

**CHAPTER 6 :**

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:**

**PHASE II**

*Among School Children*

*I WALK through the long schoolroom questioning;  
A kind old nun in a white hood replies;  
The children learn to cipher and to sing,  
To study reading-books and histories,  
To cut and sew, be neat in everything  
In the best modern way...*

W.B. Yeats (1926)

## 6.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodological procedures which were utilized as part of Phase II the study, it also explains why the methods chosen were considered to be the most productive in order to illuminate the research question. Taking an ecological standpoint (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) a multi-perspective approach was engaged. The researcher developed the methodological approach while working from the premise that children's development is embedded within the social and cultural context they inhabit, and that the relationships within these contexts are all important. Much can be learned about children's direct experiences by observing them within these contexts, and by including them as partners in the research process. To facilitate this partnership, one of the considerations when developing the methodological approach was the right of the child to have a voice in research relating to their lives, and the belief that children making the transition to school could be competent participants in such research. These considerations had a direct influence on how the methodological approach for Phase II of the project was developed.

The specific objectives of the Phase II of the study were to:

- To follow the progress of a small sample of children from a point prior to school entry, to the end of the junior infants year.
- To investigate the transition of the case study children from the perspective of their parents, their teachers and their classmates.
- To involve children in the research process and to allow the voices of the children themselves to be heard in relation to their experiences and understanding of the transition to school.

The qualitative methods of data collection in Phase II were employed with the aim of portraying a balanced view of transition from a range of perspectives. A variety of measurement instruments were employed, involving children, their parents, teachers and classmates, to better understand the impact of the transition from preschool to formal school on the seven case study children

## **6.2 A Case Study Approach**

Following on the assumption inherent to the ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1989) that children should be examined in context to ensure that valuable information relating to the determinants of their behaviour is not lost, Phase II took a qualitative approach to the study of the transition from preschool to formal schooling. The aim of qualitative research is to collect and analyse information in many forms, tending to focus on exploring rather than analysing data in numeric form. Although the data is not collected in numerical form, this does not mean that it is any less scientific than quantitative data. The researcher allows the subjects to speak for themselves then attempts to understand and interpret what has been said, the term itself “*implies a direct concern with experience as it is ‘lived’ or ‘felt’ or ‘undergone’.*” (Sherman & Webb, 1988, p7)

It was decided to use a variety of methodological approaches in Phase II to endeavour to understand how the transition to school affected a small sample of children. This phase did not set out to prove or disprove any particular hypothesis, but instead sought to provide an insight into the lives of these children during this period of time. Both case study and ethnographic methodology were considered to be appropriate this phase of the study. Although true ethnographic research requires depth of study for a considerable period of time, the methodology used can prove useful in small-scale studies to provide an in-depth look at young children’s learning (Siraj-Blatchford & Siraj-Blatchford, 2001) particularly what happens during transition to formal schooling (Peters, 2004). Indeed, Tobbell & O’Donnell (2005) suggest that ethnographic methodology is better equipped to understand transition trajectories than other more restrictive methodologies. The focus of

Phase II on gathering data through classroom and playground observations, meetings with the children in their home environment, involving the children in group discussions, interviews with preschool and primary school teachers, and parent involvement placed the research in an ethnographic context. The technique of reflexivity, the quality of being reflective, commonly used in ethnographic research, was also considered to be appropriate in the case of this study. Reflexivity allows for the fact that the researcher understands and interprets each situation through their own consciousness, they are not entirely detached from the research process, and any impact this may have should be acknowledged at the outset. The researcher undertook a period of reflection on the research process during and after each session of field work. This was found to be helpful in fine-tuning the methodology used, and in working on initial analysis of the data.

Case studies have been shown to be particularly useful in order to “*portray, analyse and interpret the uniqueness of real individuals and situations through accessible accounts*” (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000, p79). One of the aims of Phase II was to provide some narrative accounts describing how individual children lived the experience of the transition to school. The intention was to better understand the perceptions of the children themselves, and their parents, of the process. The case studies provided an insight into the reality of the experience for these particular children. Another aim of Phase II was to include the children in a way that made sense to them. The lack of research which facilitates the voice of the child to be heard has been noted internationally (Clarke, McQuail & Moss, 2003; Docket & Perry, 2005; Kernan, 2007) and one of the aims of this study was to involve the children in the research process. Hayes (2005) has spoken of the need to change our focus on children in research from that of ‘eliciting information from’ to that of ‘generating information with’, and this philosophy was one that the methodology aimed to conform to.

### **6.3 Sample**

It was decided that the first point of contact for Phase II would have to be a primary school, as many children in Ireland do not have confirmation of school place until

towards the end of the preschool year it would have been difficult to confirm school participation in the study for children still at preschool stage<sup>1</sup>. The aim was to recruit between six and eight children to take part in the study. Permission was granted by the Headmaster and the Board of Management of the school, who confirmed that the school would be happy to take part in the study. The researcher then attended the parent welcome and information evening held by the participating school in June 2005. She made a short presentation to parents on the study, and information packs giving further details of the research and including consent forms were handed out to parents at that evening [See Appendix 7, Appendix 8, and Appendix 9]. Some parents chose not to attend this evening, any parents who were not in attendance were handed the information packs when they made a pre-start visit to the school during June 2005 with their child.

Parents were assured that if they choose to take part in the study they could ask any questions that occur to them during participation. They could also decline from answering any questions during meetings with the researcher, and could withdraw from the study at any time. Written parental consent was sought for both case study and general observations. Verbal consent was sought from every child before being interviewed or being involved in a discussion group. Parents were assured that the welfare of the individual children taking part in the research was considered to be of greater importance than the research itself. They were assured that if for any reason a child appeared to be uncomfortable while taking part in conversations with the researcher, or while being observed by the researcher, the researcher would immediately end the conversation, or the observation.

Parents who were happy for their children to take part as Case Study Children, and who would therefore be happy to be interviewed prior to school start, included contact

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<sup>1</sup> If children had been recruited to take part in the study at preschool stage, there was no guarantee that their school of choice would be happy to take part in the study. As there was only one researcher working on the project, it would not have been possible to conduct observations at various schools simultaneously. It was considered that longer periods of observation in one setting was more beneficial, rather than very limited periods at more than one setting. Due to all the above, it was decided to commence the study once school places had been confirmed, and work within one school setting. This meant that it was not possible to commence observations and interviews with the case study children at preschool stage, and this is acknowledged as a limitation of the study.

numbers on the consent forms, and the researcher contacted these parents during Summer 2005 to arrange to meet with them and their children prior to school start on 29<sup>th</sup> August 2005. The parents of seven children returned signed consent forms allowing their children to take part as Case Study Children.

In September 2005 a letter and consent form was sent to all parents in the class advising that the researcher would like to conduct group discussions with children during school time [See Appendix 10]. The researcher advised parents that the aim of the group discussions was to talk to small groups of children during the school day, about school start. Parents were advised that children with parental consent would be invited to take part in the discussions, the decision on whether to take part would then be down to each individual child. Twenty-two parents returned these signed consent forms Children with consent forms were then invited to take part in these discussions.

## **6.4 Measurement Instruments**

### **6.4.1 Meetings with Case Study Parents**

The seven case study children and their parents were visited in their homes during the month of August 2005. At these meetings data were collected using semi-structured interviews. The aim of these interviews was to work primarily from a prepared interview schedule, but to encourage open-ended discussion, and to allow enough flexibility to follow the lead of the parents exploring any avenues that they might introduce to the conversation. All parent interviews were taped (after permission was requested) and transcripts were then made of the tapes. .

This initial parent interview covered areas such as general information on the child, and some family background. It looked into the preschool experience of the child, including the things that parents felt the child had learnt in preschool that would help with the transition to school. It then went on to explore the parent's feelings and expectations about school start. Finally, questions were asked about how the parent made the decision

about whether the child was 'ready' for school, and the factors they felt were important for a child to possess on arrival at school [See Appendix 11].

A further meeting was held in February 2006 with parents in their homes, to conduct semi-structured interviews on how the transition to school was progressing. As with the initial interviews open-ended discussion was encouraged, and flexibility was allowed. Parents were asked to think back to their feelings on the first day at school, and to describe the first few weeks of school both in terms of their own, and their children's experiences. Then they were asked about how their child had adapted to school at this time [6 months into the school year] and what they felt had helped their child adapt. Again they were asked what they felt were the most important skills for any child to possess on starting school. Finally they were encouraged to talk about how well they felt the school was equipped to welcome new starters [See Appendix 12].

During summer 2006 final meetings were held. The aim of this interview was to recap with parents their experiences of their child's first year at school<sup>2</sup> [See Appendix 13]. After each of the three interviews the parents were offered a copy of their interview transcript and advised that they could review it, comment, and suggest changes. All parents reviewed the transcripts after the first interview, at that point four parents advised that they did not require to view any further transcripts. Two parents requested to view further transcripts, and in one case minor changes were made as requested.

#### **6.4.2 Case Study Children: Interviews and Pictures**

It was decided to gather some information on the views of children themselves on the process of transition in order to gain their perspective. In this way it was hoped to acknowledge that children are not passive in this process but are active constructors of their socio-cultural environments. This was in line with recommendations by Green & Hogan (2005) Dockett & Perry (2005) and Griebel & Niesel (2000) who advise that as

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<sup>2</sup> Due to time constraints Case Study Parent 5 took part in one interview only. However she was happy for her daughter to continue to take part in the study.

both adults and children work together to construct the world of childhood both perspectives should be considered when undertaking research. The practical process of undertaking research with young children can be a complex one, interviews with children need to be conducted in a manner which empowers the child to express themselves easily. The 'Mosaic Approach' to listening to young children (Clark & Moss, 2001) was investigated, and although due to time constraints, it was not possible to include the full portfolio of data collection tools described in this study, the researcher aimed to follow recommendations of this study by using a multi-method approach, participatory process, and reflexive approach involving children, parents, practitioners, and the researcher herself. The ethos of the Mosaic approach "*children as experts in their own lives*" (p.54) was one that this researcher sought to adopt, encouraging the children to actively participate in the project.

Informal interviews with the seven case study children took place in their homes following each interview with their parents (see Section 6.4.1). It was decided to commence these discussions with a general conversation with each child on the issue of starting school. In order to assist the children in these conversations, it was decided to also use pictures of items related to school life to encourage discussion [See Appendix 14, Pictures 1-8]. The researcher told the 'story' of a day at school through the pictures, and while looking at each picture the children were encouraged to talk about the various situations, and chat about preschool and school in general terms. The interview was piloted with three children who had started school the previous September, and it was found that the use of these pictures did stimulate discussion, particularly with quieter children.

The case study children were also given the opportunity at each home visit to draw one or more pictures for the researcher, a strategy used in the Starting School Research Project (Dockett & Perry, 2005). The researcher explained to the children that she was writing a book about children starting school for adults, and that she would like to have some pictures to include in the book. She asked the child to draw something that was

connected with starting school. The researcher provided the paper and pencils and let the child draw whatever they wanted without any further guidance on the choice of picture drawn. The drawings were then discussed with the children which helped the researcher to ascertain the meaning the child placed on the drawing, rather than interpreting the picture from her own perspective. All of the children were happy to draw pictures at the first meeting, however on the second meetings two of the children said they would prefer not to draw anything on that occasion, and the researcher made it clear that was fine. On other occasions the children chose to draw something that did not appear to be connected with school (for example one child drew a picture of a rainbow, because she said it was pretty) the researcher discussed the picture with the child, and thanked the child for drawing the picture.

#### **6.4.3 Classroom / Playground Observations:**

Observations of school start in the Junior Infants class were also conducted and recorded. The aim of these classroom observations was to make notes about the experience both for the individual case study children, and other children in the class, to better understand what it is like for children starting school. Aubrey et al (2000) suggest that although observations of this type can be classed as being descriptive-analytical “*the researcher is still likely to be alert to, if not attempting to identify, functional relationships*” (p49). Non-participatory observations were conducted both in the classroom and in the playground at breaks and lunchtime.

It was decided to keep a running record of events taking place in the classroom, with a particular emphasis on any event relating to the children’s experience of transition, and with a particular focus on the seven case study children. Field notes recorded each of the case study children’s experience of transition and adaptation to the Junior Infants class. This included their level of involvement in activities, their interactions (both with peers and adults), their choice of activity during ‘free play’ time, their willingness to engage in classroom life generally. Focal sampling was used in that the individual case study

children were observed for specific periods of time during each day, and the order in which individual children were observed was randomised. As Pellegrini proposes:

*Focal sampling, especially when tied to continuous recording, is very useful to construct thorough descriptions of a sample. With this method, we can derive numerous measures and accurately reconstruct the behaviour of focal participants (1996, p88).*

Although this method can be a powerful tool to describe children in everyday situations, Pellegrini does acknowledge that it can be time consuming, both in terms of data collection and the amount of data generated, and requiring analysis. Although direct observation undertaken in this way was indeed found to be time consuming, it was considered that such records were more valuable than checklists or rating scales in order to provide the richest account of the children's ongoing experiences.

The issue of observer interference was noted. It was acknowledged at the outset that the presence of the observer can interfere, even if minimally, with the behaviour of those being observed. The researcher made every effort to ensure that her presence caused as little disruption as possible. The researcher waited for a settling-in period each day before commencing observations. She also sat unobtrusively at the side of the classroom, where she was not in direct contact with the children, but could view the whole room. The fact that the researcher joined the children on their first day in the classroom, when they were not familiar with any staff members, and became a familiar sight in the room for them, was seen as an advantage in this respect. The teacher also explained to the children that the researcher was in the classroom as she was writing a book on what it was like for children starting school. The children quickly realised that the researcher was not a teacher, she did not act in a teaching capacity at any time, but they were familiar with her as being a part of life in the junior infants classroom and quickly accepted her presence. A conscious decision was made that the researcher would assist the children only in housekeeping areas (such as if a child asked her for assistance in opening lunch items, or in sharpening pencils). However she did not offer assistance in this way unless clearly

necessary, or unless asked by the children. She did not offer support in academic areas, and referred the children to the teacher in this respect.

Hayes (1993) refers to the importance of “*developing the skill of observing children and interpreting what you observe by reference to your knowledge*” (p39) and indeed this is what the researcher aimed to achieve. Prior to commencing this research project the researcher had trained extensively, and put into practice, the skill of observation. Using video tapes that had already been coded by skilled observers, the researcher worked to hone her observation skills. Inter-observer reliability was also tested with another skilled observer. As the classroom observations involved in this study were to be un-structured, the researcher also worked on developing the skill of objective interpretation. She then undertook a pilot observation phase at an early education setting which was not taking part in the project.

During the project itself, in order to achieve objectivity the researcher observed situations, recorded them exactly as observed, and interpretation took place at a later stage. Consistency was considered in terms of repeated coding of the same events over a period of time, to check that the researcher was being consistent across time. A second measure was put in place to check reliability in that at the end of each day field notes were re-read and some initial analysis or interpretation of events was made. Observations were then discussed with the teacher and classroom assistant the following day, to clarify any details or queries. The aim of such triangulation of opinion was to ensure trustworthiness of data.

Having noted the above, the researcher does acknowledge that in qualitative research complete objectivity is neither possible nor necessarily desirable. In many ways, although every effort is taken to ensure reliability of data, the outcome of analysis is a co-production of those being observed and the observer herself. As Strauss & Corbin advise the skills for effective analysis of qualitative data involve both the ability to step back and critically analyse situations, including an awareness of bias, and a “sensitivity to the words and actions of respondents” (1998, p.7). In order to understand the nuances of

human living this sensitivity is essential. In fact, many researchers (Rossman & Rallis, 2003; Marshall & Rossman, 2006) would agree that as qualitative research is grounded in the lives of real people it is fundamentally interpretative, and relies on “complex reasoning that moves dialectically between deduction and induction” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p2). This was acknowledged by the researcher at the outset.

Observations took place both at the beginning of term over three weeks in September 2005, then again during the second term over two weeks in January-February 2006, and finally again towards the end of the school year over three weeks in May-June 2006.

#### **6.4.4 Child Group Discussions**

Following on from the recent recognition in Ireland that children have a right to have their views heard in matters relating to themselves (Department of Health and Children, 2000; Devine, 2004) it was decided to conduct child discussion groups during each of the above periods of classroom observations. The discussions related to the transition from preschool to formal school and the children’s experiences in formal school as compared to preschool. It was hoped that group discussions would support the children in talking in a relaxed manner without feeling under pressure to provide the ‘correct’ answer to the researcher on a one-to-one basis. The researcher was aware of the power relations involved in an adult interviewing children in a school situation, as Linklater reports “*children are very used to playing ‘guess what the adult is thinking’, particularly in a school context!*” (2006, p66), and the researcher wanted to give the children every opportunity to relax and share their feelings without feeling under pressure to deliver the right answer. Other researchers have suggested that often children are willing to discuss things when among a group of friends. This can encourage them to have the confidence to build on, or contradict if they feel necessary, the general conversation, diluting the power relations present when an adult is interviewing one child alone (Hill, 2006; Dockett & Perry, 2005; Punch, 2002).

In September 2005 a letter and consent form was sent to all parents in the class advising that the researcher would like to conduct group discussions with children during school time. Parents were advised that children with parental consent would be invited to take part in the discussions, the decision on whether to take part would then be down to each individual child. Twenty-two parents returned these signed consent forms (some of these included the case study children) children with consent forms were then invited to take part in these discussions. The discussions were held with groups of four or five children at a time, in the school hall. Each child was invited individually and asked would they like to join the group, with the aim of giving the child the final say on whether or not they would like to be involved. A conscious decision was made to group friends together when deciding on who would take part in groups. All children invited chose to take part. Punch (2002) noted that children can sometimes be motivated to take part in research activities by the novelty factor of the experience as compared to the routine of classroom life, indeed she suggests that the desire to miss class can also be a contributory factor. These factors may have had an impact on the children's willingness to take part in the current project, as many expressed excitement at the thought of heading off to the school hall with the researcher and a group of friends, as compared to staying in the classroom.

In total 10 group discussions took place over the course of the project, involving the participation of 47 children (some children took part in more than one discussion group). The discussions were very child led, some revolved around pictures the researcher had brought of typical school situations [See Appendix 14, Pictures 1-8] during other discussions the children drew their own pictures of anything related to school life. The researcher brought some prompt questions along to discussions and used these also to initiate conversations. All discussions were recorded, the children were asked at the start of each discussion if they would mind the conversation being taped. Prior to discussions commencing, the researcher gave each child the opportunity to talk into the tape recorder, and listen to themselves talking, to ensure that they were familiar with, and comfortable with, the idea of being taped. The children greatly enjoyed being taped, and often asked that parts of the tape be played back so they could listen to themselves talking again.

The group discussions were found to be a positive method to gather the opinions of the children in that most children were relaxed among a group of their own friends, and the social interaction of the group encouraged discussion. However, one disadvantage of the group work was that on some occasions, a very talkative member of the group could dominate the discussion, and at times the researcher had to intervene in the discussion and ask members of the group who were having difficulty being heard for their opinions on the topic at hand. However the right of children to listen to the conversation but remain silent was respected. After the discussions each tape was transcribed. In line with recommendations by Hennessy & Heary (2005) transcribing took place as soon as possible after each discussion to enable the research to include notes on the emotional tone of the conversations.

#### **6.4.5 Teacher / Classroom Assistant Interviews**

The researcher conducted three formal interviews with the teacher and classroom assistant. The interviews were held with the two women together. They took place during the three periods of classroom observations, after school had finished for the day. These had a particular focus on the case study children, but also developed to include other aspects of classroom life. Both the teacher and classroom assistant were provided with transcripts from these interviews, which were available for review and discussion. The teacher and classroom assistant were also both happy to hold informal discussions on the children and their transition to school during the weeks of observations. Both were very forthcoming with their opinions and their time, and the insights they offered were noted as being a valuable part of the study.

#### **6.4.6. Trustworthiness of Data**

The technique of observation as a research method has been criticised as being too subjective, with observers making inferences about what they see. A triangulation approach can be a useful tool for achieving objectivity in approach (Cohen et al, 2000;

Siraj-Blatchford & Siraj-Blatchford, 2001). Originally a term taken from a Surveyor's technique involving viewing a point of interest from three vantage points allowing it to be seen from multiple perspectives, it is proposed by researchers as a method of combining different types of data to give many different perspectives on a research question (Morse & Richards, 2002). In Phase II the use of triangulation, of both research methods and data sources, was proposed in order to maximise an objective approach. The case study stories were written following analysis of: classroom and playground observations; semi-structured parent interview data; semi-structured child interview data; child group discussion transcripts; pictures drawn by children; semi-structured interview data with teacher and classroom assistant; and feedback on observations from teacher and classroom assistant. Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2000) suggest that in naturalistic enquiry validity and reliability must be replaced with the concept of trustworthiness. The use of the above multi-mode methodology was undertaken in order to achieve a good level of trustworthiness in the data. In many respects the researcher worked from the advice of Bassey (1981), who suggested that the most important criterion for evaluating a case study is to consider if a teacher working in a similar situation could relate her decision-making to the information presented in the case study. In this way, "*the reliability of a case study is more important than its generalizability*" (Bassey, 1981, p85).

To ensure triangulation of not only methods and data, but also of 'investigators', the researcher spoke to both the teacher and classroom assistant about her observations, both during the observation days themselves (as events happened), at the end of the day, and at the end of each session of observations during the teacher interviews. This gave the teacher and classroom assistant the opportunity to discuss observations, and to advise if they would consider the researchers interpretation of any individual events to be in line with their own interpretations. The researcher would like to acknowledge both the teacher and the classroom assistant, for their willingness to engage with the topic, and the insightful thoughts and opinions they offered on the case study children, and the process of transition for children generally speaking in their school.

## 6.5 Data Coding and Analysis

Although for a researcher the process of analysing their own qualitative data manually can be an arduous process, the ability to draw on firsthand experience with settings can assist in gaining a deeper understanding of findings, and assist with refining interpretations. The process has been recognised as being dynamic, intuitive and creative, and involving sequences of reasoning and theorising (Basit, 2003). Indeed it has been suggested that analysis of qualitative data is an ongoing process continuing throughout the life of the research project, for which the researcher will require plenty of time and energy! (Delamont, 1992). Cohen et al (2000) advise that data analysis in naturalistic research involves “*organising, accounting for, and explaining the data; in short, making sense of the data in terms of the participants’ definitions of the situation, noting patterns, themes, categories and regularities*” (p147).

Working within grounded theory methodology from a social constructionist approach, a systematic, inductive, comparative and interactive approach was taken to data analysis (Charmaz, 2006; Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). Grounded theory methods propose that data analysis should take place along with data collection. In essence codes are generated as they emerge from the data rather than being generated beforehand. General coding extends into focused coding, through which units of analysis of the data are fully developed. Clustering of codes was found to be a useful strategy for linking codes. More incisive categories can then be developed resulting in more firmly grounded analysis. Relationships and links can then be established between different domains. This form of systematic comparison integrates and streamlines data analysis, speculative inferences can be made, and theoretical analyses built during the interactive process. Data analysis of the Phase II data essentially started as data was being collected. The researcher coded field notes, interview transcripts, and child discussion transcripts as soon as possible after data collection.

These codes were essentially descriptive, and covered a multitude of experiences, feelings, activities, and perspectives. Categories, codes, themes and sub-themes were identified [Appendix 15]. Codes needed to be refined and modified at various intervals,

with some being broken down into sub-codes. Codes were rejected and replaced, deliberated and re-generated during the process. Data was reduced, distilled, grouped and classified. The emergent themes were contemplated, revised, and re-considered on an ongoing basis. Field notes were taken apart, matched, compared and contrasted. Interview transcripts were compared, and matching responses and frequency of responses were noted. Analysis of the data was conducted both horizontally and vertically, in that a profile of each child was constructed, and a 'picture' of their individual experience was constructed. Comparisons were made across the seven case study children, and their families. Evaluations were undertaken of field notes and interview transcripts over time, and the responses of different parents and children were compared simultaneously and again over time. Different features in both the adaptation of the children and their parents to the transition were noted.

Although analysis took place throughout the data collection period, the final phase of analysis at the end of data collection was an intense and prolonged period of organisation and deliberation. Blaxter, Hughes & Tight (2001) suggest that the analysis and documentation of case studies can be thought of in terms of "*a 'Russian doll' metaphor, where each piece of data rests inside another, separate but related.*" The researcher worked on analysis with this metaphor in mind. On the gathering of data using a multi-method approach, Clark, Moss & Kjørholt (2005) propose that the analysis and writing up of such data "*can feel like sifting sand*" (p100) with a mass of research material being generated, and hours of consideration resulting in occasional nuggets of information being produced. This was certainly the case with the current project! The researcher was aiming during analysis of the bank of data generated during Phase II to tell the individual story of the transition to school for each of the case study children, while offering a critical interpretation of their experiences. The aim of the final report on each child being to reveal the richness of the individual experience.

## 6.6 Ethical Considerations

When undertaking any research study working directly with children it is important to consider the ethical implications of working with this age-group. During the planning phase of this study the ethics of involving four and five-year-old children in the study was considered. No national guidelines relating to research involving young children were available in Ireland when data for this study was collected in 2005/06. Walsh (2003) notes “*the question of ethical guidelines for conducting research with young children requires immediate attention leading to national guidelines*” (p144). The Declaration of Helsinki provides a standard of international ethics in research involving human subjects, including children. It suggests that research involving young children should gain not only the consent of the legal guardian, but where possible the consent of the child herself. Informed consent is an important ethical consideration. It involves ensuring that the subject (or in the case of young children, their legal guardian) knows that they have a choice whether or not to participate in the research. They should be aware that they can withdraw from the study at any time, and they should have a full understanding of any consequences of taking part in the research. Finally, they should be made aware that the work may be published (Greig & Taylor, 1999).

The approach taken in this study was to be guided by ethical principles outlined by the Research Ethics Committee at Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT). The Committee is guided in its work by commonly agreed standards of good practice such as are laid down in the Declaration of Helsinki and the statements of appropriate ethical practice produced by relevant professional organisations. The guiding ethical principles for the present study were: respect for human dignity; respect for free and informed consent; respect for vulnerable persons; respect for privacy and confidentiality; respect for justice and inclusiveness; and minimising harm. It was aimed to take a subject centred perspective, and to be sensitive to any vulnerability that the children in particular might have to any aspects of the research. An application for ethical clearance for the project was submitted in writing to the Research Ethics Committee at DIT before data collection commenced. After consideration, the Committee granted ethical approval for the project to commence.

Staff and parents were advised that all individual data collected during the study would remain confidential. Names of children, parents, staff and school were changed to ensure anonymity. Prior to data collection, staff and parents were advised that study would not conduct any form of educational evaluation of individual children. They were also advised that data would be used in conference presentations, and the final report would be published as a PhD thesis. After completion of the study, an information sheet giving details of the findings of the overall study was provided to staff and parents of the class that took part in Phase II.

### **6.7 The Ethics of Conducting Research in a Familiar Setting**

Brooker (2003) has identified that *“the complex and uncertain business of accessing and representing the beliefs and attitudes of research participants is fundamental to all interpretative research”* (p.120) and indeed it was a concern in this study. An issue identified during data collection and analysis phases of Phase II of the study was the issue of whether it is preferable to conduct fieldwork in a setting well known to the researcher or a completely independent setting. Working in a familiar setting can be of benefit in terms of access, and it can also make establishing a relationship of trust between researcher and participants easier, if relationships are already established prior to data collection. However, during the present study the researcher identified some ethical difficulties in working with children, and more particularly parents, with whom she already had a relationship, or with whom she would have an ongoing relationship in the school context in the future. Information was passed to the researcher by participants in the study that it was not felt ethical to include in the research findings, and the researcher had to give great consideration to her ethical responsibilities during the course of the project. As noted by Murphy (2005) although the results of research should be reported with honesty, it is also important to weigh up the possibility of harm to participants in the study, and the researcher has a responsibility to act with integrity when presenting and interpreting data relating to both children and adults involved in research studies. Assurances of confidentiality had been given to both staff and parents prior to

commencing the research, and this made it impossible to discuss with either party information given by the other. At times this information could have enlightened the other party in a positive way, but would have breached confidentiality agreements. Also, on occasions information was given to the researcher “in confidence” which it was not felt appropriate to discuss with any other party or include in the project. After much deliberation, as the above information was not seen to impact on the immediate welfare of the children, it was decided from an ethical standpoint not to include it in the findings. Occasionally, the researcher was put in a difficult position in conversations with parents and staff where she felt that her role as researcher, and her role as a parent with a child in the research setting, came into conflict. When dealing with a well known setting, the researcher found that at times the boundaries between the roles of ‘researcher’ and ‘friend’/‘acquaintance’ could become blurred in the minds of the participants, and due care had to be taken at all times not to exploit this situation, and to retain professional competence and integrity when reporting on the findings.

## **6.8 Summary**

The aim of this study was to present a comprehensive picture of the transition from preschool to school in Ireland, while also acknowledging children as being competent subjects in research into their own lives and viewing children as active agents in their own social worlds. To achieve this aim, a multi-disciplinary approach was employed, and the methodology was eclectic and triangular. Phase II followed a small group of children during their transition to school, commencing prior to school start and through their first year in formal school. This phase investigated the perspectives of the children themselves, their parents, teachers and classmates, using observation data, semi-structured interviews, and child discussion groups to gather information about the process. Findings from Phase II are presented in Chapter 8, and Chapter 9 presents an analysis and discussion of Phase I and Phase II as a whole.