

CHAPTER 10:

CONCLUSIONS

AND

RECOMMENDATIONS

“Helping children should be viewed as an investment, not a cost, since failure to act surely will mean far higher payments later on in remedial education, in unemployment, in crime – in wasted lives and promises unfulfilled”

(Boyer, 1991, p11)

10.1 Introduction.

This chapter presents the conclusions from this study and highlights issues for future policy development. Implications arising from the findings are analysed and recommendations made. Taking an ecological perspective, the emphasis for transition to school is on developing links between families, preschools, schools, and the community. In order to do this, the views of teachers in both preschools and schools need to be considered, along with the views of parents and children. It is hoped that the findings of this study will go some way to making this possible.

The results presented must be interpreted carefully in the context of the research limitations which were outlined in previous chapters. These include the fact that the need to provide a general picture of transition in Ireland was the primary aim of the project, so it was not possible to investigate the experience for specific groups of children considered to be at risk during this time. It is acknowledged that further research needs to be undertaken into the process of transition to formal schooling for children from vulnerable groups. With regard to the case studies – Phase II of the study - as with all ethnographic case-study type research, another limitation is that it is not possible to generalise across settings. The aim of this Phase of the project was to give an insight as to how the process of transition to formal schooling was ‘lived’ by these individual children, their parents, classmates and teachers. It is acknowledged that the experience will be different for each individual child and their family. Generalisations from the results are made with caution.

10.2 Conclusions

The conclusions of the study are outlined following on from four themes which emerged from the findings: conclusions relating to children experiencing transition; conclusions relating to families experiencing transition; conclusions relating to professionals supporting transition; and conclusions relating to continuity and communication.

10.2.1 Conclusions Relating to Children Experiencing Transition.

Findings from the study support the notion that the concept of 'school readiness' has been given too narrow a focus, the responsibility for readiness does not lie with the child or their family alone. It is important to note that although in an ideal situation every junior infants class, in every primary school in Ireland should be 'ready' for the range of abilities, skills, and challenges that each new intake of children brings with them, in practice this may well not be the case. The teachers in this study have highlighted issues that make it clear that the ideal scenario is not necessarily the situation in which most children will find themselves.

Findings with regard to the skills teachers' value on the transition to school suggest that a difference between rhetoric and reality exists. With regard to the skills of independence and the ability to sit and listen, the dichotomy between these two skills areas is of interest. The balance between acting independently when required yet also sitting still when required may well be a difficult balance for children of four and five years old to understand.

The findings also noted a focus on language skills by both groups of teachers and parents alike. Language is acknowledged as being an important tool in the development of intellect, and its importance in terms of school achievement was noted. How best to support children with language and communication difficulties both at preschool level and on arrival at primary school was highlighted by the findings as being an important issue to address.

The findings noted a loss of independence felt by the children experiencing transition, with an emphasis on obedience and compliance, and a lack of autonomy noted in the role of school-child. The children preferred activities where they had some autonomy and control, however they were very aware that they must become accustomed to the rules of the classroom, and seemed accepting of this fact. An understanding of school rules was clearly important to children when asked what preschool children should know when entering school.

10.2.2 Conclusions Relating to Families Experiencing Transition.

Findings from the study suggest that increased communication and better home-school relationships would heighten parent's sense of involvement in their child's education. Findings suggest that even parents who would appear to be empowered to approach teachers can often be reticent about doing so. An 'open door' approach may be advocated in the junior infants classroom, however it is not clear that this concept is equally understood by parents and staff.

This is particularly important in terms of the cultural capital that children arrive at school with. If the beliefs of parents do not coincide with the pedagogic discourse of the school, this can result in the parent being considered not to properly fulfil the role of 'school parent' as considered appropriate by the school. This could prove to be a major barrier in the development of a supportive home-school relationship.

The study also noted that parents in Ireland are rarely asked to provide any information on their children to schools. It is clear from the case study stories that parents had a wealth of information on their children's strengths and weaknesses, both in academic, social, and emotional terms. Communication between parents and teachers in Ireland appeared to be seen very much as the transfer of information from teacher to parent, rather than any expectation that communication might be a two way process. This imbalance in power needs to be addressed.

10.2.3 Conclusions Relating to Professionals Supporting Transition.

The findings from the study would support the theoretical approach of Vygotsky suggesting that teachers should help scaffold and support children through the transition process. The importance of opportunities for teachers and children to interact thereby facilitating a co-construction of meaning were highlighted.

Teachers in this study reported that children are not necessarily arriving in their classrooms with the preparation necessary for success. This raises the question of whether there is in fact a mis-match of beliefs between preschool and primary school teachers about how children should be prepared for school. However, this must be

considered in tandem with the understanding that the responsibility should not be on the child to enter school 'ready' for the demands of the infants class, but more that the responsibility should be on all professionals working in ECCE to work towards an approach that supports children during this time.

The findings emphasised the curricular differences between preschool and primary school settings. A dichotomy was found in the study between the children's experience of play-based activities at school, and what the children considered to be play, ie, the times when they could actively control their environment. Findings supported the view that children leave behind the role of 'active explorer' in preschool. Questions were raised as to whether schools are ready to meet the needs of children in terms of providing an active rather than passive learning environment. An equal partnership between preschools and school needs to include a respect for the emphasis on play and active learning reflected in ECCE curricula (Bernard Van Leer Foundation, 2006).

Finally, it is noteworthy that there is no national policy for transitions. It is clear from the findings from this study that very few policies or practices are being implemented at ground level. Instead of working towards continuity, the differences between the preschool and primary school sectors in Ireland are emphasised by differences in almost every aspect of operation: curricula, staff training, regulation and inspection, historical and cultural differences, and the government departments with responsibility for each sector.

10.2.4 Conclusions Relating to Communication and Continuity

The study did not find high levels of continuity, or planning for transition, at preschool or primary level. Cultural differences may go some way to explaining this difficulty with regard to communication and co-operation. However differences in the training of preschool and primary school teachers may also play a part. A true partnership between preschool and primary levels needs to include a respect for differences between the two educational settings.

The findings of the study suggest that in order to facilitate smooth transitions from preschool to primary school for children in Ireland, policies procedures and practices that promote consistency between the settings need to be developed. These should include a focus on curriculum. Indeed providing program continuity through curricula for preschool and primary school children has been proposed as one of the keys to successful transition.

10.3 Recommendations

Recommendations from the study are outlined following on from four themes which emerged from the findings: recommendations relating to children experiencing transition; recommendations relating to families experiencing transition; recommendations relating to professionals supporting transition; recommendations relating to continuity and communication.

10.3.1 Recommendations Relating to Children Experiencing Transition

It is recommended that strategies should be implemented at an early stage to help the groups of children identified in the study as being at risk to cope with the transition. It is also recommended that further research take place in the Irish context in clarifying these findings, and further identifying the behaviours that teachers consider cause difficulty at junior infants level. It is not clear from the findings that any supports have been put in place to facilitate transition for children considered to be at risk.

The differences in opinion noted with regard to children from disadvantaged backgrounds, or children from minority groups, warrant further investigations. It is not clear why the two groups of teachers view these groups differently. The reason why teachers in DD settings were more likely to predict higher levels of children at risk, but did not appear to associate this risk was also unclear. It is recommended that further research be undertaken to determine the reasons behind these findings.

Findings from the study suggest that confidence and emotional skills are valued less highly at primary level than preschool level. It is suggested that primary school

teachers should actively encourage interactions and friendships with peers. It is not clear why these practices which would not appear difficult in practical terms, are not better supported by teachers of junior infants classes. Further investigation into this area is warranted.

Differences were noted in how the playground is viewed by children, in that some children cite it as their favourite place in school, while others clearly have difficulty adapting to the playground. This may lead adults to believe that difficulties belong to individual children, rather than view the playground as being an environment for supporting and extending children's learning experiences. It is interesting that the playground has been identified as a key site with respect to bullying and yet in Ireland teachers have only a custodial role in the yard. Therefore there are unlikely to be extensive policies other than Health and Safety governing their thinking or practice. It is recommended that policies and practices need to be developed with regard to outdoor play times, and the issues of bullying at these times, in Irish primary schools. Both staff and children could be involved in establishing a code of conduct for behaviour in the playground, thus enabling children to have their voices heard with regard to this issue. It is also a concern that children are reporting experiences of bullying in their first year of school, and further investigation into this issue is called for.

The children in the study noted a difference in levels of outdoor equipment available at preschool level as compared to school. It is recommended that more equipment, not necessarily expensive equipment, should be available to children in the primary school playground or yard. The provision of play equipment in the yard also creates situations in which it is easier for children to interact with peers. It is recommended that further research into how teachers could better support children's development and social skills during outdoor playtimes should take place.

The children in this study noted a change in freedom and control to which they had to adapt on making the transition from preschool to primary school. If, as it appears, the children regard only periods where they have a choice in activity as a time of play, it is recommended that there is a need to reconsider the opportunities in which children

are given some form of control over their learning. In this regard, it is suggested that opportunities should be provided for greater choice in the classroom. Then perhaps children would feel more ownership over their activities.

Finally, it was clear from the child discussion group data that these five year old children could skilfully describe the nuances of the junior infants classroom, and provide valid suggestions about what could help younger children to make sense of this environment. They proved to be experts in their own environment. It is recommended that the views of children should be kept to the forefront of research into the transition to school in Ireland, and their expertise in this area valued in its own right.

10.3.2 Recommendations Relating to Families Experiencing Transition

Findings from the study suggest that much of the rhetoric in favour of parent involvement in Irish schools may not be actively practiced. It is recommended that further information needs to be gathered on the factors that contribute to family and school interaction and the policies and practices in Irish schools that are used to promote parent involvement. Also further information needs to be sought on the most effective methods for cultivating home-school relationships

Although the study found that parents are usually provided information about the procedures for the first day at school and what is expected of them and their child, it was clear that information was not transferred from parent or preschool teacher to primary school. It is also recommended that further research be undertaken into the usefulness of parents completing a questionnaire about their children for teachers prior to school start (many preschools in Ireland already do this). It is acknowledged that such information would be subjective and reflects the parent's individual beliefs, however it would provide the teacher with some background information of both the child and the parent. Parents would have the opportunity to highlight any concerns, they would also be aware that their views were valued by the school, and that their child was seen as an individual, with individual needs. Some parents in the current study had concerns about the transfer of information. However it is recommended that

the potential for the use of such information in a positive manner should be discussed in terms of possibilities and implications.

A major concern with regard to the study, is that although this research has generated some very important findings which could greatly assist parents in helping to support their children at this time, parents may not be able to access these findings. It is recommended that a booklet outlining the findings from the study, particularly with regard to the importance of developing self-esteem, independence, language and social skills, rather than an academic focus at preschool should be developed. This could be circulated to all preschools in Ireland, in order that the information can support both preschool teachers and parents of preschool children.

Finally, a greater commitment needs to be given to establishing better partnerships with parents who may not easily fit into the role of 'school parent'. Clearly working towards such partnership will have its challenges, particularly when building relationships with hard to reach parents. If the beliefs of parents do not coincide with the pedagogic discourse of the school, this can result in the parent being considered not to properly fulfil the role of 'school parent' as considered appropriate by the school. This can prove to be a major barrier in the development of a supportive home-school relationship, and schools need to work harder and supporting such parents.

10.3.3 Recommendations Relating to Professionals Supporting Transition

Most of the parents, preschool teachers and teachers of junior infants classes questioned in the study expressed a belief that children benefit from starting school older, and questioned whether primary school is the appropriate learning environment for four-year-olds. It is recommended that free quality preschool places should be provided for children of four years old. This would enable all parents to enrol their children in quality preschool services for one year prior to school start, rather than be forced by financial reasons to enrol their children in primary school at four years old. Only services complying with the Preschool Regulations (Department of Health, 1996, 2006) would be eligible to take part in the scheme.

It was clear from the study findings that opportunities for sustained shared thinking are limited in the infants classes of the primary school. Class size, adult:child ratios, the lack of appropriate training in play-based philosophies and time for reflection were noted as being challenges to the development of a more play based practice. The findings from this study would support the need to better explore how to provide greater opportunities for sustained shared thinking at in the junior infants classroom. It is recommended that research into this area would be beneficial.

Related to the difficulties mentioned above, it is suggested that issues such as class sizes and lack of classroom assistants should be considered in further detail at national level. The Government should work with more speed towards reaching the recommendations made in 2002 when they committed to a reduction in class sizes for children under nine to bring the average class size to below the international best-practice guidelines of 20:1 (Programme for Government, 2002). This aim has clearly not been met. For many years, the importance of small class size has been noted in terms of enabling teachers to work with the diversity of experiences and abilities in the infant classroom.

The findings from the study highlighted a difference of opinion between preschool and primary school teachers with regard to whether children from disadvantaged backgrounds, or children from minority groups, were at risk of a difficult transition. Both this issue, and the issue of why the DD sample were more likely to predict higher levels of children at risk but did not appear to associate this risk with disadvantage, are issues which require further investigation.

The findings from this study suggest that in terms of academic skills, there appears to be a lack of agreement between theory and practice at preschool level. It is possible that preschool teachers feel pressure from parents to prepare children in academic terms for the junior infant class, or they may be influenced by their own beliefs about expectations at primary level. It is recommended that this area should be further explored, as it may highlight a need to better educate parents about how children of this age learn, and the importance of active learning through play at both preschool and junior infants level.

In practical terms, a buddy programme where older children are paired with new starters to facilitate their transition to school is also recommended. The older children should have opportunities to mix with the younger children both in the classroom and in the playground. As noted in Chapter 4, successful ‘buddy’ programmes have been reported on in Australia (Dockett & Perry, 2005a) and the UK (Bulkeley & Fabian, 2006). It is recommended that a pilot buddy programme should be undertaken to better understand the value of such a system in the Irish context.

It is also recommended that a pilot study of the effectiveness of a preschool-school transition plan in the Irish context would be very useful. The development of such a plan would need to adopt a partnership approach where all the stakeholders were involved in the process, and communication between all groups was supported. Any plan should be community-wide, and have in place a system for evaluation.

Furthermore, a ‘transitory activity system’ such as proposed by Brostrom (2007) should be considered by Irish preschools and junior infants classes. Such a system involves the development of higher mental functions using forms of advanced play to help children develop non-contextually bound thinking skills. In this way, teachers can provide activities which encourage children to develop a love of learning, enthusiasm and motivation which will assist them in the primary school classroom. 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.

10.3.4 Recommendations Relating to Continuity and Communication

The lack of communication found in the study between preschools and primary schools in Ireland suggests that there is little congruence in approaches to learning. The Vygotskian suggestion that continuity of approach in terms of philosophy, curriculum and experience would lead to optimal learning conditions for children, is clearly not taking place. Findings from the study suggest that the two groups of teachers have only a limited understanding of each other’s working ideologies and environments. It is recommended that avenues be investigated through which the two groups of teachers could develop a greater understanding of each others philosophy and work on ways to develop shared policies and practices.

It is suggested that some form of joint in-service training could also be useful to allow for a sharing of pedagogical practice bring and provide opportunities to develop greater understanding. Staff from primary school could be given some practical experience of working in preschools, and preschool staff could be given some practical experience of primary school teaching, to experience the realities of working in both situations. Such placements should help both groups develop a greater understanding of the links between the preschool and primary school curricula. Greater collaboration and knowledge sharing would be beneficial for practitioners from both fields, and policies are needed that would foster communication in this area.

The lack of training in communication skills identified in Chapter 9 is also an issue at both preschool and primary level. Not all teachers have good communication skills. Their training focuses on communication with children, not with adults. It is recommended that training in this area should be included in both preschool teacher training, and the initial teacher training course for primary school teachers. Even staff with good communication skills may face challenges in contacting all parents, and training in this regard could prove to be very useful.

International research (Early et al, 2001, 2004) has found that teachers were more likely to make use of transition practices in schools if they had received some training in transitions. Trained teachers make use of both group-based and individualised transition practices, starting before the school year, and involving children's preschool settings. Findings suggest that a greater emphasis in both pre-service and in-service teacher training on the importance of transitions would be worthwhile.

Although both sets of practitioners questioned in the study were in favour of greater levels of communication, it is clear that in order for a co-construction of transition to take place between the two groups of teachers, that there needs to be a clearer understanding of language use and meanings between the two educational spheres. An investigation into the professional language used in the preschool and primary school sectors in Ireland could be a first step in this process. It is recommended that a study into the language used by the two groups of teachers, and more importantly the

meanings associated with such language, is undertaken. Such clarification would enable a shared conceptual framework to be developed.

It was noted in the study findings that both the DD preschool group and the DD primary school group were more open to communication and the sharing of information between preschool and primary school. The reasons for this were not clear, further exploration of why this should be the case would be justified.

Findings from the study report that little or no information is transferred from Irish preschools to primary school. It is not clear why such a transfer has not historically taken place in Ireland, but it is suggested that we could learn from international activities in this area, where some innovative methods have been piloted with regard to the transfer of information in a way that is meaningful to all stakeholders. The 'portfolio' system currently in use in New Zealand (Peters, 2007) as discussed in Chapter 4 was found to help to foster relationships between teachers and children, and between children themselves during the transition from preschool to school. It is suggested that a pilot project involving the use of portfolios demonstrating learning might be useful in the Irish context.

Finally, it is suggested that further research into the area of transition to school in Ireland is needed to better understand the area. Identifying examples of good practice, and disseminating information with regard to good practice through both the preschool and primary sectors would be of value in this regard. Research related to developing policies and practices within the sectors to facilitate transition would be welcome.

10.4 Summary

In conclusion, this research has come full circle back to the title of this thesis: Building Bridges. This research has been the first exploration of a very complex topic, it has been the first step to better understanding this transition for children in Ireland. Although the findings have shown that the numbers experiencing a difficult transition are believed to be small for these children good transitions will not just automatically happen. The extent to which children experience a smooth transition will have long-

term implications for their future educational experiences. The theme of building bridges crossing two different environments was the focus of this project at the outset. As the research has developed the importance of respecting the cultures on each side of the bridge, and the cultural environments of each of the participants in the journey has become apparent. The lives of our children are embedded in their social ties to others, and the influences on transition for children were found to be multi-level, from the influence of home, through schools and neighbourhoods, through to historical context.