

**CHAPTER 2 :**  
**CONTEXTUALISING TRANSITIONS:**  
**PRESCHOOL AND PRIMARY SCHOOL**  
**PROVISION IN IRELAND**

*“Education should not be the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire”*

W.B. Yeats

## **2.1 Introduction**

The importance of contextualising human development, and looking at the multi-level systems that influence children during periods of transition has been emphasised in terms of research methodology (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Elder, 2007). It is important to place study members in context, both in terms of their individual ecologies, and the historical and social context in which they are making any given transition. As Greene advises “*the child is bathed in culture like fish are bathed by the sea*” (1994, p354). The transition for the child from preschool to school is embedded within their relationships with people and the links between them, in combination with the ecology and historical context in which the transition takes place.

With this in mind, this chapter provides a background to the Irish context in general terms, and in educational terms, specifically in terms of the preschool and primary school environments in place during the period 2003-2007 when the research project took place. The chapter then focuses on three main issues that influence the transition from preschool to primary school in Ireland: curricular continuity, cultural continuity and physical continuity between preschool and primary schools in Ireland. Difficulties arising from a lack of continuity, and the inherent differences between the two educational settings, are discussed under these three broad headings.

## **2.2 Ireland 2000-2007**

The island of Ireland is one of the smallest countries in Europe (total area of 70,282 km) and consists of the Republic of Ireland (26 counties) and Northern Ireland (6 counties). The Republic is a parliamentary democracy, with a mixed economy, bolstered by significant inward investment from abroad (OECD, 2004). The Central Statistics Office (CSO) advise that the population of the Republic of Ireland has risen by 12.3% to over 4 million persons in the period 1995-2004, and approximately 10% of this population are children up to six years old (CSO, 2005). During this period the average household size has decreased from 3.13 persons to 2.88 persons. Divorce had trebled since it was introduced in 1997, and

the proportion of births outside marriage has increased to almost 33% over the last decade (CSO, 2005). Education has always been valued in Ireland, and is currently viewed as being of particular importance in the economic, social and cultural development of Irish society (Department of Education and Science (DES), 2004).

This research project was undertaken during a period in Ireland known as the 'Celtic Tiger' when the Irish economy was particularly strong. The economy had seen substantial growth, with an annual growth rate of 4.7% between 1990 and 1995, and 6.7% between 1995 and 2000 (Duffy, Fitzgerald, Kearney & Smyth, 1999). The buoyant economy, among other reasons, in the 1990's had led to increasing involvement of women in the workplace. This in turn led to a greater demand for pre-school provision, and so state support became a political issue. Ireland experienced a 'baby-boom' in the 1970's, of which it is now reaping the benefit, and has one of the youngest populations in Europe. This fact, combined with substantial inward and return migration (of often a well-qualified workforce) has contributed to Ireland's current demographic profile (OECD, 2004a). House prices in Ireland had risen sharply over the 1990's and, although they appear to be stabilising, many couples now require both parties to work in order to cover mortgage payments. With this in mind, it should also be noted that the prosperity enjoyed as part of the 'Celtic Tiger' must be considered in tandem with other depleted resources, most notably, time. The impact of longer working hours, longer commuting hours, increased levels of stress and tiredness experienced by many working parents, may also impact on the quality of life experience by children in their home lives (CECDE, 2004). Children are spending longer hours in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) settings, very often in informal provision provided by family or friends.

As the issue of ECCE has become more prominent in Ireland this has resulted in an increased level of reports on the subject (DES, 1999a; Department of Health and Children (DoH&C), 2000; OECD, 2004; NESF, 2005). A Survey of Childcare Arrangements conducted by the Economic and Social Research Institute in 1998 found that 38 % of parents with children from birth to four years and 18% of parents of children aged five to nine years made use of paid pre-

school provision (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (DJELF), 1999). The group predicted that demand for places would rise by 25% to 50% up to the year 2011, mainly because of the increased labour force participation of women. In 2007 the Irish Government spent 0.4% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on early childhood care and education, and calls have been made for this spending to be increased in line with the European Community recommended level of 1% within the next three years (IPPA, 2007). The combination of economic growth, rising levels of female employment, changes in family formation, and fertility patterns, as described above are central to the issues surrounding ECCE in Ireland during the period 2000-2007. However, as Hayes (2006) reports there is still a continued governmental focus on parents as buyers of childcare, rather than sectoral support of quality services for children. The situation, she believes, is made more difficult by the unaddressed conflict between the traditional ideology of the family<sup>1</sup>, and the need to attract women back into the workforce.

Much progress had been made in Ireland in the area of early education policy since the 1980's culminating in the National Children's Strategy (2000) which sets out a series of objectives to guide policy on children, from birth to 18 years, until 2010. As highlighted by the Department of Education and Science (2002) a rights-based approach for children has slowly been developing in Ireland. The National Children's Strategy (DHC, 2000) outlines a vision of the rights of children in Ireland from birth:

*An Ireland where children are respected as young citizens with a valued contribution to make and a voice of their own; where all children are cherished and supported by family and the wider society; where they enjoy a fulfilling childhood and realise their potential (2000, p4)*

To date this vision has not been realised. However, it stands as a reminder of the entitlement of young children to the supports necessary for their development, and the importance of enabling all children in Ireland to reach their full potential.

---

<sup>1</sup> Traditionally in Ireland the role of the mother was seen to be in the home, and some conflict has arisen between the role of mother as homemaker, and that of mother in the workplace.

### 2.3 Preschool Provision in the Irish Republic

In order to understand the issues involved in the process of transition from preschool to school for children in Ireland, it is important to first look at provision in both these areas.

Compulsory education in Ireland begins at the age of six years. Preschool provision in Ireland thus generally relates to any ECCE setting that caters for children from birth to six years. Historically in Ireland pre-school provision was seen as the responsibility of the family, and state involvement was principally limited to provision of places for children seen to be at risk. The demographic, social and economic changes in Ireland noted above have resulted in increased demand for pre-school provision. Between 1990 and 1996 the number of women in the workplace increased from 456,500 to 573,700 (OECD, 2004a). This impacted on the number of children making use of preschool provision. Hayes and Kernan (2001) found that 90% of seven year old children in their study had attended some form of ECCE service before beginning primary school. The majority of these children (75%) had attended a sessional or playgroup type service. Daly (2002) notes *“diversity underpins the range of early childhood educational provisions and their curricula in the Republic of Ireland. Objectives, training, conditions, status, the areas they cover, their relationship with parents and their methodology differ in many if not every way”* (p32). Services in ECCE are predominantly offered on a sessional basis: of a total of 3,496 preschool services available in Ireland in 1999/2000, 1,124 (32%) offer full-time care (OECD, 2004). Provision takes a variety of forms, outlined below. For clarity, services are outlined under the headings of sessional services and full-day care.

#### **Sessional Services:**

##### *Playgroups.*

Playgroups are the most widespread form of provision for pre-school aged children in this country. Playgroups offer care and education to children aged three to five years, on a sessional basis. The majority of playgroups are privately owned, with the remainder being community based. The Irish Pre-school and Playgroups Association offers training, local support and advice to playgroup

providers. The IPPA has over 2000 members, catering for more than 44,000 children (IPPA, 2007).

#### *Naíonraí*

These are Irish speaking or bilingual playgroups which are co-ordinated by An Comhchoiste Reamhscolaíochta Teo. They are financially supported by the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs. The OECD report that there are 292 naíonraí in the Republic of Ireland, 72 of which are located in Gaeltacht areas, catering for 3,395 children (OECD, 2004a).

#### *Montessori Schools*

There are approximately 500 Montessori Schools/pre-schools in Ireland (INTO, 2006). They provide a pre-school service for children aged three to six years using the Montessori method. They are generally private fee-paying services. Training is provided by the Association Montessori Internationale (AMI) and St Nicholas Montessori Society of Ireland.

#### *Early Start Pre-school Programme*

In 1994, the Department of Education initiated the Early Start Programme catering for three to four year olds in designated disadvantaged areas, with an aim of combating school failure. Classes of 15 pupils are taught by a primary school teacher and a qualified ECCE worker, within primary schools. Parental involvement is also a fundamental part of the programme. The programme now caters for more than 1,500 pupils in 38 primary schools (DES, 2005).

#### *Traveller Preschools*

The Department of Education and Science also funds preschool services for Travellers, providing 98% of the costs of tuition and transport for each service. By 2003 there were reported to be 52 preschools operating with over 550 pupils attending (DES, 2003). The aim of the preschools is to provide some redress against the children's disadvantaged position in comparison to their peers from non-Traveller backgrounds. Indeed, the INTO note that there has been an increased momentum towards, and achievement of, integration of traveller children into mainstream primary schools (2004).

### **Full Day Care:**

#### *Nurseries/Crèches*

Nursery schools / crèches are usually private fee-paying services for children from zero to six years. They offer full-time as well as part-time care and usually cater for the needs of working parents. The National Children's Nurseries Association (NCNA) was formed in 1988 to support providers offering nursery care for young children, and has over 600 affiliated members (NCNA, 2007). These nurseries may be private, community based, or workplace nurseries.

#### *Childminders/Family Daycare*

Since the law does not require registration it is not known how many people provide day care for babies or young children in their homes. This is often a private arrangement between neighbours or friends. The INTO suggest that paid childminding is used by 14% of all mothers with children aged four or under, with overall figures estimated at 40,000 childminders providing this service in Ireland (INTO, 2006).

## **2.4 Primary School Provision in the Irish Republic**

The first Irish Constitution (Government of Ireland, 1922) states that all citizens have the right to free elementary education. The Constitution of 1937, further developed this theme while also acknowledging the rights of parents as the primary educators, and emphasising the supporting role of the state. Therefore, the system is predominantly a state-aided one. National schools make up the vast majority of primary schools in Ireland. In 2002/2003 there were 3,283 schools aided by the DES, catering for 443,720 children (DES, 2004a). The great majority of schools are denominational, and most national schools are owned by church authorities, the majority of which are Catholic. The churches also have involvement in matters such as staff appointments, school management and school ethos. The state however is responsible for payment of most of the building costs of schools, payment of staff salaries, devising the curriculum and sanctioning the textbooks which may be used (other than the religious curriculum/text). The state also has responsibility for regulation and inspection of

National schools, under the Department of Education and Science. It should also be noted that as well as national schools there also exist in Ireland a number of private primary schools, which are fee-paying and receive limited state support. Many are linked to state-supported secondary schools run by religious orders.

Compulsory education in Ireland begins at the age of six years, however, many children in the Republic start school as young as four. The OECD Background Report (2004a) reports that half of all four-year-olds and almost all five-year-olds attend primary schools. Free pre-primary education is not available to all children in Ireland, which may be linked to our early school starting age<sup>2</sup>. The primary school year in Ireland usually commences on the first of September each year, with a one date school start. Primary schools do not make use of rolling-starts, or the practice of starting children after their birthdays, as is the practice in some countries. The first-entrants class at primary level is called the Junior Infants class, and all children entering that class will commence together, although pupil age can range between four years and nearly six years old. Infants classes in Irish primary schools usually run from approximately 9am – 2pm each day, a longer session than the sessional preschools which usually run for a 3 – 3.5 hour session. The longer hours of free education at school may also be an incentive for some parents to send their children to primary schools at an early age. However, the kind of educational experiences that four year olds are receiving in Irish infants classrooms has been questioned. The difficulties inherent in providing appropriate play-based learning experiences at infants level without additional adults, and with large class sizes<sup>3</sup> has been highlighted (INTO, 2006).

## **2.5 Curricular Continuity Between Preschools and Primary Schools in Ireland**

---

<sup>2</sup> The cost of preschool education in Ireland has been an issue, both in the media and at policy level for some time. A Survey by the Forum for the Workplace in 2005 reported that parents pay 20% of their income on childcare, almost twice the EU average (Consumer Association of Ireland, 2005). The most recent survey conducted by the NCNA found that it cost an average of €173.65 to place a child full time in a private pre-school crèche, but some parents were paying well in excess of €200 each week (Sunday Business Post, 2008; Irish Independent, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> See Section 3.7 for a discussion on class sizes at infant level in Irish primary schools.

A curriculum can be defined as the activities and experiences, both planned and unplanned, that support a child's learning in an educational setting. It covers the process of learning, the learning context, and the actual learning progression (Ball, 1994). It is widely accepted that continuity in curricular approach and links between preschools and schools can help ease the transition between the two spheres (Dunphy, 2000; Neuman 2002). In Ireland, the Junior and Senior Infants classes of Primary schools follow a standardised curriculum devised by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and monitored by the Department of Education and Science. There is no one curriculum in practice across the Irish preschool sector. The National Childcare census reported that in over half of services the curriculum is devised locally (ADM, 2002). Three of the more popular approaches used in Irish preschools are Montessori, High/Scope and Play based learning, and details of these three, along with the Early Start Preschool Curriculum are outlined below.

### **2.5.1 The Montessori Curriculum:**

Garhart Mooney (2000) advises that Montessori's theories about children "*have influenced the way all early childhood programs are structured today*" (p.23). This curriculum emphasises the environment, both physical and the people with whom the child is interacting, as being of great importance. The belief that children learn best from sensory experience is the cornerstone of the curriculum, and Montessori developed her own materials mostly involving sensory play. An organised, child-sized environment, with materials accessible to children, is central to this approach, with the aim of teaching children to be responsible for their own learning.

In traditional settings, teachers determine the curriculum by deciding which of the prescribed Montessori materials to demonstrate to the child. They then assess the child's progress using observation to determine her ability to complete the activity. After children have completed a task the teacher can suggest additional activities to extend the activity. Children can also choose the Montessori materials they want to work with, and the length of time they wish to spend on a given activity. A typical classroom setting contains at least 200 exercises (Epstein,

Schweinhart, & McAdoo, 1996). In a Montessori preschool children work individually for most of the day, working with the materials of their choice. Children proceed at their own pace, rather than according to predetermined developmental norms. However, there is an assumption within the Montessori approach that there is a set way to use particular materials, and children are expected to master the exact method to use any given piece of equipment, rather than to use individual interpretation.

### **2.5.2 The High/Scope Curriculum**

Drawing on the work of Piaget, active learning is the cornerstone of the High/Scope curriculum. The aim of this programme is that the learner should be actively involved in their own learning, rather than having information formally transmitted to them. The role of the adult is to support and extend the children's experience of active learning. The High/Scope preschool environment requires well-defined work areas, and room to give the child space for physical activity. The aim is to give the children independence, to acknowledge their own abilities, and encourage their problem solving abilities. The curriculum, for three-five year olds, defines key developmental indicators in the following areas: creative representation, language and literacy, initiative and social relations, classification, seriation, movement, music, space and time. These key developmental indicators are intended to be the framework for planning and evaluation. The daily routine follows a plan/do/review sequence, planning an activity, carrying it out, then reviewing what has been achieved. This routine follows a child-centred approach, with the child making decisions on what they want to do, with adults acting in a supportive role (High/Scope, 1990; O'Flaherty, 1995).

Although learning initiated by the child is a feature of the curriculum, practitioner feedback has suggested that some children tend to stick with familiar activities, and may not have the confidence to engage in more complex forms of learning (Bennett, Wood & Rogers, 1997). Thus, as with any curriculum, the expertise of a reflective practitioner will strongly influence the child's learning experience. The review time is an important feature of the day, whereby children are encouraged to discuss what they have done during the day, question each other on

what they have achieved, and share information. Wood & Attfield (2005) advise that “*when used effectively, review time can encourage the development of metacognitive skills and processes. At its worst, it can degenerate into a repetitive, tedious ritual*” (p131). The curriculum was originally designed for a 1:8 adult:child ratio, so success in this area may depend on both this ratio and the expertise of the teacher.

The High/Scope Curriculum has been in use in the United States for over thirty years. The first High/Scope trainer in Ireland was appointed by Barnardo's in 1987 (O'Flaherty, 1995). Like the Montessori method, the High/Scope Curriculum is also being practiced in Ireland in many settings with limited staff training. This is particularly important when considered in tandem with Wood and Attfield's comments above about how various aspects of the curriculum can disintegrate if not managed properly. This reinforces the importance of the reflective practitioner who is actively fostering learning dispositions in the children in her setting.

### **2.5.3 Play-Based Curricula**

Bruce (2001) states that play is the “*highest form of learning in early childhood*” (p129), however play is both difficult to define and difficult to conceptualise. Both teachers and academics use a variety of terms to describe different types of play: imaginative play, heuristic play, constructive play, structured play, role play, among others. Rubin, Fein and Vandenberg (1983) define play in terms of dispositions; Fromberg (1987) believes that play is symbolic, meaningful, pleasurable, voluntary and intrinsically motivated, rule-governed, and episodic; Pellegrini (1991) suggests that play acts should be related along a continuum from ‘pure play’ to ‘non-play’ and Wood and Attfield (1996) advise “*play is infinitely varied and complex*” (p4). However, although a final definition of play has proved elusive, a strong tradition exists in ECCE in Ireland which regards play as an essential tool for learning. Play enables children to develop in many ways, emotionally, socially, imaginatively, creatively, intellectually, physically and linguistically. Froebel (1887) stressed the importance of play to children's development, when he wrote “*Play is the purest, most spiritual activity of man at*

*this stage...a child that plays thoroughly with self-active determination, perseveringly until physical fatigue forbids, will surely be a thorough determined man.” (p55).* Although he noted the importance of play to child development, he also felt that children should be guided in their play in order to properly learn and develop from the experience, and proposed that kindergarten should provide stimulating activities to help children achieve the most from their play.

Learning through play is the focus of many preschool curricula, and learning through play is the central component of the playgroup movement (Spring, Daly, Byrne & Whyte, 2003; Whyte, Daly, Bujia, Smyth, 2007). The aim of these programmes is to provide opportunities for assessment and evaluation of children’s learning. The information gathered while observing children at play is intended to provide effective means for evaluating the individual curriculum. The IPPA have produced a book, titled ‘Power of Play’ which outlines a play curriculum in action, to assist practitioners in linking theory regarding play with their day-to-day practice (Brennan, 2004). The book provides a useful tool for practitioners to use to develop their skills as facilitators in learning while using a play based curriculum.

Questions have been raised however, about whether all types of play are equally valuable in terms of children’s learning. The role of the reflective practitioner, who focuses on the competencies that each individual child brings to the learning situation, and scaffolds the child learning experiences, is all important in this regard. Wood & Attfield (2005) have highlighted the need to improve the quality of play, and for practitioners to develop a reflective approach, and outline a structure for use when auditing existing provision in order to evaluate and improve the quality of a service. Practitioners need to work towards developing learning environments in which reflection and critical thinking are developed, and opportunities for extending play-based learning experiences are provided and supported.

#### **2.5.4 Early Start Preschool Curriculum**

The Early Start Preschool Programme is a one-year preventative intervention scheme offered in selected schools in designated disadvantaged areas in Ireland. The aim of the Early Start Curriculum is to prioritise language, cognition, social and personal development. The intention is to enhance development through structured play activities. Within these play activities, teachers set specific learning objectives for each child. Play and positive adult-child interaction are the cornerstones of the Early Start activities. The aim of Early Start is to implement an educational programme that will enhance the overall development of young children and prevent school failure. After completing the Early Start programme, children proceed to the junior infant class of their primary school.

We can see from the curricula outlined in the four sections above that the role and training of the practitioner in any given curriculum is all important. The proactive role of the adult in facilitating, guiding and scaffolding children's learning is central to any curriculum. An understanding of the theories of learning and development which underpin the curricula, and the intricacies and ethos behind the curricula is vital to it being implemented in a way that will provide a richness of both activities and interactions in which the child's learning can be supported and extended.

### **2.5.5 Primary School Curriculum.**

In 1971, the Primary School Curriculum (Curaclam na Bunscoile) was launched in Ireland. It involved a shift in ideological position and methodological approach to primary education (Coolahan, 1981). It advocated a more child centred approach to learning, and intended to "*enable the child to live a full life as a child and to equip him to avail of further education so that he may go on to live a full and useful life as an adult in society.*" (Department of Education, 1971a, Part 1, p12.). Small group teaching was encouraged, as was integration of subject areas. Although the curriculum was seen by many as a positive step in the area of teaching young children, it was noted that implementation varied between schools, and that large class sizes and a reluctance on the part of some teachers to change their pedagogic style limited effectiveness.

Building on this curriculum, in 1999 The Revised Primary School Curriculum was introduced, having been developed by the NCCA (DES, 1999). The NCCA advise that the curriculum is based on “*the latest thinking and research about how children learn, and how that learning can be supported optimally for each child through skilled, sensitive, and informed involvement by a teacher*” (NCCA, 2004, p9). It gives precedence to learning processes and emphasises that education should be viewed as an integrated process. The child is seen as an active agent in his/her own learning, and a developmental approach to learning is emphasised. Murphy (2005) would agree that the curriculum very much promotes active learning, and works towards ensuring that each child is allowed to gain ownership of their learning while becoming directly involved in the learning process. The curriculum was intended to help the child develop in every area of his/her life, emphasising a range of learning areas other than cognitive development, such as social, emotional, physical, as well as a moral and spiritual aspect.

The Curriculum covers the following areas: Language (English and Irish), Mathematics, Social/Environment and Scientific Education (including History, Geography and Science), Arts Education (including visual arts, music and drama), Physical Education, Religious Education, and Social, Personal and Health Education. A curriculum statement is published for all seven areas. These comprise an introduction; aims; objectives; content; concepts and skills development; guidance on the selection of content; and assessment statement. Each subject area is divided by content into *strands*, which are further sub-divided into *strand units* which focus on the specific areas of learning required to achieve the developmental goals of the strand. Further detail is given on the learning experiences and activities which should be included in that area, and summaries of skills and concepts to be developed are also outlined. It is important to note that although different subject areas are covered in detail, an integrated learning approach is encouraged, and there is an emphasis on making connections between learning in different subjects.

The Introduction to the Curriculum mentions the importance of the transition from home or preschool to formal schooling, and states “*the child’s entry into the formal education system marks a significant transition in his or her life*” (DES,

1999, p.30). The document suggests that the curriculum for infant classes takes into account the fact that some children begin formal schooling at four years of age, that children are entering school with a variety of educational experiences behind them, and that some children have not reached their full potential at this stage for a variety of reasons. Indeed children enter formal schooling in Ireland with a variety of learning experiences. The nature of those experiences, combined with the ability of the teacher to match them with the new curriculum, and the children's individual strengths and needs, will influence ongoing learning achievements. The curriculum aims to account for these factors in that the focus is on the individual needs of each child at this stage of their development, the emphasis on play at this stage is particularly suited to children in the infants classes, and because it promotes an active learning approach. However, it should be noted that in practice, the ability of a junior infants teacher, with a class of approximately 30 pupils, ranging in age from 4 years to 5.5 years, some with no preschool experience, others with two years preschool experience, some with additional needs, some who may not speak English as their first language, may find it difficult to fully meet the needs of each individual child. This is acknowledged to some extent in the introduction to the Curriculum, which acknowledges that "*Open-mindedness, a commitment to curriculum change and the most effective deployment of all the resources of primary education will be required if the educational potential the curriculum has to offer is to be reflected in children's lives and learning. The success of implementation depends on the use of effective existing resources and the addition of a varied range of additional human and physical supports*". (p.75). It is not clear that the resources and supports in place at present in Ireland to support the implementation of the curriculum are sufficient.

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2005) conducted an evaluation of the English, Mathematics and Visual Arts strands of the curriculum in September 2003. Teachers reported some difficulty using the English strands as compared to the Mathematics and Visual Arts. Challenges identified by teachers included time, appropriateness of assessment tools, and catering for the range of children's abilities. More detailed direction and guidance was requested in some aspects of the curriculum. Also more detailed advice and support was

requested for teachers regarding the use of assessment to support learning, and on how to involve parents in supporting their children's learning. Limited use of group work and pair work was reported by the teachers, and greater guidance on teaching approaches in this regard was requested.

The National Framework for Early Learning, and *Síolta*, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (which are both discussed below) are intended to complement both preschool and primary school curricula and quality endeavours, and their implementation may well create more coherence across sectors.

### **2.5.6 National Framework for Early Learning**

The Government White Paper "Ready to Learn" (DES, 1999a) drew attention to the various curricula being implemented in ECCE in Ireland. The report did not recommend any individual curriculum, however it proposed that guidelines on the principles underlying any curriculum should be prepared, and the development of a specimen curriculum to be available for providers to use. In 1997, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) was established in Ireland as a successor to the Curriculum and Examinations Board. It was reconstituted a statutory body in July 2001. The Council was given the responsibility of developing a National Framework for Early Learning, covering children from birth to age six, in Ireland. The Framework is intended for use by all adults in early childhood settings (including the infant classes of primary schools) in order to support them in "*giving children learning opportunities responsive to their individual strengths and needs, and so help them to realise their full potential as learners*" (NCCA, 2004, p.4.). It is intended to complement existing curricular material, not to replace what is already in existence, but to bring greater coherence to children's learning and to increase connections in learning throughout early childhood (Fitzpatrick & Forster, 2006).

The NCCA published a consultative document in September 2004 outlining the rationale behind the project, and detailing plans for building the framework. Many ideas were explored in this document, however three key areas emerged,

these were (i) the Framework is based on a view of the child as an active learner, unique in her own strengths/weaknesses and requiring different types and levels of adult support to facilitate her learning, (ii) the three areas of relationships, play and language are seen as being of critical importance in the context of development in early childhood, and (iii) the role of assessment as a natural part of daily interactions with children is stressed.

The Framework intends to cater for the diversity in children's learning experiences by providing guidance for the individual practitioner to make her own decisions on appropriate learning opportunities. Rather than prescribing activities which should take place, the aim is to highlight good practice generally in early years education. The Framework intends to support a progression in learning from preschool through to the infants level at primary school in terms of curriculum (NCCA, 2005a). This should be a step towards providing coherent links between preschool curricula and the infant level curriculum in the primary classroom. As the NCCA advise: "*continuity and progression in learning across early childhood is essential in supporting children to learn to their true potential*" (2004, p36). The Framework itself is expected to be published in 2008.

### **2.5.7 Síolta**

A complementary framework, which can be used in tandem with the NCCA document, is *Síolta*<sup>4</sup>, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education. The framework has been developed by the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE). The CECDE was established under the joint management of St Patrick's College, Drumcondra and the Dublin Institute of Technology in 2001. The aim of the CECDE is to develop and co-ordinate ECCE in pursuance of the objectives of the White Paper "Ready to Learn". *Síolta* is a set of national standards for early childhood education, covering services for children from birth-six years. Therefore it covers both preschool services and the

---

<sup>4</sup> "*Síolta is the Irish word for seeds. It expresses the potential of childhood and of this Framework to grow and succeed. It relates to the metaphor of the 'Kindergarten' as a place of care and education, and the role of the educator as a skilful gardener*". (CECDE, 2006b, piii)

infants classes of primary schools. *Siolta* comprises separate user manuals for Infant Classes, Full and Part-time Daycare, Sessional Services, and Childminders.

The framework was published following three years of consultation and research in partnership with a wide range of stakeholders. It works from the premise that working towards quality is an ongoing process, and the *Siolta* framework itself is intended to be “*a dynamic and evolving framework*” (CECDE, 2006b, p3). The framework identifies twelve inter-dependent principles of quality, which outline the vision behind the framework, and are intended to inform quality practice. It then outlines sixteen national standards which cover the actual areas of practice to be addressed, and which will be assessed under the framework. The standards are further broken down into components of quality for practitioners to use as quality indicators. The CECDE advise “*The Principles, Standards and Components of Quality work together to form a coherent definition of quality in ECCE settings, while assessment and supporting mechanisms will also contribute to the achievement and maintenance of the vision of quality articulated in the Principles*” (2006b, p24). The framework actively encourages self-reflection, and provides signposts for reflection to assist practitioners in identifying both positive elements of practice, and areas where further attention may be required. It is envisaged that the implementation of the framework will enable a positive progression in terms of working towards quality in ECCE services for children from birth to six years in Ireland in a coordinated and cohesive way.

Standard 13 of *Siolta* relates to Transitions, and states: “*Ensuring continuity of experiences for children requires policies, procedures and practice that promote sensitive management of transitions, consistency in key relationships, liaison within and between settings, the keeping and transfer of relevant information (with parental consent), and the close involvement of parents and, where appropriate, relevant professionals*” (CECDE, 2006c, p85). Specifically within the components of transition, consistent key relationships, liaison between settings, involvement of all stakeholders, and documenting policies and procedures are noted as being important.

It is hoped that both *Siolta* and the National Framework for Learning will complement the existing curricula in use in ECCE settings catering for children from 0-6 years. As Dunphy (2007) advises the former focuses on the contexts *for* learning, while the latter focuses on the principles *of* learning. One concern that must be acknowledged however, is that current levels of human and financial resources available in some ECCE settings may make implementation difficult. Indeed, the *Siolta* handbook acknowledges the challenging nature of the framework. Practitioners will need to invest time and energy into working with their own chosen curricula, and the two quality framework instruments. However, the rewards in terms personal and professional development, and in terms of quality improvement, are clear.

There may be a potential tension between the primary curriculum and the two new framework instruments, however the reality of how practitioners in all sectors make use of these new framework documents has yet to become clear.

## **2.6 Preschools and Primary Schools: Cultural Differences**

The culture of preschools and primary schools in Ireland are often very different. The two educational services have developed independently of each other and can vary widely in their objectives and approaches to education. Preschools traditionally focus on a play based approach, with the primary school system following a more preacademic focus. These cultural differences also impact on the process of transition for children, and on preschool and primary school teachers' perspectives on the process.

Indeed, differences in both the goals of early childhood settings and schools, and the roles of the teachers in these two settings have been noted internationally (O'Brien, 1991; Myers, 1997; Ledger, 2000). Early education settings have been noted as being more likely to encourage active participation and involvement of adults and children, responding to the lead of the children. While schools are more likely to be directive and adult controlled, encouraging compliance with teachers instructions, and talking to, rather than listening to, children (O'Brien, 1991). While both settings have elements of child-centred approaches and

teacher-led approaches, the move from preschool to formal schooling can be mean a much greater focus on teacher-led activities. Findings from the Irish element of the IEA Preprimary Project (Hayes, O’Flaherty & Kernan, 1997) reported that teachers in primary schools proposed a greater level of preacademic activities than their preschool counterparts, they were also more likely to make use of whole-class groupings, and were more likely to be involved in direct teaching behaviours, as compared to the participating and sharing approach of the preschool sample. The shift from ‘learning goals’ at preschool level to ‘performance goals’ in formal education has also been noted (Carr, 2001; Peters 2002). Such cultural differences impact strongly on the role of the child in each setting.

### **2.6.1 Teacher Training in the Preschool and Primary Sectors**

Some of the philosophical differences between preschool and primary school may stem from training within the two sectors, which has traditionally taken a very different approach. Most primary school teachers undertake a three year training course resulting in a Bachelor of Education Degree. This qualifies them to teach children from four to twelve years. Graduates of other disciplines can also become a primary school teacher by undertaking a postgraduate diploma in primary teaching. Early childhood education comprises part of these training courses, but both the INTO (2005) and the National Economic and Social Forum (NESF, 2005) have noted that the time set aside during B.Ed training for early years education, approximately 40 hours, is short as compared to many other European countries. The INTO also note that the current training for primary teachers has been criticised for a lack of emphasis on early childhood development and learning through play, and the lack of opportunities for specialisation in early years education, and acknowledge that this weakness “*may be responsible for what is seen by some as an inappropriate rush to formal education in some infant classes*” (INTO, 2005, p22). The NESF have also recommended that the B.Ed training be increased to a four year programme, while they also highlighted the need for an increase in the number of graduates with degrees in ECCE (2005).

Training within the preschool sector is more fragmented. Literature on ECCE has identified training of preschool teachers as being one of the most important factors involved in ensuring high quality early childhood programmes (Olmsted and Montie, 2001; Burchinal, Howes and Kontos, 2002; Clark-Stewart et al, 2002; Bennett, 2007). However at present in Ireland there is legally no specific standard of training required to work in this area. The Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations (DH&C, 1996) were introduced as the first legislative control over ECCE in Ireland, under Part VII of the Child Care Act 1991. They cover any service catering for children under six years who are not attending school, with some exceptions relating to relatives and childminders. However they do not specify levels of training for those working in Irish Pre-schools, but only that staff are deemed to be “competent”. The Explanatory Guide to the Regulations states that *“A competent adult is a person who has appropriate experience in caring for children under six years of age and/or who has an appropriate qualification in child care and is a suitable person to care for children.”* (p32) There has been much controversy over the terms used in this paragraph, as “competent adult”; “appropriate experience”; and “suitable person” are all terms which can be open to varied interpretation. A review of the Regulations was published in 2006 (DH&C, 2006) which recommended that settings *“should aim to have at least fifty percent of childcare staff with a qualification appropriate to the care and development of children”* (p40). This was a disappointing review of the wording relating to qualifications and training, particularly in light of growing concerns both in Ireland and internationally about the need for better training for ECCE staff. The Regulations have gone some way to go to address this issue, but as Bennett (2007) advises *“a realisation is growing that the work of early childhood professional staff is complex, and that sound training is required”* (p23). Findings from a recent Irish study (O’Kane, 2004) suggest that the level of pre-service training in Irish preschools has increased compared to pre-Regulation figures, with 100% of teachers in that study reporting that they had attended some form of formal training, as compared to 48% of teachers questioned prior to the implementation of the Regulations as part of the Irish aspect of the IEA Preprimary Project (Hayes et al, 1997). Although the sample was small (23 teachers in the 2004 report), these figures suggest that the need for pre-service training is becoming more widely understood in the ECCE sector.

Finally, it is important to consider the type of training undertaken by ECCE workers. Research in the United States suggests that teachers with degree-level training in early childhood development are the most effective (National Research Council, 2001). With regard to the Irish context, the Partnership 2000 Expert Working Group Report (DJELR, 1999) recommended that the child care sector should aim to achieve the European Commission Network on Childcare target of a minimum of 60% of staff working directly with children in collective services having at least three years training. Although recent small scale research in Ireland would suggest that pre-service training figures have increased (O’Kane, 2004) Irish pre-schools are still not meeting these training targets. Only two of the 23 teachers interviewed in that study had completed a degree course. These findings suggest that the Irish pre-school sector still has some way to go to reach the European Commission targets, although it must be acknowledged that the Irish figures were starting from a low baseline rate of training. It is also important to note that degree level professional training in ECCE had only been available in Ireland since 1995, when University College Cork commenced its degree in Early Childhood Studies. Dublin Institute of Technology has offered a degree in ECCE since 1999.

More common than degree level training in Ireland in 2007 are Childcare Qualifications awarded by the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC). FETAC is the national awarding body for further education and training in Ireland. Programmes leading to FETAC Childcare awards are offered nationwide by a wide range of providers in diverse settings, including FÁS<sup>5</sup> centres, Vocational Educational Committee centres, adult and community education and training centres, and private providers. FETAC offer awards in Childcare from a basic Level 3 qualification, through to Level 6 (supervisory level). Providers organisations such as the IPPA and NCCA also offer FETAC Level 5 and Level 6 childcare courses, along with courses in Health and Safety, Childcare and Education, and Nursery Management.

---

<sup>5</sup> FÁS is the Training and Employment Authority in Ireland.

## **2.7 Preschools and Primary Schools: Physical Differences**

The physical differences between preschools and primary schools in Ireland are many, as have been noted in international research. Schools are usually much larger than preschool settings, a difference that children have to adapt to while also adapting to a new teacher and new classmates (Ladd & Price, 1987; Margetts, 1999; Griebel & Niesel, 1999, 2000; Fabian, 2000). School adult:child ratios are much larger than those of the preschools, so children are mixing with a larger and more diverse group of children (Wolery, 1999, Fabian 2002). Ledger (2000) suggested that the move from an environment with a large number of adults, to one with little adult attention is one that emphasises discontinuities. She reported that children were very aware of the lack of adult attention in school. School buildings are also larger, and more challenging for children to become familiar with. Children may also have to become familiar with 'routes' through the new building, for example to the toilets, or to the playground (Cleave, Jowett, & Bate 1982; Margetts, 1999). Two of the most important physical differences that have been noted in the Irish context between preschool and primary school are class sizes, and adult:child ratios. The importance of these two issues is discussed below.

### **2.7.1 Class Sizes and Adult:Child Ratio's**

Class sizes at infant level in Irish primary schools have been an issue for some time. Horgan (1995) cited the example of 73% of Junior Infants classes having between 30-40 pupils, commenting that, at infant class level, Ireland had the worst pupil:teacher ratio in the developed world. This situation is changing slowly. The latest OECD report on Ireland (2004) advised that now only 24% of infant class pupils are in a class of 30 or more pupils, with 54% of junior infant pupils in classes of between 25-34 children. However, they still advise that this adult:child ratio would be classed as unacceptable in most other European countries. They suggest that these class sizes constitute a considerable barrier to quality education. The Government White Paper (DES, 1999a) recognised the importance of class size particularly for children in disadvantaged areas. It stated that the average adult child ratio in primary schools is 21.8:1, with an average class size of 30.

The White Paper does acknowledge that international research suggests a ratio of 18:1 as having significant effects on learning achievements. The INTO (1995) report that large class sizes curtail learning opportunities in many ways, particularly in terms of linguistic development, engagement in developmentally appropriate learning strategies, play-based learning opportunities, and working at small-group activities. It has also resulted in an emphasis on formal teaching methods purely to ensure effective group management. Walsh (2001) suggests that Ireland's high pupil:teacher ratios result in pupils who are experiencing educational difficulties developing a negative approach towards education from a very early age.

Calls for a reduction in the size of classes have been made by various organisations including the Primary School Teachers Union, INTO (Byrne, 2000; Carr, 2005, INTO 2006) the National Parents Council (2002, 2004) and the OECD (2004). In June 2002, the Government 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 (Department of An Taoiseach, 2002). In November 2004 the National Parents Council announced that it was "*bitterly disappointed*" (NPC, 2004, p1) that this target would not be met, and called again for a start to be made in class size reduction. Fay & Griffin (2004) highlighted the issue again, reminding the audience at the CECDE 1<sup>st</sup> International Conference in Dublin Castle that the Government policy on class size had not been implemented. Carr, the General Secretary of INTO, suggested that for many junior infants starting school in September 2005, there was "*at most eight minutes of teacher time per day for each individual child. In reality it is much less*" (INTO, 2005, p12). The INTO policy is that class size at infant level should be reduced to a maximum of 20:1 in a single-grade classroom, and 15:1 in a multi-grade class. They also propose that a maximum class size of 15:1 should operate in all designated disadvantaged infants classrooms, and have also called for a reduction in class size if a child with special needs is enrolled in the class (INTO, 2006).

The Government criteria for the organisation of teaching resources for pupils who need additional support in mainstream schools, is outlined in Special Education

Circular SP ED 02/05 (DES, 2005b). The circular offers guidance for primary school head-teachers on the deployment and organisation of specialist teachers such as resource teachers and learning-support teachers. The allocation of resources operates under a general allocation system, whereby additional teaching time is allocated in a flexible manner, by the individual setting by either group or individual teaching. Schools can also apply for additional specific individual resource teaching hours for individual pupils with more complex and enduring needs. Concerns have been expressed about the level of additional teaching resources available, and whether staffing levels are sufficient at primary level (Fay & Griffin, 2004; OECD, 2004; INTO, 2006). This is particularly significant when considered in tandem with findings from research conducted by the CECDE (2006) which reported that in their sample of settings specifically for children 0-6 years from disadvantaged areas, 24% of children had identified disabilities, or were believed by staff to have disabilities that had not yet been formally diagnosed.

The adult:child ratios for preschool settings are more favourable. The adult/child ratios recommended in the Preschool Regulations (DHC, 2006) for sessional services for children two-and-a-half to six years is 1:10 with a second adult present on the premises at all times. For full day care the recommended ratio for children aged three to six years is 1:8. The space requirements for sessional services require a floor space of 2.00 sq. meters for children between nought to six years. Full day care requires a space of 2.3 sq. meters per child aged three to six years. Following on from these requirements relating to clear floor space, Health Boards will specify on an individual basis the number of pre-school children that may be cared for in any particular facility. These ratios compare to the primary school infants class (4-6 year olds) where the recommended ratio is 1 teacher to 29 pupils (INTO, 2006).

## **2.8 Summary**

The above was a brief overview of the Irish context, in general terms, in educational terms, and specifically in terms of the preschool and primary school environments in place during the period 2003-2007. It has illustrated the

particular cultural context in which children in Ireland are making the transition from preschool to primary school, and gives an insight into some of the curricular and cultural differences between the two environments, and some of the differences in practical terms that children will encounter as they make their way from one educational environment to the other.