer into formal education. This study hopes to investigate these issues surrounding continuity during this important transition.

Both Irish and international research has consistently demonstrated the value of high quality ECCE both to the individual children and to society as a whole. It can lead both to improved performance throughout school years (Peisner-Feinberg et al, 2000, 2001; Gormley, Gayer, Phillips & Dawson, 2004; Sammons, Elliott, Sylva, Melhuish, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart, 2004) and to later social benefits which persist through to adulthood (Schweinhart & Weikart 1997; Masse &

---

<sup>4</sup> Since the development of this project, another research project has commenced within St Patrick's College, Drumcondra, looking at the effect of transition for refugee children in Ireland (Donnelly, 2007).

Barnett, 2002; Schweinhart, 2004). These effects have been shown to be particularly strong in educationally disadvantaged children (Sylva, Meluish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart, 2004; Karoly, Kilburn & Cannon, 2005). However the issue of whether this investment into ECCE is being capitalized on at primary level needs to be considered. The impact of high quality early intervention *without* successful transition to school has to be questioned (Kagan & Neuman, 1999; Ramey & Ramey, 1999; Bohan-Baker & Little, 2004). Benefits gained during early intervention may not automatically transfer to the new school context. Acknowledging the long-lasting effects of difficulties experienced at the early stages of education, there is clearly a need to better understand children's adjustment during their transition to school, and identify causes for these difficulties.

Another important reason for undertaking this study is the fact that there has been a changing perception of children in Ireland resulting in the emergence of a rights-based approach (OECD, 2004). The OECD suggests that this is primarily as a result of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, which was ratified in Ireland in 1992. This growing acknowledgement of children's rights has led to a greater focus by educators, parents, and policy makers on children's experiences in early educational settings. From an Irish perspective, the National Children's Strategy "Our Children – Their Lives" (DHC, 2000) sets out a series of objectives to guide policy on children until 2010. One of the National Goals identified by the Strategy is to use research to better understand the experiences of children growing up in Ireland. With the above in mind, it is important for research in Ireland to investigate this area which has to date been overlooked.

#### **1.4 The Concept of Transition**

The term transition, in educational terms, has been defined as the process of movement from one place or phase of education to another (Fabian & Dunlop, 2002). Transitions often mean a change in location, teacher, curriculum, and philosophy (Margetts, 1999). A number of transitions occur through the early

education years<sup>5</sup>. Some occur across the years, ie, home to preschool; home to formal schooling; childminder to formal schooling. Some occur during the child's day or week, ie, early morning childcare to school, or school to after-school care. All transitions are important, and often involve tension, uncertainty and new challenges for children (Yeboah, 2002). For this reason, practices to ensure the smooth transition for the child from one setting to another are encouraged. This study investigates one of the most important transitions during this period, the transition from preschool to formal schooling.

The transition from preschool to school does not just refer to the first days at school. Fabian and Dunlop (2002) remind us that the period of transition from preschool to school begins with preparation at preschool level, followed by the initial settling-in process, and continues on until the child feels established in the new school setting. Other researchers have reinforced the view that because of the dynamic nature of transition, it is more appropriate to consider it a process rather than focus on a single event or occasion (NFER, 2005; Johannson, 2007). The time of transition is a period when developmental demands become accelerated (Fabian & Dunlop, 2002) and Johansson advises "*transitions usually involve transitioners changing roles, status and identity*" (2007, p34). Some children will adapt easily to a new educational environment, however for others moving from a familiar preschool environment to the new primary school setting can be a challenging experience.

The concept of transition itself is rapidly changing as it is being explored in greater depth. Ramey & Ramey (1999) advise that the issue of transition is emerging as an important new construct in ECCE, replacing the construct of school readiness<sup>6</sup>. They cite evidence suggesting that the concept of readiness is flawed in that it focuses on the competence of the child as compared to the role of the family, school, and community. They suggest that this traditional view of readiness needs to be replaced with a transition-to-school framework, which views the first few years of a child's school life as a time of adaptation for

---

<sup>5</sup> For the purposes of this study the early education years are seen the years from birth to six, whether a child is attending preschool or formal primary education during this period.

<sup>6</sup> See Chapter 4 [Section 4.3.1.] for a discussion on the concept of School Readiness.

children, their families and schools. Indeed, this is the approach taken in the present study.

Recognition is growing internationally that a successful transition to school is significant to both the social and emotional welfare of the child, and their later cognitive achievements (Dunlop and Fabian, 2002; Wylie & Thompson, 2003; Bernard Van Leer Foundation, 2006; Niesel & Griebel, 2007). Transition creates challenges for the child, but it also provides opportunities for growth. Successful negotiation of these challenges can have long term consequences for both the child and their family, resulting in confidence and competence to manage later moves. It has been suggested that the transition to school is a period in which children develop a view of themselves as learners and as people, which will have long term consequences in all areas. A ‘new’ child can emerge during this period, and this may be a child filled with self-belief both in academic and social terms, or the opposite can occur, and the long-term consequences for the child can be very negative (Pianta & Cox, 1999).

Researchers have identified four areas as being important during this time of change. Academic expectations increase, while social interactions also become more complex to negotiate. Conversely there is less support from parents at school level compared to preschool, and teachers also have less time for individual support, due to larger class numbers (Pianta, 2004). In essence, the demands placed on the child both socially and academically increase, while the supports available to the child decrease. With this in mind, continuity and progression could well play a part in assisting children to cope with these new demands. It has been suggested that to enable children to predict events and have some sense of control over their environment, it is essential that they are given the information they need about the timings involved in the change, people involved, and the expectations of the new setting (Dunlop & Fabian, 2002).

Brostrom (2007) however, reminds us that not only are organisational transition systems (such as transition plans and activities) important to have in place, but he proposes that the development of high mental functions is important at this time. In terms of preparation, he suggests implementing a “*transitory activity system*”

(2007, p61) using types of advanced play to help children develop thinking skills that are not contextually bound, and develop children's motivation to learn in the new school environment. He suggests that through the process of adults scaffolding children's learning using different kinds of 'expansive play' a transitory activity can take place which has "*the potential to enrich the individual child and to guide the development of motivation...at the same time it could also be seen as an activity that will bridge preschool and school*" (2007, p65). In this way the child would develop as a confident transitioner, and would internalize the skills they need to manage future transitions. Such a system could work well as part of a transition plan in terms of preparation, and the development of competencies, for the children themselves.

## **1.5 Outline of Study**

**Chapter Two** introduces the context of the study and gives an overview of Ireland from 2000-2007. It then gives an outline of preschool and primary school provision in Ireland at that time. There follows a summary of the differences between the two types of provision, including curricular differences, cultural differences and physical differences.

**Chapter Three** is a review of the relevant literature regarding the transition from preschool to formal schooling internationally. A growing concern with the issue of transition is revealed. This chapter commences with a discussion about the impact of this transition on children, and the skills necessary to succeed in formal schooling. Policies and practices which impact on children during this transition are also discussed. Parental beliefs and expectations and the importance of parental involvement is noted. In this regard the impact of social, cultural and transitions capital are outlined. Also highlighted is the considerable debate about the roles of communication and continuity, the role of play, and the impact of curricula on children during this period.

**Chapter Four** outlines how transitions are theorised in the project. It gives an overview of the ecological systems model of development proposed by Bronfenbrenner, and how transitions are understood in ecological terms. It then

briefly outlines sociocultural theory which is also considered important in better understanding transitions.

**Chapter Five** provides an insight into Phase I of the research process. Firstly it gives an outline of the sampling methods used for the study. Details are then given on the measurement instruments, including the expert review undertaken during the questionnaire development. This is followed by details of the data collection process and procedures undertaken in order to maximise questionnaire response rates, and an outline of data input and analysis procedures. The Chapter concludes with a brief review of ethical considerations.

**Chapter Six** provides an insight into Phase II of the research process. The Chapter commences with an outline of the case study and ethnographic approach taken in the study. This is followed by information on the sample. Details are then given on the measurement instrument, which include meetings with case study parents and children, classroom and playground observations, child group discussions, and teacher interviews. A discussion on the trustworthiness of data then follows. The chapter finishes with an outline of data coding and analysis procedures, followed by ethical considerations.

**Chapter Seven** presents the findings of the questionnaire data. Firstly the preschool questionnaire findings are presented. These include background information and decision making information, attitudes and beliefs of the preschool teachers, and information on policies and practices considered important by preschool teachers. This is followed by the primary school questionnaire findings, including background information on teachers, school and class context, attitudes and beliefs of the primary school teachers, and policies and practices considered important by primary school teachers. The responses of the two groups of teachers are then compared.

**Chapter Eight** commences with some background information on Springwood school. The seven case study stories are then presented, and details of Callum, Ross, Ruairi, Jack, Rachael, Janice and Fiona's stories unfold. This is followed by information on teacher perspectives taken from the teacher interviews, and

information on parent perspectives taken from the parent interviews. The chapter concludes with information gathered during child discussion groups on the perspectives of the Springwood school children on their transition to school.

**Chapter Nine** involves analysis and discussion on the findings presented in the previous two chapters in light of the literature reviewed. The themes which have emerged from the research are highlighted and discussed with reference to the research questions that this study hopes to answer. These are: children experiencing transition, families experiencing transition, professionals supporting transition, the role of continuity, and the role of communication.

**Chapter Ten** presents the conclusions from this study and highlights issues for future consideration. Implications arising from the findings are analysed and recommendations made. Conclusions and recommendations are made with regard to the main four themes which emerged in the findings as outlined above. These are: children experiencing transition, families experiencing transition, professionals supporting transition, and the role of continuity and communication.