

## **CHAPTER 3:**

### **THEORISING TRANSITIONS:**

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

*“When a seedling is transplanted from one place to another, the transplantation may be a stimulus or a shock. The careful gardener seeks to minimise shock so that the plant is re-established as (easily) as possible”*

(Cleave, Jowett & Bate, 1982, p.195)

### 3.1 Introduction

Internationally transition has been studied using several theoretical concepts. Griebel & Niesel (1999) advise that in Germany many studies of transition have either referred to attachment theory or stress theory. However they suggest that the concept of family transition is also “suitable for enhancing the multiple demands and expectations concerning children, and parents as well as on the institution’s side” (2000, p1). They cite the family transition model developed by Cowan (1991, 1994) as being suitable to investigate this transition. This model was initially developed to study family transitions such as the birth of a child, divorce, remarriage, and includes the perspectives of all the family members. Elder (2001) has further suggested that the experiences of children should be viewed within the context of family, social change and the individual lives within such contexts, using the perspective of ‘life course theory’. Peters (2000) reminds us of the importance of considering maturational theories when looking at the transition to school. She noted that following on from these theories, the understanding that children are expected to develop in a predictable fashion has implications in terms of when children are considered to be ‘ready’ for school, and also in terms of judgements of children who are deemed not to meet standardised readiness tests.

Fabian (1998, 1999, 2000a) cites the anthropological work of van Gennep as being useful when looking at rites of passage when entering the school system. These rites of passage would include rites of separation, rites of transition and rites of incorporation. She identifies three stages: the preliminal stage (such as talking about what school will be like, buying the school uniform, and creating expectations about school); the liminal stage (which includes meeting the teacher, and separating from the parent on the first day of school); and the postliminal stage (involving celebrating completion of the first day of school with family, and habituation to the new status of schoolchild). These concepts of ‘liminality’ are also cited by Norris (1999) as being particularly relevant for the study of transitions, as she reminds us that the word originally comes from the French word ‘liminaire’ or ‘of the threshold’. Fabian suggests that these rights of passage help to incorporate the individual into the group, as Van Gennep outlines the process it should include rights of separation, rights of transition, and rights of incorporation.

Another theory that has been used in the study of transition is that of Communities of Practice. Emanating from socio-cultural theory it is a social theory of learning developed by Lave & Wenger (1991) using the Communities of Practice model. Wenger (1998) explains the notion of communities of practice in terms of members learning within familiar territory, where they are both considered to be, and consider themselves as being, competent learners. She suggested that this allows engagement in terms of full understanding of the community. Within such a system learners should be encouraged and supported by more capable members of the community, sharing common goals and meaningful intercourse. The theory has a foundation based on three basic concepts: negotiation of meaning, participation and reification. It emphasises the importance of the interplay between learning and the process of meaning making within the given social system. In essence, children's participation in the classroom environment and community involves them adopting the rules and roles implicit within that environment, this in turn helps them develop a sense of belonging within that community. The aim is for students to develop identities of participation in which they engage with the learning process.

All the above theoretical considerations are useful in the study of the transition from preschool to school. However, after much consideration it was concluded that the ecological model of transition would be particularly useful in better understanding the transition from preschool to school in the Irish context. Thus the Ecological Systems Model is the primary theoretical basis for the project. The main reason for this was its acknowledgement of the shared responsibility of all the stakeholders and the dynamic nature of the relationships involved in the process. In tandem with the Ecological Systems Model, the Sociocultural Perspective was also considered to be important, and the combination of the two approaches provided a sound theoretical focus for the study.

Another point of importance is that when considering the theoretical standpoints for the current study, it was decided to place the researcher's vision for the inclusion of children and the rights of children to be involved in research into their lives at the forefront of considerations. Within the areas of research, practice, and policy in Ireland, the rights of the child to have her voice heard are becoming widely recognised (Hogan & O'Reilly, 2007). Similar considerations have been noted

internationally (Christensen & Prout, 2005). In Ireland, the National Children's Strategy (DHC, 2000) followed by the establishment of the Children's Ombudsman's Office and the Office of the Minister for Children have most notably focused on the need to empower and consult with children in matters relating to their own lives. Indeed such consideration follows from Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which asserts the rights of children to be heard in matters relating to their own lives (UNICEF, 1989). Following on from the above, this thesis has been framed with a vision of children as being both active agents in their own world, and competent participants in the research process. The importance of acknowledging children as being competent subjects in research into their own lives and viewing children as active agents in their own social worlds strongly contributed to the decision to combine the approaches of the Ecological Systems Model and the Sociocultural Perspective as a theoretical focus for the study. Details of the two models, and why each was considered appropriate for the study are outlined below.

### **3.2 Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model**

Underpinning much of the current thinking on transitions research has been the ecological systems model of development, proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1979; 1992) which sees the child as one part of a process of interaction influencing her development. Bronfenbrenner states

*“the characteristics of the person at a given time in his or her life are a joint function of the characteristics of the person and of the environment over the course of that person's life up to that time”* (1992, p190).

Bronfenbrenner suggests that the child is the centre of five environmental systems, or layers, and is influenced by experiences related to each of the five. Within these layers, the individuals within each level, most notably the child himself, actively participate in and influence interactions. The most central influence on the child is that of the microsystem, which is any individual setting, for example the home or the school, in which the child has most of her direct interactions. The people in these microsystems have the most immediate effect on the child, and according to ecological theory, if the relationships in the immediate microsystem break down this will cause the child difficulty in exploring other parts of his environment (Paquette &

Ryan, 2001). As Dockett & Perry (2003) advise “*children exist within a web of meaningful social relationships; what is important to them and what they know derives largely from the interactions within these relationships*” (p9). The second level is the mesosystem, the relational network with others, which consists of linkages between any of the various settings in which the child spends time. These can exert an influence over the child in subtle ways, for example if parents and teachers have differences of opinion on the education of the child. The exosystem is the influence of external environments, for example the national curriculum or bilingualism in the classroom. In essence, it is the organisational context in which the child operates at any given time, and which has a direct influence on the child. Although the child has no active control over these influences, the child does actively interpret these in his/her local context and characteristics of the child have a definite influence on the application of these influences. Next come the influences of the macrosystem, the variables of the particular culture, in which the child exists. The priority that the macrosystem gives to children’s needs will effect the levels of support that children receive at the inner levels of the system. For example, Paquette & Ryan (2001) suggest that if it is the belief of any particular society that parents should be responsible for rearing their children, that society is less likely to provide external resources to assist parents in that role. This will impact on the parents’ ability or inability to carry out that responsibility, and will impact the child’s micro- and mesosystems. Fulcher (2007) reminds us of the importance of the macrosystem, and proposes “*children perceive and learn to give meaning through culturally designed experiences*” thus the experiences of children must be viewed within the various cultural environments which they inhabit. He suggests that historical and cross-cultural meanings must be taken into account when undertaking research into the lives of children, and thus places great emphasis on the local-regional policy environment. He compares this to placing Bronfenbrenner’s set of Russian Dolls into their Dolls House.

Bronfenbrenner’s later conceptualisations of the model also include a Chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) which involves the “*temporal changes in children’s environment, which produce new conditions that affect development*” (Berk, 2000, p30). These can be changes which take place on a frequent basis through the child’s life, or one-off changes such as the transition from preschool to formal schooling.

Bronfenbrenner's chronosystem includes changes within and between systems included in the transition over time. In this way he sees the child's ecology as composed of a layer of multi-connected systems all of which have some degree of effect on the child and his/her development. Relationships within these nested layers are bi-directional, so adults affect children's behaviour, but children are also active participants in the process.

Bronfenbrenner & Morris (1998) further developed this evolving theoretical framework which they renamed the Bioecological Model. The model was refined to allow for what Bronfenbrenner saw as a change from research out of context, to research on "*context without development*" (p994) providing more knowledge about environments than the developing individual within that environment. The newly evolving model hoped to further develop the role of the person in the model. It also answered criticisms of the last model for failing to account for biological influences. Elder (2007) suggests that when developing the original model Bronfenbrenner admitted that he was so immersed in context that he failed to account properly for the role of the person. This is reflected in his later writings when a greater emphasis on the person is clear. The model consists of four principal components, and the relationships between them. The first of these is the Process, which encompasses interactions between the individual and the environment, called proximal processes. These proximal processes are viewed as being the "*primary engines of development*" (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, p996). The next influence is the developing person and their individual characteristics. Dispositions, resources of ability and knowledge, and demand characteristics are seen to be important influences in shaping the development of the person and their proximal processes. These person characteristics are also incorporated into the microsystem as characteristics of parents and teachers interacting with the child. Thirdly, environmental contexts, although more remote than person characteristics, are noted as being of importance, in terms of children's relationships with objects and symbols. Particular reference is made to the importance of features of the environment that "*foster versus interfere with the development of proximal processes*" (p.995). For example, the hectic lifestyle experienced by most children today is noted as being a particularly chaotic environmental context. Finally, time is mentioned as having been omitted from the earlier version of the model, and as being particularly significant to three successive

levels, micro-, meso-, and macro-. In terms of the current research project, it is clear that time will impact on the microsystem and mesosystems during the first year of formal schooling. The microsystem of school as experienced by children arriving in September to start school for the first time will clearly be very different to their experiences of the same setting in June when they finish their first year of school. Similarly home-school links during the first year of school can result in changes in relationships and understandings within this mesosystem over the course of the same school year. Clearly time has an impact in terms of the ever changing systems.

### **3.3 Understanding of Transition in Ecological Terms**

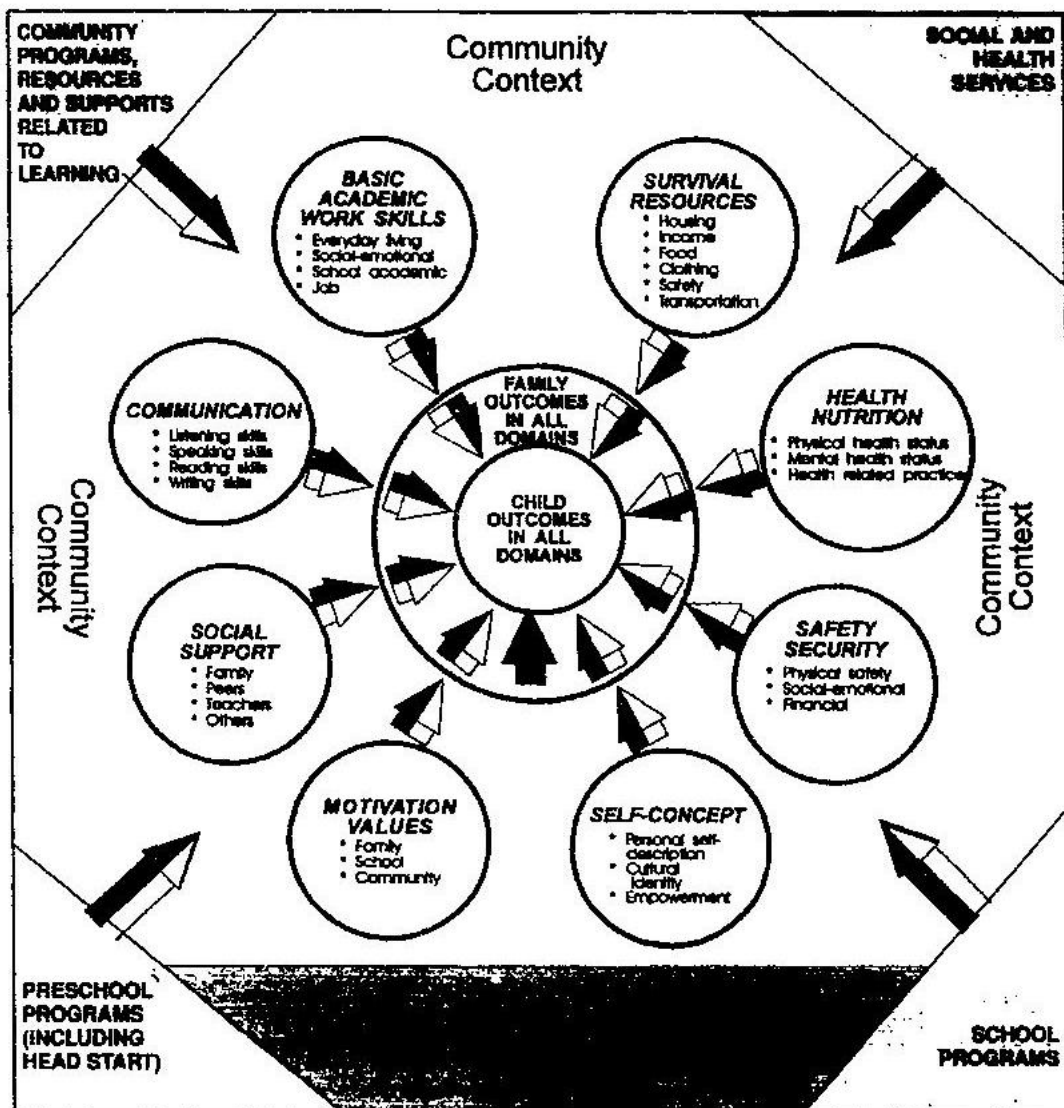
Bronfenbrenner (1979) defines adjustment to a new situation as an ecological transition: *“An ecological transition occurs whenever a person’s position in the ecological environment is altered as the result of a change in role, setting, or both”* (1979, Definition 6, p.26) Viewing the transition from preschool to school from this model, the child is influenced by the family and background, the characteristics of the child’s past and present learning environments, and the educational values and experiences of his/her caregivers. This results in complex interactions between the child, the family, preschool and primary school staff, along with each of their expectations of this process. In this way the child’s transition to school is seen in terms of the influence of contexts (eg, family, preschool, school) and the connections between these contexts (eg, family-school relationships, preschool-school relationships) across time (Bailey, 1999). During the transition period the three microsystems of home, preschool and school are interconnected in a mesosystem. Difficulties experienced within the three environments can interfere with the development of proximal processes. As Paquette & Ryan comment:

*The interaction between factors in the child’s maturing biology, his immediate family/community environment, and the societal landscape fuels and steers his development. Changes or conflict in any one layer will ripple throughout other layers (2001, p.1)*

If the process of transition is to be a successful one for the child, communication and participation is needed between these groups.

Understanding the transition to school in ecological terms is emphasised by many researchers in this area. The approach of three influential groups have heavily influenced the theoretical basis of this study, these are: Ramey & Ramey (1992, 1996); Pianta & Walsh (1996); and Dunlop & Fabian (2002). Ramey & Ramey devised their Transition Conceptual Model following a socio-ecological approach to the development of children within a developmental systems theory framework. The key concepts of context, process and outcomes are represented in the model. Figure 3.1 below outlines their model.

**Figure 3.1: The Transition Conceptual Model (Ramey and Ramey, 1992, 1996) showing the major influences on children and families during the school years. (taken from Ramey & Ramey, 1999, p222).**

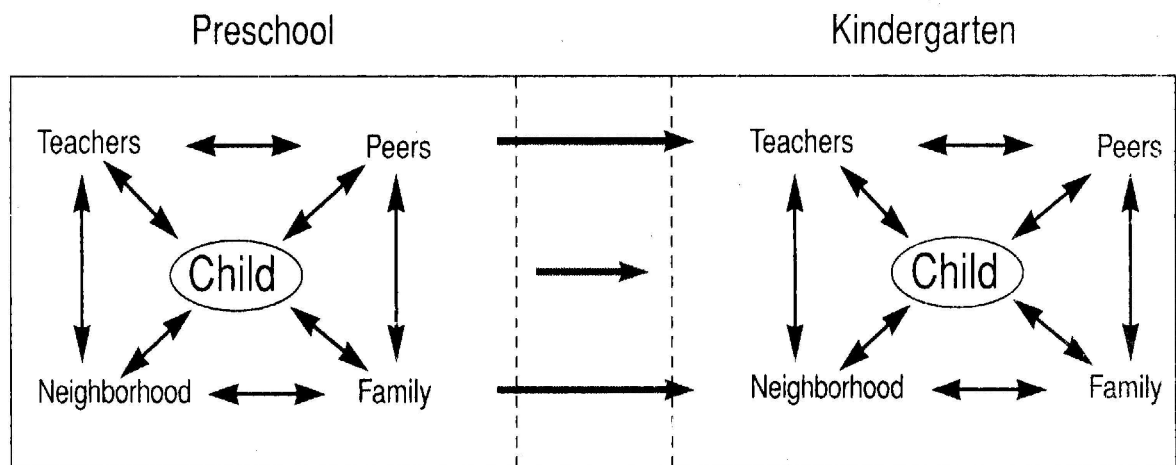


The child is shown as being embedded within the family, and the family as being embedded within the community. They note that the bi-directional influences that children and families have on schools and communities, although acknowledged as being important, are not shown in this diagram as their emphasis is on ways to improve child and family outcomes. The model also details eight spheres of influence which overlap to effect the child and family, they are considered to be the proximal factors in the overall system. Transactions involving supportive influences in the diagram are represented by black arrows, and those involving stressors and risk factors represented by white arrows.

Pianta & Walsh (1996) studied the transition to school for high risk children and suggested that the quality of relationship between home and school is critical for this transition. Their Contextual Systems Model suggests that a successful transition is dependent on this relationship, which is in turn influenced by the parent's personal resources and background, the school's openness to communication, and community values. The present study suggests that when children attend a preschool before formal schooling, this context is also included as a partner in the process.

The model depicted in Figure 3.2 is a graphic illustration of an ecological perspective to transition (Pianta & Cox, 1999).

**Figure 3.2 An Ecological Model of Transition (Taken from Pianta & Cox, 1999, p.6)**



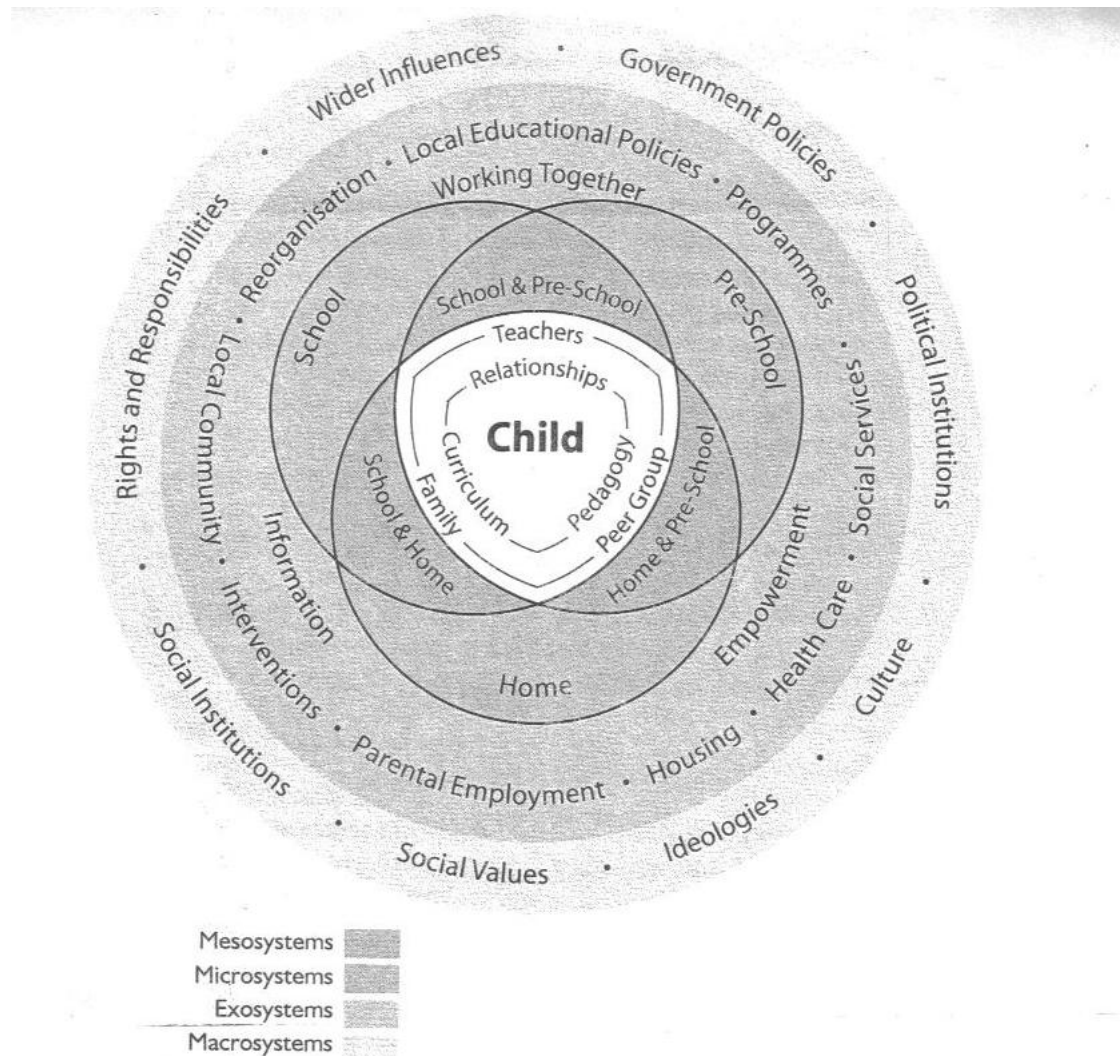
Pianta & Cox (1999) outline the work undertaken by the National Center for Early Development and Learning (NCELD) on the transition to formal schooling. They suggest that this transition should be considered in terms of the relevant contexts (eg, family, school, community) and the connections between each of the contexts. These contexts and the relationships between them are important at any point in time during the transition process, and across time. They suggest that the ecological model is more complex than the child-centred perspective on transition that considers the skills of the child to be the most important factor. They argue that the ecological approach is more appropriate for the study of transition to formal schooling than assessment of children's individual skills and abilities, as child factors account for less than 25% of the variance in kindergarten outcomes. They suggest that an ecological perspective on the transition to formal schooling is "*a powerful tool for analysis and synthesis of an issue that is of national significance*" (Pianta & Cox, 1999, p.11). They propose that a greater understanding of transition can be achieved by looking at the different contexts that influence children's development (such as home, preschool, and community) and the inter-relationships between these contexts over time needs to be considered.

Dunlop & Fabian (2002) also propose that research on transitions favours an ecological model. They advise that their research encompasses home, school, community and society in general, and as such is a nested one, but not constant. "*Presented as a systems approach on an ecological model, our conceptual framework is transformed, and our contention that children, teachers and parents might co-construct transitions can be seen in context*" (p149). They suggest that the child undergoing transition from preschool to school occupies three microsystems: home; the preschool; and the school. Their transition systems model (See Figure 3.3 below) shows how they look beyond the three individual settings to encompass the relationships between each. They also remind us that the people involved in the model are active in each area by way of their inter-connections.

At the exosystem level Dunlop and Fabian have included areas such as parental employment; housing; local educational policies. It is interesting to note that they have also included "information", "empowerment", and "working together" at this level. The fact that these three areas have been included in the model are a sign of

their significance. They also stress the need for communication and participation between each part of the system. Finally, they assert that two other areas are central to, and interact with, each of their conceptual levels. These are the ability of children to contribute to the process, and the effect of public policy on children's lives.

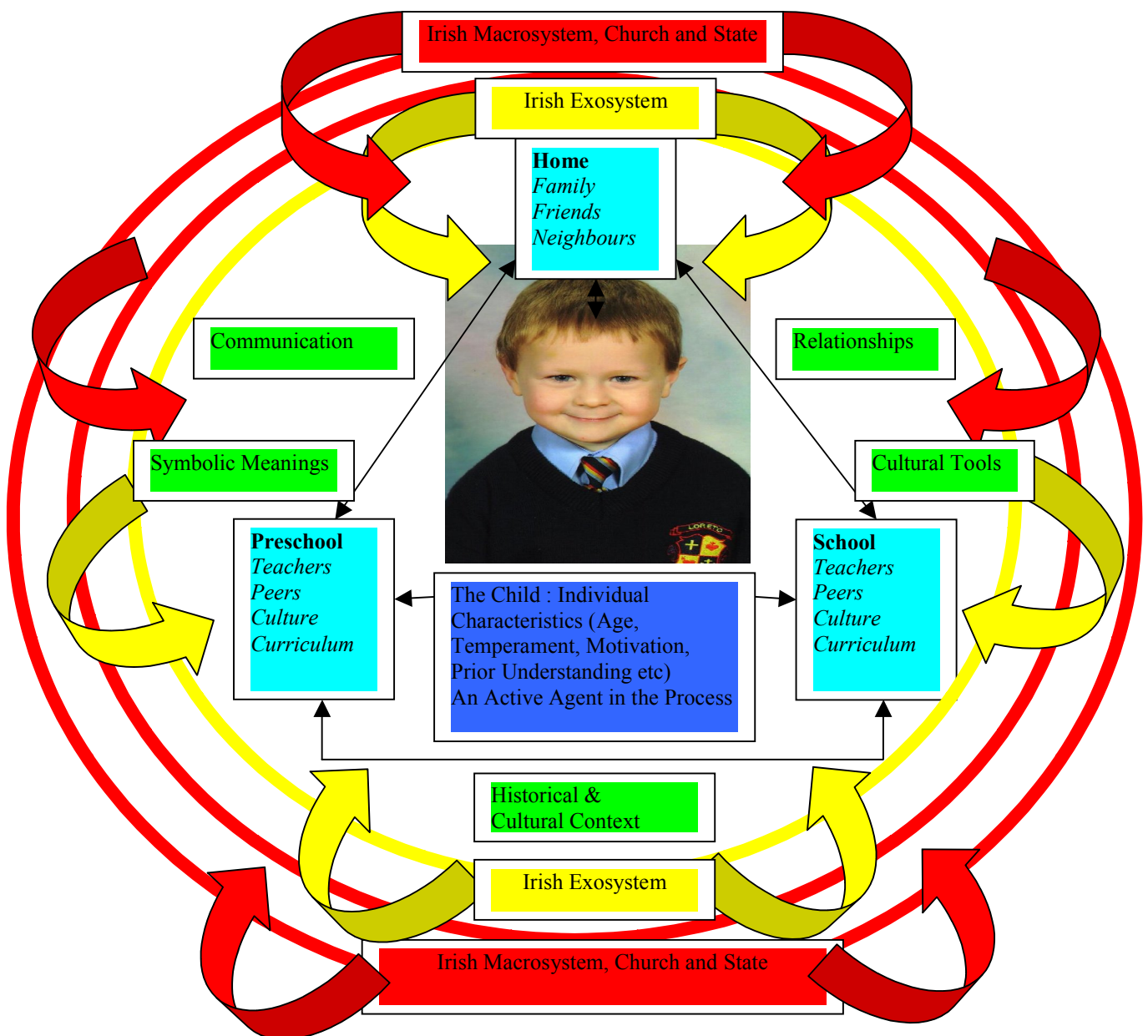
**Figure 3.3: A Transition Systems Approach. (Taken from Dunlop & Fabian, 2002, p151.)**



The above three representations of ecological models of transition acknowledge the shared responsibility of all the stakeholders in the process. They all highlight the dynamic nature of the relationships involved in the transition process, and each one acknowledges the fluid and evolving process of transition. Rather than viewing transition as an event for the individual child, they acknowledge the involvement and

influence of all stakeholders in the process. With this in mind, and drawing on the three models outlined, the author proposes that the following ecological model of transition would be useful when approaching the transition from preschool to school in the Irish context [Figure 3.4]. This model was used when designing this research project, and demonstrates how the child is an active agent in their own transition.

**Figure 3.4: A Model of Transition From Preschool to School in the Irish Context.**



A photograph of a child is used in the figure to remind us of the importance of keeping the child at the centre of all research in this area<sup>1</sup>. It was considered that a pictorial image of a child reminds the reader of this emphasis more than plain text. It is suggested that during the period of transition from preschool to school, the contexts of home, preschool, and school are all important in terms of Microsystems within which the child learns the skills, and develops the cultural knowledge, which will assist them during this transition. The arrows between the child and these three Microsystems within which he is learning, remind us of the importance of the Mesosystem, and the links between the systems. It is important to note that these arrows are bi-directional reminding us that the child can influence all three contexts as well as being influenced by them himself.

The yellow layer represents the Exosystem in the Irish context, this layer influences the home, preschool and school environments, and indeed the child himself. Although the home, preschool and school environments may also have the opportunity to influence the exosystem. Consultation with parents/practitioners in many areas of ECCE in Ireland has increased rapidly over the past decade. For example, the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) have worked from a broad consultative base, including parents, while developing the National Quality Framework for early education in Ireland. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) have also worked from a consultative approach while developing the National Framework for Early Learning. Opportunities for parents and practitioners to be more involved, and to make their views known on policies concerning the education of their children, are becoming more widely available.

Finally the Irish Macrosystem is represented by the red layer. This consists of the culture within which children in Ireland are located. The model also specifically mentions the Church and the State as it is considered that these two institutions have great impact on this transition for children. Many state departments have responsibilities for children during this transition. At the preschool level, the Department of Health and Children is responsible for developing and maintaining the

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<sup>1</sup> Both Michael and his parents gave permission for his photograph to be used in the model.

Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations (DOH&C, 1996, 2006) which were the first legislative control over ECCE in Ireland. The Regulations cover any ECCE service catering for children under six years who are not attending school, and focus on the structural aspects of settings. The Department of Education and Science is also involved in preschool education in Ireland, particularly in terms of funding initiatives for children at risk of educational disadvantage. This Department was also responsible for publishing the White Paper, *Ready to Learn* (DES, 1999a) which led to the development of the CECDE. The Department of Justice Equality and Law Reform are also involved in ECCE at preschool level, both through funding initiatives and also having published the National Childcare Strategy (DJELF, 1999). In December 2005, the Office of the Minister for Children (OMC) was established to improve the lives of children under the National Children's Strategy and bring greater coherence to policy-making for children. The OMC units that are part of the Department of Health and Children include the Childcare Directorate (formerly part of the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform). The Early Years Education Policy Unit is also co-located with the OMC but continues to report to the Department of Education and Science. The aim of such co-location is to provide a joined-up Government approach to the development of policy and delivery of services for children and this may be particularly relevant to the transition from preschool to primary school services. The Department of Social and Family Affairs also has great impact on those children residing in disadvantaged areas at the time of transition, particularly in terms of income support, and benefits, made available to parents. This can have a direct impact on whether parents can afford to pay for preschool education or not.

At a primary school level, the vast majority of schools in Ireland are state aided, originally established under diocesan patronage (usually under the patronage of the local Bishop) with the State recognising their denominational character. Schools must comply with the Rules for National Schools, laid down by the Minister for Education, and funding supplied by the state for the current and capital costs of primary schools is dependent on such compliance. Boards of Management are responsible for the direct government of their schools, including appointment of teaching staff. Parent's representatives are included on these Boards of Management. These Boards provide an opportunity for parents, teachers, and community representatives to play a role in

school management. The Department of Education and Science is responsible for developing the primary school curriculum, and the regulation and inspection of primary schools in Ireland. The aim of the Department is to “*provide high-quality education which will (a) enable individuals to achieve their full potential and to participate fully as members of society; and (b) contribute to Ireland's social, cultural and economic development.*” (DOE&S, 2006, p1.). We can see from the above that the child making the transition from preschool to primary school is influenced by a range of external environments over which he has varying levels of influence.

Finally, it should be noted that the ecological perspective supports a holistic approach to the transition to formal education. It sees the child as an active participant in the process, acknowledging his/her rights and entitlements to a positive learning environment. A holistic view of the process would also ensure that the interconnectedness of the child, his/her family and his/her teachers, would be emphasised. The expectations of, and the relationships between, all those involved in the transition would all be acknowledged in the process. A holistic approach to the transition would also focus on the range of supports that each child needs to ensure a successful transition and assimilation into the new cultural environment of the infant classroom. These could include basic physical needs such as adequate nutrition and warm clothing, and educational needs such as access to adequate equipment in the school environment and access to small class sizes in order to facilitate children’s learning. It could also include socio-emotional needs such as access to positive adult-child interactions, comprehensive support and positive expectations for both children and families. It would also involve continuity and communication between settings, and educational programmes which would facilitate children’s individual development.

### **3.4 The Ecological Model and the Current Research Project**

The ecological model was considered suitable for the current research project in that “*it provides a framework which allows the enquirer to visualise the complex dynamics in different contexts*” (Hayes, 2004a, p34). Ecological theory supports the importance of a systematic description of the settings in which development takes place, and the relationships between these settings. The emphasis on relationships supports the need to involve all stakeholders in the research process. This research project will use both

quantitative and qualitative data to systematically investigate the experience of transition from preschool to school for children in Ireland. The data gathered during Phase I of the project will give an insight into the views and opinions of both preschool and junior infants teachers on the transition to school. These data should inform opinion on the proximal processes at work during this transition and their influence on child development during this time. The relationships between preschool and primary school teachers, their beliefs and practices influencing the transition between the two contexts are expected to be an important factor in developing a better understanding of the topic. They should also yield a better understanding into some of the environmental contexts in which this transition takes place. Rather than just bridge a gap between preschool and school, the emphasis is on building a sense of continuity between preschool settings and the primary setting. A greater understanding of the relationships between, and differences of opinion between, the preschool and primary school environments will enhance our ability to develop this continuity. The model is also believed to be very relevant to Phase II. Data gathered during this phase will involve observing children in both the Microsystems of home and school. The mesosystem, the interactions between the child, parents, home environment, teachers, and school environment, will also be considered during this phase of the project.

Bronfenbrenner proposed the *Process-Person-Context-Time Model* as being an operational research design that facilitated research following his Bioecological model. In terms of this research, the 'process' is investigated both in Phase I and Phase II of the project. Phase I investigates the opinions of preschool and primary school teachers on the process of transition. It investigates factual aspects such as policies and practices in places in preschools and schools with regard to transition. However, it also examines the opinions and beliefs about the two groups of teachers on the process. Phase II gives a more in-depth view of the process in the individual lives of seven children undertaking the transition. The 'person' element is accounted for in Phase II of this research, in terms of the case study children and their individual experiences of the transition to school. In Phase I the 'person' element is represented in terms of the information provided on questionnaires about the teaching experience, or qualifications, of the respondents. The 'context' element has various aspects. In Phase I, the preschool and primary school teachers provide a context in which they

have developed their opinions on transition in terms of the context in which they experience their working lives. Preschool teachers give information on the type of service, who makes the decisions regarding a child leaving preschool to start formal schooling, whether they are located in an urban or rural area, and whether that area is disadvantaged or not. The personal details given also have implications for the context in which their decisions are based. The primary teachers provide information on the number of children in their class, whether it is a mixed grade class, the numbers of children in each group, the number of adults working with the group, and the school size. As with the preschool group they also give details about whether they are located in an urban or rural area, and whether their school has disadvantaged status. The personal details given by this group also have implications for the context in which their decisions are based. In Phase II, the research design included the views of parents, teacher, classroom assistant, and the children themselves. Methodology includes interviews, group discussions, classroom and playground observations, and child drawings, with the aim of providing a broad general context in which the transition for these individual children took place. Finally the 'time' element is important in Phase I in terms of the timing of the research, during a period when class sizes at infant level, and resources available to primary schools, are very much to the forefront in the Irish media (Flynn, 2000; Irish Independent, 2004; Carr 2005; Kerr, 2005; Walsh, 2005). In Phase II, it is important to note that the research commences prior to school start for the case study children and their parents, and continues through the first year of primary school. Finally, although the four elements are considered individually, they are inter-linked and are also investigated in terms of their interaction.

### **3.5 Sociocultural Theory**

Deriving from the work of Vygotsky (1962, 1978, 1988) sociocultural theory proposes that children are active agents in their own learning and that that human capacities are changed by the culture of the environment in which they develop. In this way the same biological or environmental factors can produce very different effects depending on social or cultural considerations. The emphasis of this theory on the role of society in development of education has been hugely influential (Hayes, 2004a). Vygotsky suggested that the child internalizes social interactions through

which they learn and develop. Children use internalization and reconstruction to learn from new situations, and as they re-encounter situations they develop more sophisticated ways of dealing with them. The role of adult is seen to be that of 'teacher' and a central concept of the theory is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which is the distance between the child's current level of understanding, and where they can reach with assistance, in essence it is a measure of the child's learning potential. Within the ZPD Vygotsky proposed that children need assistance to develop higher mental processes. He defined the concept as "*the distance between the child's actual level of development as a measure of their independent behaviour and his or her potential development level in a social context with adult or peer guidance or collaboration...the ZPD defines those functions that have not yet matured but are in the process of maturation, functions that will mature tomorrow but are currently in an embryonic state*" (1978, p.86).

The concept of scaffolding (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976) is particularly important in relation to ZPD. This is where an adult assists a child to reach the next level of development, in effect the adult (or more competent peer) can lead and guide the child towards extending their knowledge. The adult then gradually lets the child perform the tasks without support thus developing their confidence. The role of scaffolding and the ZPD is considered to be central to the concept of effective teaching. As Hayes reminds us "*the ZPD furnishes psychologists and educators with a mechanism for cultivating higher order cognitive functions, a tool through which the internal course of development can be understood.*" (2004a, p.87). However, some have argued that, although the concept has been widely supported and adopted by educationalists, it is not always properly understood or put into practice (Lambert & Clyde, 2000; Valsiner, 1997). Indeed it has been argued that both the concepts of ZPD and scaffolding present "*too passive a view of the child and too instructional a role for the expert. The direction of the interactions, from the adult/expert to the novice/learner, is considered uni-directional and insufficiently sensitive to the important role of the process of the interaction itself within the scaffold metaphor or the ZPD space.*" (Hayes, 2004a, p75). Researchers have stressed the importance of remembering that the child should be an active agent in the process, not a passive force in the scaffolding process. In this way the child, or children, involved in the process share in developing the new meanings constructed, and it is now recognised that scaffolding

consists of a complex set of social dynamics and interpersonal communications which then result in a new shared construction (Addison Stone, 1993; Hayes 2004a). This in turn reminds us of the importance of the relationship between teacher and student. It is important that the adult show a sensitivity to the stage of development currently held by the child, and the tasks that are within reach through the process of scaffolding (Oates, Sheehy & Wood, 2005). In essence by teachers must stimulate their student's mental processes by giving them access to the symbolic tools required to reach more advanced forms of thought (Perret-Clermont, Carugati & Oates, 2004). It is also important to note that if the adult shows little regard for any aspect of learning, the motivation for the child to learn is reduced.

Vygotsky also identified language as being particularly important in the internalisation of interpersonal processes. He suggested that language is central to children's development and that although children use language initially to communicate with others, it then develops into internal speech which is essential for the higher development of the child. He saw preschool children who talk through a problem out loud while working on a task as being in the process of developing their internal language, which will later be used in self-directing thought. In effect he suggested that it is through language that children's thinking develops, and the language a child develops and the meanings and understandings linked to that language are culture bound.

Sociocultural theory is recognised as a framework which enables us to better understand children's learning and the influence of both adults and peers on the learning process, while also recognising the child as being an active partner in the process:

*Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first between people (interpsychological), and then inside the child (intrapsychological)*

(Vygotsky, 1978, p57).

### **3.6 Understanding Transition in Sociocultural Terms**

Researchers such as Podmore, Sauvao and Mapa (2003) have argued that sociocultural theory has an important place in the study of the transition to school. As

discussed above Vygotsky saw the development of the child in terms of their social and cultural interactions. Learning will be promoted when a child is both supported and challenged in their achievements by interaction within the learning community. As Niesel & Griebel advise “*in a socio-constructivist perspective, transition is a process of co-construction through communication and participation between institution and family*” (2007, p24). In this way learning is a collective activity, and the tools, language, and social rules within any given community of learners may differ. This will have direct impact on children as they move between different cultures of preschool and formal school in Ireland. On entry to formal schooling children must cope with the dual socialisation of preschool and school. Cultural differences found within the home context will also have an impact on this transition. These differences and the challenges involved in negotiating the new activity system in which learning will take place, can in some cases hinder the learning process. Different expectations of the behaviour expected of a child can also be found in the home environment, the preschool or school environment, and at a societal level generally. These expectations will affect the transition of the child between each of these environments. If there is a difference between the expectations at home, in preschool, or in school, this can result in difficulties in the child moving between contexts.

Vygotsky stresses the importance of pupil and teacher sharing the same frame of reference, they need to have a shared understanding of the task at hand. The emphasis is on the adult having an understanding of how the child views the task, and adult and child working together on a task in order that scaffolding can take place. Vygotsky did not support direct teaching of information, but required the ‘teacher’ to engage in sensitively scaffolding the child’s own learning, in effect arranging a situation which gives the child the tools to figure out the next step in learning for themselves. So a process of social interaction between teacher and pupil is required in order that the pupil reach their ZPD. This form of scaffolding instruction can often be found in preschool environments such as High/Scope (O’Flaherty, 1995). It should also be noted at this point that many preschools in Ireland work from a curriculum heavily influenced by Piaget. As Hayes (2004a) outlines:

*“His work has provided an almost universally agreed developmental context for curriculum development and practice in early and elementary education. In many of the early preschool intervention projects, which were designed to facilitate the academic development of young children, the paradigm that guided planning was one that drew its inspiration from his developmental theory. The aims of these projects were to prepare children for school and to compensate for delays in their development arising from socio-economic disadvantage. This attention to readiness and corrective measures derives from the Piagetian tradition.”* (Hayes, 2004a, p37).

It has been argued that Piaget did not value culture and social aspects in the same way as Vygotsky, and some researchers are critical of the constructivist model of learning, arguing that it places too much emphasis on the child as a lone constructor rather than shared learning experiences (Tudge & Rogoff, 1987; Berk and Winsler, 1995). However, others argue that Piaget *“considered individual and social factors to be inextricably intertwined ... he believed that development ... is simultaneously individual and social”* (Brown, 1997, p60-61). Certainly, the Piagetian model of learning suggests that teachers should create learning opportunities in which a child can explore and formulate a higher level of thinking. As Hayes asserts *“the scaffolding metaphor captures the Piagetian notion of the child as a constructor of knowledge and the construction is supported, or scaffolded, by the social environment within which such construction is occurring”* (2004a, p75). However, in order for such high-level interactions to take place, the teacher must be in a position to engage with the child in conducting the activity, challenge learning, and support development. Researchers have noted that examples of high-quality scaffolding are rare at primary level (Sylva, 1997; Bliss, Askew & McRae, 1996). Although Sylva acknowledges that the preschool environment provides greater opportunities for scaffolding opportunities as compared to primary level. Indeed, teachers in Irish primary schools have long argued that the class sizes which they teach, and the adult:child ratios, are not favourable to small group activity, or high-level adult:child interactions (INTO, 2006). Hayes (2004a) found that infant classes teachers were observed to spend 85% of time teaching in an adult-centred way. She noted that this high level of adult-centred teaching was unexpected, particularly considered in tandem with the teachers expressed belief that the development of social skills with peers is the most important skill for children of this age to develop, and the child-centred nature of the primary school curriculum. Practical considerations, such as class sizes and adult:child ratios, may play an important part on the social interactions

with the classroom. From a sociocultural perspective enough time needs to be available for teachers to observe and judge adequately the needs of each child, so that they can adjust their support to extend the child's learning. Small group time, or one-on-one interactions are important in terms of such interaction and conversation with children.

Vygotsky also saw play as being of importance in children's learning, particularly fantasy play, as it created situations in which a child could test out rules and meanings away from concrete real-life situations. Play creates its own ZPD and Vygotsky suggested that while engaging in imaginary play a child would often act "*as if he were a head taller than himself*" (1978, p102). The impact of moving from the more play-based preschool curricula to the more formal infants classes curricula may well affect the learning experiences of the children. The emphasis on play-based activities, or lack of emphasis, will have an impact on transition in sociocultural terms. [See Section 2.5 for a discussion on curricular continuity between preschools and primary schools in Ireland]. Finally, Lombardi (1992) advises that "*traditional notions of transition that focus on bridging the gaps between different types of early childhood programs are changing*" (p2). She suggests that instead we should be working on developing continuity of services. The cultural differences between the settings of preschool and formal school will in sociocultural terms have an impact on the transition between the two settings, and will be of great importance in terms of achieving continuity between the two.

### **3.7 Summary**

The transition from preschool has been studied using several theoretical concepts. However, as pointed out by Tobbell & O'Donnell (2005) the design of much of the current research available studying this transition does not allow for a complex understanding of the central issues involved. They advise "*the literature does not provide detail or understanding of what actually happens in a classroom; the practices which construct participation and so learning*" (p3). The movement towards the right of children to have their voices heard in both research and policy considerations in Ireland, and rights of children to be recognised as individuals within their own social worlds, had a direct influence on how the theoretical approach for

this project was developed. It is hoped that the use of ecological and socio-cultural theory which underpin the methodology of the current study will produce data which will provide a clearer picture of this transition in the Irish context. The ecological perspective was considered important in terms of its emphasis on the interactive dynamics between person, process and context over time, and also in terms of its emphasis on proximal processes in driving development. The project also adopted an implicitly socio-cultural perspective on learning, recognising that the learning which takes place within any given cultural setting is mediated by the tools and experiences of that particular social group.