

CHAPTER 8:
THE CASE STUDIES:
FINDINGS

“It is as if the teacher had been presented with a small library of 30 brand new books all waiting to be opened with the reverence that brand new books deserve – anticipation about how each new plot will develop, how the characters will develop, will it be a thriller, a horror story, a family saga or a romance, and of course, will there be a happy ending?”
(The First Day at School, Fay & Griffin, 2004, p.3).

8.1 Introduction

In this Chapter findings from study of the seven Case Study Children are presented both individually and in relation to each other. It is important at this point to again reflect on the issue of objectivity. As discussed in Chapter 6 the researcher used a triangulation approach, both in terms of asking the teacher and classroom assistant for opinions on observations, and comparing data from different sources, to achieve objectivity in her interpretation of the following case studies. However, it is acknowledged at the outset, that this interpretation is only one reading of the experiences of the children, their parents, and teachers, studied. The reading of the forthcoming case studies provided below, is specific to the researcher's own constructed representation of events, and position as an Irish female middle-class parent, local to the case-study school, and viewing the situation from an academic viewpoint.

8.2 Springwood School¹

Springwood school is a primary school, locally known as a 'country school', located on a country road on the outskirts of a large town in County Meath in Ireland. The school has twelve mainstream classes, from junior infants through to sixth class, and also facilitates special needs and learning support teaching. It caters for over 300 pupils, and has a teaching staff of 18.

Information is widely available for parents of children starting school in Ireland to assist them in preparing their children for school start. This is offered by organisations such as The National Parents Council (2007); the Irish National Teachers Organisation (2005), newspaper articles, and Irish internet sites which offer advice to parents during this transition². However, like many other primary schools in Ireland, Springwood school hosts familiarisation events prior to school start for both children and their parents. The school holds one 'open day' for new starters in the June prior to the September in which

¹ The names of the school, principal, teachers, and children have all been changed.

² Examples of Irish Internet Parent Information Sites: www.rollercoaster.ie, www.solo.ie, www.families.ie, www.independent.ie/lifestyle/parenting/

they start school when the new starters have an opportunity to explore the junior infant classroom themselves, meet their new teacher (Mrs Murphy) and meet each other. Parents are welcome to join children for this afternoon. Springwood school also holds one 'information evening' for parents /guardians of new starters in the June before the child is due to start in September. At this evening the principal (Mr Delaney) speaks to parents and introduces them to the school, it's ethos, school policies, and some rules and regulations. He supplies parents with an information pack at the meeting, which gives details of many aspects of school life [Appendix 39]. In 2005, the first day of school at Springwood School for the 30 junior infant pupils was 30th August. Field Notes from the first and second day at school are attached [Appendix 40 and 41].

8.2.1 The Junior Infants Classroom

The Junior Infants classroom at Springwood school is a large square classroom, bounded on two sides by windows, making it a bright room. The classroom is divided into different areas: social corner; environmental corner; reading corner; maths corner. The desks are divided into different sized groups ranging from groups seating 4 children, to groups seating up to 10 children. For the first few weeks the children were allowed to choose their own places at tables. Every few weeks Mrs Murphy changes the places so that children mix over the course of the year. Children have a say in where they would like to sit and who they would like to sit beside, but Mrs Murphy encourages movement.

Mrs Murphy's desk is at the head of the classroom in front of the black board and whiteboard. Also situated at the top of the class are the days of the week, the calendar, the weather chart, and a list of 'jobs' (ie, cleaning blackboard, opening door, maintain the library). To the right of the teachers desk, towards the entrance to the classroom is the junior infants library, containing small and large books. Just inside the entrance to the classroom are located separate boys and girls toilets. Between the toilets and the classroom itself is an area in which two full-sized desks are situated, Mrs Murphy uses these desks to store/organise copies and workbooks. Aideen, the classroom assistant, also uses this area for lesson preparation. The classroom appears perfectly adequate size-

wise for the 30 pupils, one teacher and one classroom assistant. However, in the past (two years, and three years ago) the class consisted of 43 and 44 pupils respectively, which was a less satisfactory situation.

8.2.2 The Junior Infants Teacher

Mrs Murphy has twenty years experience teaching, all at Springwood school. She has worked with the infants classes, and particularly with junior infants, for many years. She works with this group by choice. It is clear that Mrs Murphy is an advocate of the Revised Curriculum in terms of its approach to preparation for reading being grounded firmly in oral language work. Prior to the introduction of a formal reading scheme, she concentrates on rhyming skills, songs, and oral language games to develop phonologic and phonemic awareness in her class. She advised that she finds the new curriculum very easy to work with, however she is aware that this approach is not taken in every junior infants class, some of which are engaged in more academic activities such as learning spellings. However, she believes that the emphasis on oral work gives the children confidence talking out which will stand to them in their future educational career. She puts this attitude down to her training at Mary Immaculate College³, which she feels was very progressive [Mrs Murphy, I.1].

8.2.3 The Classroom Assistant.

Aideen, the classroom assistant who took part in the present study, was allocated to the junior infants class of Springwood school on a full-time basis during the 2005-06 academic year. She was present in the class officially in the capacity of Special Needs Assistant to an individual child in the class, but also acts as a Classroom Assistant in general terms and is known by this title. This is the second year that Aideen has worked with Mrs Murphy, and they both reported having developed a good working relationship.

³ Mary Immaculate College was founded in 1898 for the training of primary school teachers. In 1974 it became a Recognised College of the National University of Ireland. Since then it has offered a three-year Bachelor of Education Degree.

8.3 Callum's Story

8.3.1 Background

Callum lives with his parents and two older siblings in a residential area close to Springwood school. Oonagh, his mother, works at Springwood School. He was 5 years old in September 2006 as he commenced school and Oonagh advised that she felt this was a “*good age to start school*” [Oonagh, I.1]. Prior to starting school, Callum attended a crèche full-time, at which he attended an afternoon Montessori session. He had been attending the crèche for three years since his mother returned to work [at Springwood school]. She reported that Callum was particularly determined in everything he wanted to do, much more so than her older two children, and she felt he was very bright.

8.3.2 Preschool Experience

Oonagh reported that Callum was very happy at preschool. He is the type of child who takes direction well and he wants to please the teacher, “*if the teacher asked him to stand on his head, he would do it*” [Oonagh, I.1]. In relation to the differences between preschool and school, Oonagh noted the class size as being the main one. Oonagh has experience of seeing the junior infant class over various years on the first day of school, and said:

“It can be bedlam. Mothers, fathers, aunties, grandmothers, some with cameras and camcorders, create a very high noise level, which can be quite intimidating for the quieter children” [Oonagh, I.1].

Oonagh noted that she was glad he was among the older group in the class, rather than the younger. She said that from her own experience of the class she felt she could tell who the older children were and who were younger. She felt that the two years in preschool had been good for Callum in terms of his social skills, and she reported that his language skills were very good (this was confirmed by Mrs Murphy). However, although she felt two years at preschool were good for Callum in terms of social skills and

maturity on entering school, she questioned the emphasis at preschool level on academic work:

“I mean they come to school to learn the academics, they don’t need them before they arrive. I think they can learn too much academically at preschool, I mean Callum did his ‘letterland’ twice! I felt it was overkill for him.” [Oonagh, I.3].

8.3.3 Callum’s Home-School Links

Oonagh works in Springwood school and although she does not work directly in the Junior Infant classroom she has daily contact with the teacher. Callum had visited the school with her on various occasions in a working capacity, so his experience of school was in terms of her workplace. Callum was familiar with Mrs Murphy and with Mr. Delaney prior to school start, and so would already have established home-school relationships. He was also keen to share the fact that he knew them prior to school, *“I knew Mr Delaney before anyone in this school.”* [Callum, 19-9-05(2)]. From an ecological perspective his mesosystem would appear to have been well-developed which would help him during the period of transition from one setting to the other.

Prior to school start, Oonagh felt that knowing the school and Mrs Murphy would be a benefit to Callum. By the end of the first year, Oonagh acknowledged that these established relationships may in fact have caused unexpected difficulties for Callum. On school start Callum was very familiar with Mrs Murphy, but this meant that he had difficulties in understanding classroom boundaries. It took him some time to understand the rules governing classroom behaviour, possibly due to these already established links. He tended to interrupt Mrs Murphy and speak to her in a way that was not acceptable in the classroom. Callum had to give up the role of ‘friend’ and replace it with the role of ‘school-child’ and all that entails, as the following quote from Oonagh explains:

“He felt so familiar going in, and in some ways that was not a good thing. Even at the parent-teacher meeting Mrs Murphy said basically that he could be too forthcoming, that he could be too familiar... go too far. Being familiar with her definitely was a kind of disadvantage, you see...it was difficult for him, in a way harder than the others, he had crossed that line a lot further than the others, and he had to understand that he had to come back into line with the rest of the class,

and it was hard for him. Really they[the other children] didn't have to move back at all, they just had to conform, where he had to change his whole idea and come back into line with the school ideas. It did take a while, it was difficult for him, but he does know now that teacher is the boss!" [laughs]

[Oonagh, I.2].

8.3.4 Parent Experience

Oonagh's experience working in the school has shown her that children settle very well after the parent leaves. She reported that in her opinion it was not a good idea for parents to stay too long in the infant classroom. She felt that if a child is having difficulty settling they will stay tearful for as long as a parent was present in the class. She also felt that teachers would prefer that parents did not linger too long in the classroom for this reason. In this way her working position within the school had given her an insight into school start, and teacher's views on the role of parents at this time, that the other parents were not privy to. On the other hand, as a parent Oonagh understands how stressful it is to have a child unsettled at school. Her eldest daughter seemed to settle well in school, but an upset in the classroom knocked her confidence and it took some time for her to regain this confidence. Oonagh reported that she found that time very stressful, and was very worried about her daughter at the time.

Oonagh also mentioned 'preparing' Callum for school, in terms of his behaviour. She and her husband had been taking quite a strict approach with him behaviour-wise over the summer before starting school with school start in mind. She was aware that certain standards of behaviour were expected at primary level. Her experience of the junior infant class, and her knowledge of the types of children that the teacher had reported in the past as causing difficulties (she particularly mentioned over-confidence as causing problems) meant that she used the summer to reinforce the behaviour that she felt was expected of Callum at school.

8.3.5 The First Few Weeks

Callum seemed to settle well on the first day at school, however he found day 2 more difficult as Oonagh reported:

“I don’t know were the tears on the second day because some of the others were crying? I really was surprised, but you do feel, because I work in the school, people are thinking ‘look at her child and she works here’. Now, no-one said anything, but you do feel it. I was thinking ‘Oh God, will you stop!’” [laughs]
[Oonagh, I.2]

Classroom observations suggested that Callum appeared to need adult support during the first days of school. He sought the company of the teacher, and indeed the researcher herself, and initiated contact more often with the adults in the room than the other children [Box 8.1].

Box 8.1: Field Notes: Day 1

Callum spots me across the room, walks over to me, and stands in front of me smiling. He moves his bag over to a chair beside where I am sitting [closest chair] and comes back over to me and says ‘hello’. He tells me that his mummy works at the school and he wonders what she is doing.

Callum goes up to teacher “Teacher, here’s a picture”, teacher says thank you and puts it on her desk. Callum smiles at her reaction and walks back to his desk.

Oonagh had commented that Callum is the sort of child who stands back and watches what is going on, she expected him to take his time and observe life in the classroom, before actively taking part. However, he can be a chatty child, and she would expect him to join in activities and have the confidence to interact well, once he has spent this initial time waiting and watching. Her expectations were correct in that he did stand back from the classroom activity, although he actively made contact with the adults in the room. However, after a few days he relaxed and actively joined in with the classroom activities, and happily engaged in conversation with the other children seated at his table.

8.3.6 Older Than His Years

Oonagh reported that Callum often seemed “*older than his years*” [Oonagh, I.2]. She felt that this was the cause of him seeking out adult contact, in effect he preferred the company of adults to children. She felt that he was different to her older children in this way, and advised that perhaps because he was the youngest of three, he had more confidence dealing with people older than him. Mrs Murphy confirmed that she found Callum very mature in some ways, and his language skills were very good. He clearly had no difficulties in terms of confidence to approach her. She advised that he came up to her one day and said “*that’s a very familiar smell, what is that smell? That would be perfume then, would it?*” [laughing] [Mrs Murphy, I.3]. Oonagh said that he played mostly with older children at break and lunch time. She said that this worried her at times, but she felt he was happy at school, and that was the main thing.

Definitely Callum was the most forthcoming of the case study children during home meetings in his home. During the first home meeting with Callum he was quite shy at first, but quickly became more comfortable while proudly showing off his folder containing his work from preschool. He clearly enjoyed telling me about life at preschool, and his work there. Callum also actively sought out contact with the researcher in the classroom on every visit, and initiated conversation at every available opportunity. It became clear during visits throughout the school year that, as Oonagh suggested, he particularly likes the company of adults. Aideen confirmed that in the yard, during the first weeks of school, he would seek her out, and seemed to prefer to stay with her than play with the other children in the class. She advised that he would often stay near her, and ask to hold her hand. She would encourage him to mix with groups from the class as she felt it was important that he learned to be independent from her in the yard. At times she said she took a firm approach with him (and other children who wanted to stay with her all the time) to encourage them to develop their independence. However, she felt Callum was often too shy to go over and take the initial step himself. During the child discussions groups held over the course of the school year, Callum confirmed Aideen’s

view that he was less sure of himself when playing on the yard [See Section 8.11.5] but over time he gained confidence in this situation.

8.3.7 Reflections on Callum's Transition

In the world of school, children are rated according to how they compare with other children. Competition not only covers academic ability, but also reaches to other levels, for example ability to please the teacher, and to forecast other's reactions. Children quickly realise that they are being evaluated and are aware that different children receive different reactions from teachers. However, they may be unclear as to what determines these reactions. Callum had to quickly learn that the familiar approach he was using towards the teacher was not acceptable in school terms. He had to reassess his relationship with the teacher, and to determine what was the acceptable approach to take in the classroom context. For Callum, his previous relationship with the teacher, and his insider knowledge of the school, meant that it took him some time to understand what was now expected from him in the role of student. As Oonagh noted, he was the only child who had to re-learn his role within the school context.

Although Callum's close links to the school caused him some difficulties during his initial transition period, Oonagh's insider knowledge meant that she could adhere to school expectations of parents. How the parents fit into this new role, and the expectations that schools have of them, may also impact on the transition for the child. It is clear that Oonagh was very well aware of the unwritten school rules, for example, she mentioned on the first day she knew not to delay too long in the classroom, as teachers did not find this helpful. Her willingness to leave the classroom, while also mentioning that she would have loved to keep checking on Callum, also made clear her awareness that she was now being judged as a parent, in comparison to her position as member of school staff. Her comments about Callum crying on the second day of school, and her belief that people were judging her by his behaviour also made it clear that she was reading the situation in terms of roles and the expectations that others had of her in terms of her role as 'mother' and 'school insider'.

In the final interview Oonagh advised that she felt that Callum's confidence and his sense of humour had helped him settle during this first year of school. Both Mrs Murphy and Aideen reported that he made them laugh at times. Indeed Callum's sense of humour was apparent in some of his conversations with the researcher [Box 8.2].

Box 8.2: Child Discussion Group 1, 21-6-06

Mary: So tell me if you could do more of something at school, what would it be?
Callum: Homework!
Mary: You would like more homework?!
Callum: I would like to do it at school! [laughs]

He also demonstrated a good understanding of the complexity of the school rules during these discussion groups. During conversations about things the junior infants were not allowed to do, Callum often could provide an example of when, in fact, such a situation would be appropriate. For example, when a child mentioned the rule that you were not allowed on the grass, Callum reminded her that "*I am allowed when it's P.E.*" [Callum, 21-6-06(1)] and later when children mentioned that they would not like to be sent to Mr Delaney's office he advised "*it would be OK if you were going on a message*" [Callum, 21-6-06(1)].

Mrs Murphy was pleased with Callum's progress over the year. Callum adapted to the rules of the classroom, although there had been difficulties at first. Mrs Murphy reported that he has very good language skills, and wonderful vocabulary. She described a situation where she had asked the class to put individual words into sentences, and while the other children came up with quite simple sentences, for example for the word 'let's' they would suggest something like 'let's play', Callum's sentence was: "*Dad says, let's go and look at the plans for the extension*" [Mrs Murphy, I.2]. He was eager to please the teacher, as was reported to Oonagh at preschool level. Mrs Murphy noted: "*He hates letting me down*" and he has been known to show her his work and ask her "*do you think there's an improvement there now?*" [Mrs Murphy, I.3].

Although Callum had a difficult start adapting to the role of student, both Mrs Murphy and Oonagh report that he has settled well into the role. He is also clear on the boundaries that exist between home and school, and is aware that certain behaviour must be reserved for one or other situation.

8.4 Ross's Story

8.4.1 Background

Ross lives with his parents (Patrick and Margaret) in a residential area close to Springwood school. He was 5 in the June prior to school start. He was an only child on starting school, but his little brother, Ryan, was born a few weeks before the school year finished. Ross had attended preschool for two years prior to starting school. He would have been old enough to start school the previous September, and was due to start in a different local school. However on reflection his parents didn't feel happy with the first school. They decided to change plans, left Ross another year in preschool, and started him in Springwood school the following year, when he was over 5 years old.

8.4.2 Older and Wiser?

Mrs Murphy advised that she felt that Margaret and Patrick were right to start Ross in school this year, rather than last year, when she felt he would not possibly have been ready. Patrick and Margaret had given a lot of thought the previous year about whether they felt Ross was 'ready' for school. They worked with his preschool teacher to bring Ross up to an academic level that they felt necessary for school start. This included the preschool teacher giving Ross 'homework' to work on during this year.

He was very immature last year. His spoken word was very far behind, and his understanding of words was behind. His preschool was very good, so we decided to leave him there for the year. The teacher there was very good, and she was very helpful. We spoke to her about giving him homework and bringing him on,

and she was very good, and he has really come on in leaps and bounds in the last year. [Patrick, I.1]

During conversations about school both parents consistently referred to success in academic terms, and clearly their emphasis on homework at preschool level in preparation for school, suggested an academic focus. Giving preschool children ‘homework’ such as this is not common practice in Ireland, however Patrick and Margaret felt it was important for Ross to reach a given academic standard to succeed in school. When Patrick talked about problems Ross may have encountered if he had started school the previous year, again he talked of failure in academic terms. Finally, it was noted that when Margaret and Patrick were explaining what skills they felt were important to possess on starting school, they tended to answer from an academic perspective, as compared to most of the other parents who spoke more in terms of social type skills.

Margaret and Patrick reported that they had also spent some time discussing school start with Ross. It was clear to the researcher on meeting Ross that he was very familiar with the details of school start, when I mentioned him starting school in September, he told me that he was actually starting on 29th August, which was in fact true. However, his expectations of what school would be like were a little less clear. When asked what did he like most about preschool, he particularly mentioned the Power Ranger toys. When asked if he thought there might be Power Ranger toys in big school he felt sure there would be. His first picture, drawn for the researcher, of school was a picture of him in his football boots playing football at school [Appendix 42]. When asked if he thought he would spend time at school playing football, he said yes, that he would. It was clear that he thought of school as a place to play, either with toys, or sports (which would normally not take place during school hours). So although Ross’ parents tended to have an academic focus in terms of school, and expected Ross to be competing with the other children on academic terms, Ross seemed unaware of this focus, and saw school as a place to play. Indeed Ross was noted in classroom observation to quickly make friends during the first days at school. He happily engaged in classroom life from day one, and clearly relished the opportunities to play outdoors in the yard, exploring every area of the

yard and grassed area with his new friends. He was quiet in responding to the teacher during the initial weeks of school, but was clearly confident in terms of establishing peer friendships.

8.4.3 Language and Communication Skills

Patrick and Margaret specifically mentioned the area of Ross's speech and language skills as being a factor in their decision to hold him back until he was five starting school. They felt that he would benefit from a year further developing these skills before entering formal schooling. Mrs Murphy also advised that Ross could be difficult to understand, as she found his pronunciation to be very poor. She mentioned that she had brought this matter to his mother's attention, recommending that his mother keep an eye on his speech. At the final teacher meeting in June 2006, both Mrs Murphy and Aideen mentioned that they were still finding Ross difficult to understand, as Mrs Murphy advised:

I find it very difficult to understand him. You can understand him if it's Irish, or if he's talking in the context of what we're doing, but if it's just the news time in the morning, at times I just don't know what he's saying. [Mrs Murphy, I.3].

She noted that language is a very important skill to possess on arrival at school, as she feels it makes it very difficult for a child if they cannot be understood. It is unclear to what extent she discussed this with his parents. She did mention that this was discussed at the parent-teacher meeting when she was informed that he was currently receiving speech and language therapy. It is not clear if Margaret and Patrick actually understood that Mrs Murphy was having such difficulty understanding Ross, as this was never mentioned in their interviews.

8.4.4 A Transition for Ross' Parents

Just as Ross was making the transition to his new role of 'school-child' so too were his parents making the transition to their new roles as 'school parents'. Patrick was the only

father to get involved in the study, all other parents taking part were mothers. Prior to school start, I discussed with Margaret and Patrick how they were feeling about the transition. Margaret expressed some fears about the differences between preschool and formal schooling, she cited the large class numbers as being a major concern. Patrick also highlighted the lack of control over the school environment as being a major concern [Box 8.3]. Patrick was concerned that the values that Margaret and himself had been instilling into their son might be eroded now that other powerful influences were involved in his education.

Box 8.3: Patrick & Margaret, Excerpt from Interview 1, August 2005

Mary: Emotionally, can I ask how you feel yourselves about him starting?
Patrick: I wouldn't say I was feeling good. Part of me wishes I could rewind the clock until he was still two or three and I could keep him at home.
Margaret: But I feel good because I know he's able for it now.
Patrick: I know he's able for it, but... he was gone for three hours a day at the preschool, and Margaret could go down, and we knew he was well cared for and well looked after, but he's going into the big bad world now. He'll be gone for five hours now, and he's going to be influenced by other people, and he's going to take on other people's ways. That's what's worrying me.
Mary: It is a big step independence-wise I think.
Patrick: And other people will start get to shape him now, the teacher, and the principal, the church, the state.
Mary: It is an emotional time. I often think I would love to be a fly on the wall in the classroom, and see how they are getting on.
Patrick: I don't want to be a fly, I want to be a wasp, and if anyone goes near him I'll sting them! [laughter]

Patrick made it very clear during interviews that being a 'good' parent was very important to him. Many times he discussed the role of parents, and spoke about how in society today many parents were not, in his opinion, fulfilling this role. In terms of Ross starting school, he noted that few parents attended the Parent Information Evening (this was also noted by Sarah, mother to Janice and Fiona, Case Study Children 6&7). Margaret and Patrick reported that they found the evening very useful, however Patrick expressed concern that the low turn-out suggested that some parents did not care about their children starting school. Margaret and Patrick proved during Ross's time at

preschool that they wanted to be involved in every way in his education. It appeared likely that this would continue at school level.

At the second meeting with Ross' parents, which took place early in the second term of school, their apprehension about school start was gone. They both commented about how happy they were with his progress. They also reported that they were very happy with the contact with the school. Springwood school uses a text messaging system to text 'notes' to parents, rather than a paper system, and Margaret commented how impressed she was with this system. They also felt that the school maintained adequate levels of contact, and felt that specific messages for Ross' class (for example a head lice warning) were dealt with well. They also noted that Ross had "*a really healthy fear of Mr Delaney, and dare he mess, oh no, he'll have Mr Delaney to deal with.*" [Patrick, I.2]. They also gave some examples of instances where Ross had refused to comply with their wishes, as he wanted to follow the school rules [Box 8.4]

Box 8.4: Child Discussion Group 1, 21-6-06

Margaret: "Even today, I said to him come on hurry I have to go to [local town] and he said 'I can't hurry because Mr Delaney will be looking out the window, and there's no running, I have to walk normally!'" [laughter].

Patrick: "We were up at the school one Sunday and I went to park the car in the car park [where the teachers would park during school hours], and he told me that I couldn't park there, so I told him not to worry it was Sunday, it would be OK. I then went to walk across the grass, and there was no way, whatever about parking in the car park, there was no way he was letting me walk across the grass!"

Although Margaret and Patrick mentioned these instances, they did with laughter, recalling the stories rather than expressing concern at the fact that Ross had indeed taken on the rules of the school and was accepting these rules as being ones that both he and his parents were expected to conform to. Although this was something that Margaret, and particularly Patrick, had expressed fear about during the first interview, they both seemed happy to accept that their son was now part of the school culture, and as such he wanted to conform to the rules of that culture. At the final interview Patrick commented "*We*

have huge hopes for the school, and we had huge hopes for Mrs Murphy that she would be as good as she was." [Patrick, I.1].

8.4.5 Family Values

During the first interview Patrick described how family life is very important to himself and Margaret, and Ross comes everywhere with them. They also demonstrated a high esteem for education, and were motivated to ensure that Ross had access to the best school available locally. They felt strongly that some parents used school as a free babysitting service for four year olds; a situation they felt should not be allowed to happen. They spoke in strong terms about the family as an institution, and in the role of parents in providing clear boundaries, adequate discipline, and appropriate social and moral values for their children.

Box 8.5: Patrick, Excerpt from Interview 3, June 2006

You have these parents who are just lazy, they don't give a damn, and it's not just disadvantaged areas, we see it here, parents who have their kids out playing football on the road at 10 o'clock, you see it all the time. Margaret will tell you there is nothing that makes my blood boil more, the cheek of them leaving those kids out like that. The onus should be on you to make sure your kids are at school...it really does start with the parents.

I mean Springwood school is supposed to be a good school, but there are a percentage of children arrive in there every morning looking like their hair was never brushed, I doubt some of them have had breakfast, and this isn't a disadvantaged area, this is supposed to be a good school, but it still happens. Like the children who are always arriving late, they are not in the right frame of mind for school, they are rushed and not relaxed, not in the right frame of mind at all. Margaret always makes sure she leaves here in plenty of time, so he has time to play, and is not rushed arriving in.

They had a clearly defined picture of the role of the school parent, and did everything possible to live up to this role. They also expressed the belief that it was important that the school understand that they were interested and concerned parents. Patrick stated that he believed that the school would invest more into a child who was supported at home.

Patrick also spoke at length about how children are easily labelled by both teachers and their peers at school, for example explaining how teachers label children: *“this is [name] he’s a bit thick but he’s a hard boy, so we will put him in that corner over there...I can tell you, the so called ‘thicks’ in my school, and that name followed them through school, and what they are doing now, compared to what us sitting down the back are doing now, it is like chalk and cheese.”* [Patrick, I.3]. He explained that how parents approach education, and the attitudes they develop within their children towards school, will impact on the child’s future success.

8.4.6 Home-School Communication

During an interview held in the second term of school, Mrs Murphy reported that Ross was *“not performing as well as he used to, in his written work in particular”* [Mrs Murphy, I.2]. Aideen noted that he was finding it difficult to sit still and concentrate on his written work, and both agreed that his concentration was not, in their opinions, the best. However, both agreed that he was getting a lot of help at home. Mrs Murphy reported that Margaret had told her that she was doing a lot of reading with him, and pointing out words to him, and she believed this had been a great help to him as his reading is very good. But she did register surprise that for a child whose mother puts in work at home, that his written work was so poor. She was not sure why this should be the case, however at times she felt that *“he is just not bothered about putting in the effort and this can show in his written work.”* [Mrs Murphy, I.2]. She did also mention though that he has a poor sitting position when doing written work. Aideen advised that she would often correct his position and can notice an improvement after this. Mrs Murphy advised that they consciously give Ross plenty of space to try to improve his sitting position, they also tell him to push his chair in, and sit properly, however she finds *“he just doesn’t pay heed to what you say”* [Mrs Murphy, I.2]. In some ways they reported he is like a younger child in the way he sits, and in terms of his organisational skills, for example packing his bag or getting out his lunch. She advised that she had written many notes on his homework, and had told his parents that he needs to improve his pencil work, and needs more practice at home sitting and colouring. If he does not get this, she

is concerned that he will have difficulty when it comes to writing letters. However, in conversations with Patrick and Margaret, the concerns she had expressed were not mentioned at all. They advised that Mrs Murphy was very pleased with Ross [Box 8.5].

Box 8.5: Patrick and Margaret, Excerpt from Interview 2, February 2006

Patrick: At the parent teacher meeting, she said she was over the moon. Socially he is fantastic; he is enthusiastic, he's eager to learn.

Margaret: He's very good at maths.

Patrick: He's actually pushing ahead, he's steam-rolling ahead, and if he keeps progressing she'll give him more work than the other lads, he's just flying. He loves school, he just loves it, so we can't have any complaints.

Margaret: He's very good at reading...

How they have misunderstood what Mrs Murphy was aiming to communicate is not clear, but there has clearly been a breakdown in communication. They did mention notes in the homework, but mentioned these in a positive light, congratulating good work, they certainly did not mention any concern reflected in the notes. Reading the individual comments from Margaret and Patrick, Margaret has told me in essence what Mrs Murphy has told me as regards Ross, that he is very good at maths, and reading. However, Patrick's comments that he is ahead of the other children, and that Mrs Murphy will give him extra work if this continues, are clearly not what Mrs Murphy has told me, and do not correspond with classroom observations of Ross. Nor do the suggestions about extra work correspond with the attitudes towards children's learning that Mrs Murphy has expressed. This suggests that not all parents pick up the correct information from a parent teacher meeting. It is possible that Patrick has taken away the good points from the parent-teacher meeting, while forgetting the notes on the workbook telling him that Ross needs to work on his writing, and that Mrs Murphy is concerned about this. He is then working from his own interpretation of Mrs Murphy's positive comments, which he took to mean that Ross is ahead of the rest of the class and that he may be given extra work in view of this fact. On the other hand, perhaps Mrs Murphy is more 'tactful' with her comments to Margaret and Patrick, than she would be with a researcher. Although she was asked if she was she honest with parents, and she advised that in as much as is

possible, she is. However, perhaps teachers sometimes emphasise the positives, in a way that makes parents focus on these areas rather than be more aware of areas in which their children might need greater support. Differences in opinion on Ross and his abilities were also apparent on speaking to Aideen. She mentioned that Ross had great difficulty with saying sorry, or admitting he was wrong, even in situations where she had seen him in the wrong, for example:

“He is very immature, he can’t handle a little fight, and he pushes, then someone will tell and he’ll start screaming and crying. He finds it very hard just to say sorry and that he won’t do it again, you know, immature in that way, crying that he didn’t do it, when he did do it, rather than just apologising, getting on and forgetting about it.” [Aideen, I.2]

This is in direct contrast to Patrick’s views on his son. *“He will admit straight out when he has done something. He’s not one of these kids who would hide behind someone and blame them...[Patrick, I.1]* and *“ You know the way some kids would hold a grudge, and hold onto something till it became antagonistic, and there would be a fight, well he would never do that.” [Patrick, I.2].* Clearly differences of opinion exist between Patrick and the school staff with regard to Ross’ abilities in both academic skills and social skills. It is possible that Ross behaves differently in the two environments of home and school. Perhaps part of the discrepancy between Patrick’s view of Ross and that of Mrs Murphy can be explained by children being influenced by as well as influencing their specific context.

8.4.7 Reflections on Ross’ Transition

At the end of the school year Mrs Murphy reported that Ross was doing very well academically. She specifically referred to his reading, which was excellent, and his maths. She advised that his store of knowledge was very good too. In tandem with this, she had expressed concerns about his speech and his writing skills, and his ability to follow direction. Margaret and Patrick clearly have very high expectations of both Ross and Springwood school. They hold Mrs Murphy in very high regard. This may well help them feel more positive about the person who now has control over their child, something

they were initially finding difficult to accept. They also mentioned the strict home routine that they had developed for Ross in order to support his school life, which again might give them a sense of control over the transition.

During the transition to school the parent has to adapt to the new role of ‘school parent’. This is particularly important for the parents of first-born children who have no previous experience of school. How the parents fit into this new role, and the expectations that schools have of them, may also impact on the transition for the child. Patrick made it very clear during interviews that being a ‘good’ parent was very important to him, and himself and Margaret have a very clear picture of what they feel being a good parent entails. They have very strong beliefs about education, and at present believe that Springwood school is in line with these beliefs. If in the future either Ross, or Springwood school, do not conform to these expectations, the situation may well be different. Prior to school start, the researcher noted a discrepancy between Patrick and Margaret’s beliefs about school in academic terms, and Ross’ beliefs about school being a place to play. A difference of views between his parents and teaching staff about whether Ross was ahead of the rest of the class was also noted, as was a difference in opinion about his maturity and social skills. The quotes below suggest that Margaret and Patrick see Ross as being a very successful child, and they expect him to be successful at school.

“He’s very adaptable. He will adapt to exactly what is required of him, and he’ll give it 100%, no matter what he does.” [Patrick, I.1]

“Everything he does he does with enthusiasm. He puts 150% into everything, he would never walk away from anything” [Patrick, I.2]

Mrs Murphy has noted that, although his work is generally speaking good, it could be much better if he paid more attention and concentrated in class. She also noted that at times he is *“just not bothered”* [Mrs Murphy, I.2] about putting in the effort and this can show particularly in his written work. However she did say that you could underestimate his real ability at these times. Margaret and Patrick, spoke of Ross at all times with

glowing praise, and are clearly very proud of their child. However, at times their beliefs about the abilities of their son did not match with those of Mrs Murphy or Aideen.

Expectations of Ross are very high, and if he were not to meet the expectations they have set some difficulties may occur. Mrs Murphy mentioned that Ross can “*get a bit stressed about his colouring or any kind of written work, but he likes oral work*” [Mrs Murphy, I.1]. She advised that she was not putting him under any pressure with regard to written work, and it is unclear exactly why Ross felt stressed about this work. Given Mrs Murphy’s comments in later interviews about this area being an area where Ross would benefit from some extra practice, he may well have been stressed as he realised he was not as good at writing as he is in other areas. It is a concern that at infant level a child appears to be becoming stressed about his school work.

8.5 Case Study Child 3: Ruairi’s Story

8.5.1 Background

Ruairi lives with his parents and younger sister [2 years] in a residential area close to Springwood school. He was five years old in the May prior to school start. He could have attended school the previous year, but his mother advised that she felt he would benefit more from being one of the oldest children in the class, than one of the younger ones. His mother is a primary school teacher, although not at Springwood school, which gives her an added insight into the primary school system. She expressed the hope that Ruairi would work hard at school, and advised that she had talked to him about this. She felt that his age would stand to him in terms of independence, and would give him an advantage which would last throughout his school years. Her vision of the skills that were important for a child to possess on arrival at school were very much in line with the teachers questioned in Phase I of this study:

“I suppose they should be able to sit down and behave themselves. Not to be too babyish, running around and stuff, messing or that. To be able to sit down and do their work independently of the teacher. Also to be able to take off their coat, and

look after themselves in that way, to get their bags in order, to be able to go to the toilet. All those basic skills in the classroom...” [Eimear, I.2].

Ruairi has physical difficulties which impact on his ability to walk and, more specifically, to run. He wears splints, and his parents are concerned about his transition particularly in terms of coping with the rough and tumble of the school yard.

Box 8.6: Eimear, Extract from Interview 1:

“He wears splints up to his knees, and he doesn’t seem to mind wearing them at the moment anyway. Well, I just say that he has to wear them. I am sure children will be asking about them, they did in playschool...but as he gets older, there might be more, but I suppose we just have to wait and see.”

“I would hope that he would do well at school. I hope that his physical problem won’t have any bearing on it, that it won’t have a negative effect on it. I just hope that no-one says anything to him that might hurt him or anything like that.”

8.5.2 Additional Needs

Eimear advised that she had deliberately given Ruairi an extra year at preschool, so that he would start school at five years rather than four. Her experience as a teacher led her to believe that many children now start school at over five years, and she felt that *“they have a better chance starting if they are five, in terms of the child being near the top of the class, as compared to four.”* [Eimear, I.1]. Most of the discussion with Eimear about the anticipation of school start revolved around how his physical needs would impact on life at school. Although Ruairi had coped well at preschool, Eimear was still concerned about how these needs would impact on school start. She advised the most important factor in the classroom was room to move around safely as he could trip very easily. She had applied for a classroom assistant, particularly for the playground, had phoned the principal about this, but at the time of the first interview, had not heard back from him. However, prior to school start it was confirmed that Ruairi would be monitored by a special needs assistant in the yard for the first few weeks to see if he needed additional support.

As for the initial settling in school, Eimear predicted that Ruairi would take his time, standing back and watching, while he adapted to life in the junior infants classroom. Classroom observations confirmed her predictions, indeed Ruairi was not noted by his teacher or mother as having any apparent difficulties making the transition to school. He appeared confident in negotiating classroom life, although he did not push himself forward in any way, and took time to observe the situation. He spoke to the children sitting beside him in the classroom, but did not initiate conversations with the other children, or with the teacher. Although it was clear that he could answer questions when asked.

After his initial settling in period it was felt that he had coped well with the yard, and did not need an assistant to support him. One of Ruairi's closest friends during the junior infants year was Tommy, a boy who was not keen on the yard, but who, like Ruairi, was very academically inclined. It was clear in child discussions that a bond had formed between the two boys who had such a clear preference for the academic side of school life rather than outdoor play.

Box 8.7: Child Discussion Groups: Ruairi & Tommy

Mary: Is there anything about school you don't like?

*Tommy: No. Except the yard. I don't think you should **have** to go out on the yard.*

Ruairi: No for me too. Except the yard.

Mary: Why is that?

Ruairi: I keep falling all the time.

Tommy: He never ever ever cried in school.

Cathal: And when he hurts here [shows Ruairi's splints on legs] he never ever cries.

[14-02-06(1)]

Tommy: I hate being outside in the yard, I would stay in all day doing work.

Ruairi: Me too!

Cathal: I just want to stay out on the yard all day till 2 o'clock! On the grass!

Tommy: And me and Ruairi will be working together. We'll be like together. I think there should be no yard, I think you should work in the class all the time.

[21-6-06(3)]

Playground observations confirmed that during the first weeks of school Ruairi stood back when it was announced that the children would be going out to the yard. The children line up to walk out to the yard, and Ruairi would always wait to go last in the line. He also stood back, at a safe distance from the main play area, and observed during the actual break time and watched the other children playing. He did not stay with the classroom assistant, as many of the children who found the yard difficult to negotiate in the first weeks tended to do. He stood alone, watching what was taking place. However, even though he was alone, he did not show any signs of being upset. He appeared to be watching and assessing the situation. He was not the only child identified in field notes as looking nervous on the yard. Others were observed to ask Aideen when they would be able to go back inside again, and when break time would be over. Many of the children were noted as seeking out the company of either Aideen, or temporary assistant Zoe, on the yard, and clearly kept close to either of the assistants for adult support. During the first weeks of school, when the bell rang signalling that it was time to go back to the classroom, Ruairi was constantly observed to hold back, wait till the rush had died down, then quietly join the end of the line. Mrs Murphy also reported that Ruairi had told Eimear that he was frightened at first in the yard, however observations showed that he slowly gained confidence. She noted "*he never makes a big deal of it if he ever does fall over in the yard*" [Mrs Murphy, I.1]. She advised that he had fallen that day, she had picked him up, and he just said thanks and off he went again.

During the second set of playground observations in February 2006, it was clear that Ruairi was coping well with life on the yard. He was observed playing chasing with the other boys from the class, and although he did keep his distance from the busier sections of the yard, he happily took part in games. He was also observed falling on a few occasions, but as was confirmed by the Classroom Assistant, he did not need help, and preferred to get up himself and get on with things rather than have an adult interfere in the situation.

8.5.3 In a Class of His Own

Mrs Murphy reported at the end of the first phase of classroom observations [end October 2006] that Ruairi was “*in a class of his own*” [Mrs Murphy, I.1] academically as compared to the other students. This was supported by the observations themselves, where he appeared to have no difficulty with school from an academic perspective. Indeed, Ruairi’s drawings suggested a highly observant child, with a good memory. The first picture Ruairi drew for me was prior to school start. His picture was very different from those drawn by the other children. Ruairi had drawn the school itself, although he had only been there once, on the initial visit with his mother. He also drew the wall outside the school, and the signpost down the road from the school, directing drivers to the school [Appendix 43]. I expressed my surprise to Eimear that he had remembered the wall and the sign so clearly, and she volunteered that he was extremely observant, she wasn’t really surprised at all that he would remember such a thing. She advised:

So many people have mentioned it to me. He has gone through so many medical tests over the years, say O.T.’s or psychological assessments or whatever, and they have all mentioned that he has a great attention span for doing a task. He doesn’t want to give up, he wants to continue until he has finished. I think it is just his personality, just the way he is. [Eimear, I.1]

Indeed, Mrs Murphy noted that even at times when she thought Ruairi was only half listening to her, he still understands everything she is teaching. She also noted that he is “*so easy*” to have in the class [Mrs Murphy, I.1]. Aideen agreed, “*he has brilliant manners*” [Aideen, I.1]. Both agreed that he is happy to know that he knows the work, he never has to shout out the answer, he will put his hand up and wait to be asked. Mrs Murphy felt that he doesn’t have the need to prove himself as many of the children have. It doesn’t bother him if he knows the answer and doesn’t get asked, she advised that “*he is content knowing that he knows his stuff!*” [Mrs Murphy, I.1]. Mrs Murphy and Aideen agreed that he showed a good level of maturity, for a five year old to be so self assured that he could be happy that he knew the answer, rather than needing to impress the teacher or the rest of the class.

This maturity and confidence continued to be apparent throughout the year. During the second term, Mrs Murphy noted that Ruairi *“is very well adjusted, he makes light of his disability and is very independent. He is very confident in his own ability, he doesn’t have to prove himself...He knows that he knows, and he knows that I know he knows!”* [Mrs Murphy, I.2]. She also commented that he was very good at listening, very attentive, particularly good at oral work. She also reported that he was enthusiastic, and very eager to learn. As was noted in September, he continued to be very observant. If Mrs Murphy said that she would do something the following day, he would remind her.

Ruairi was also one of the children in the class who was very aware and focused on the ‘star’ reward system used by Mrs Murphy⁴. Eimear commented that he was very aware of the number of stars earned by his table, *“Oh, he has them all counted. He told me they [his table] had the highest number ever, and there’s 27 or whatever, and he had counted them all. And he could tell you exactly what the other group would have! [laughs]”* [Eimear, I.2]. She also noted in one interview that Ruairi had just moved table and was not impressed with the children on the table in terms of their ability to earn stars. *“He loves getting the stars. One day he came home and told me that the table he had been put on was ‘useless’ he was really annoyed!”* [Eimear, I.2]. He remarked to her that he had been happier with his last table, which included children who would all be good star earners! Eimear herself noted that she was happy with the star reward system *“I think the stars are a good way of keeping them motivated.”* [Eimear, I.2].

8.5.4 Insider Experience

Eimear works as a primary school teacher in a school local to Springwood school. She chose to send Ruairi to Springwood school, rather than the school she teaches in, as it is closer to his home, which meant he would be meeting children more local to his own area. She also noted that the school had a good reputation, and she was happy that he would make good progress there. As a primary school teacher Eimear has a good

⁴ Mrs Murphy ran a reward system where stars could be earned by each table of children in the class. Individual children could earn a star (for good behaviour, or displaying knowledge) and the star was rewarded to the table as a whole. Equally a child could lose a star for his/her table.

understanding of school life from an insider perspective. In conversation, it became clear that this meant she had a very good understanding of the challenges facing Mrs Murphy, as highlighted in the excerpt below:

Box 8.8: Eimear – Interview 1

I had Senior Infants for one year, and I found it quite difficult, because I had a lot of children who were quite advanced, say at first or second level in reading, about six or seven of them. Then at the bottom end I had children who didn't know the alphabet or the sounds or anything. I really did find it very difficult.

And then you are watching behaviour aswell. So it is not easy grouping the class. I would have found years ago it was quite easy to group the class, they were so quiet. But now you would have a few with discipline problems that you were trying to watch as well, so it is not so easy to go off and work with them in groups, because you have to keep your eye on the few who would be messing. It is hard like that alright.

She also expressed the concern that children starting school without any preschool experience could end up lagging behind at junior infant level. She felt that many children starting school now are very advanced academically, in terms of knowing letters and numbers, which they have learned at preschool. She noted that to balance the needs of children with two years of quality preschool education and children without any preschool experience could be quite difficult. Eimear teaches a class for children with mild learning problems. As highlighted in the quote below, it is clear that her own experience has influenced her beliefs about the role of parents as regards their children's education, and the impact of home life of the educational experiences of children. She commented that many parents of children in her class would have no involvement in their children's education, and in her view the children get no support from home. *“You can nearly see it in the junior infants class, the children who are at risk, you can really see it. And if you lose out early on there really is no catching up, the gap is getting bigger every year, you know. There is learning support available I suppose, and you can see very early on the ones that will need it.”* [Eimear, I.3].

However, her insider experience also led her to question some of the practices at Springwood school. She mentioned that she was a bit concerned that the school had no 'parents association' as would have been the case at her own school. She suggested that such an association would give parents the opportunity to have more interaction with the school. She also questioned whether parents had been involved in the school decision to make a uniform 'optional', so some of the children wear the formal school tracksuit, while there is no obligation to wear it, so others wear their own clothes. She suggested that there should have been some parental input on this decision, but felt there had not been. *"Not having a school uniform is unusual too, the idea that they have a uniform but you don't have to wear it. I would like a uniform that every child has to wear.....I prefer the uniform, I would say most parents would. But there is no parents association so it is hard to get your voice across. I don't know why there is no parents association, there usually is."* [Eimear, I.3].

Although she mentioned in these ways that she would have welcomed more parental involvement at the school, interestingly, Eimear also mentioned that she did not have much contact herself with Mrs Murphy. She explained that her contact was limited as she did the morning school run for Ruairi and another child, while the other child's mother collected Ruairi. She was always rushing on to work, so did not have time to call into the school. She was aware that some other mothers would call in at 2.00pm when collecting their children to talk to Mrs Murphy, and discuss their child's progress, but she didn't do this herself. *"I don't know what it is, I don't like to go in. I suppose they are nice enough, but I just don't go in. I suppose I'm not the type of person to be going in anyway, but sometimes I feel there isn't very much contact, except for the parent-teacher meeting"* [Eimear, I.2]. Eimear's insider knowledge also appears to have influenced her idea of the role of the school parent, which was often related in terms of her own understanding in her role as teacher. For example, she mentioned that although she had never taught a full junior infants class she would be somewhat aware of the impact of school start on children and parents. She explained *"You might hear a bit of crying in the corridor, but often the teachers would say that it is the mothers who are to blame more, that they are clinging on, not giving the child the independence, you know, waiting*

around looking in the windows [laughs] instead of just dropping them off” [Eimear, I.2]. This may have had some impact on her reluctance to call in to the teacher.

8.5.5 Reflections on Ruairi’s Transition

Mrs Murphy reported that she felt Ruairi had progressed well over the year. She reported that she had written his end of year report the night before and not once writing it had she even thought about his disability, she felt that it really did not affect him in her eyes at all. However, she did also comment that he knows there are certain things that he can’t do, or is not allowed do, and he will just not do those things. Eimear had expressed some concerns that she did not want Ruairi to become dependent on a classroom assistant “*I don’t want an assistant following him around, and fixing his coat and stuff, I don’t want him to become dependent, you know what I mean, but I don’t think he would.*” [Eimear, I.2]. Although he would fall every day, there is little she feels she can do about that. He did tell her that he would go over to a corner and check his splints to see if he had hurt himself, but she is aware that he tries to make little of his disability.

Eimear also commented that although she had not seen any huge changes in Ruairi during the year, he had indeed grown-up during the course of the year, and she had noticed that he had developed socially. “*It’s amazing the influence of the other children too, you know, he would be talking about the football and stuff that he is getting from the other boys. He would be listening to things, and hearing different things, and coming on in that way, you know. They learn a lot from each other in that way over the course of the year, you know, socially.*” [Eimear, I.3]. However, she did say that she felt he was very ready in terms of independence and maturity when he arrived, a fact that was apparent during the classroom observations, and from reports by the teacher. Both Aideen and Mrs Murphy who noted that he was indeed a mature and independent child, also commented that he had “*a lovely temperament*” [Aideen, I.3] which they found to be helpful to him in negotiating classroom life.

From Eimear's point of view, her insider perspective may have been a help and a hindrance in her interaction with Springwood School. In her final interview she again stated that she would like to have had more contact with the school, however she did mention that teachers are very busy, and might not appreciate parents calling in all the time. Although she said that she knew she could go into the school if she needed to, she could not explain quite why she did not feel comfortable doing this generally speaking. However, she did also refer to a lack of communication with the school when discussing Ruairi's entitlements in terms of assistance with regard to his physical needs. She reported that Ruairi may be entitled to more assistance than he is receiving, "*but I've never been called in, or told anything, or anything at all. So that is just my reading of it. I did think it was all a bit casual, but then on the other hand I'm thinking, what do I want? You know.*" [Eimear, I.2]. This lack of contact initiated by the school staff may have impacted on her confidence to initiate contact herself. Although her experience as a teacher means she has some insider knowledge, it is clear that communication could be better in terms of Ruairi's entitlements. As a teacher it could be expected that she would be empowered to act confidently in this situation, however, this does not appear to be the case.

8.6 Case Study Child 4: Jack's Story

8.6.1 Building Confidence

Jack lives with his parents, and two older sisters, in an area local to Springwood School. He was five-and-a-half on starting school, and Cathy (his mother) explained that she had consciously made the decision to hold him for an extra year, as compared to his older sisters who both started at four-and-a-half. The decision was one that Cathy reported she was happy with, although she felt it was right to send her daughters earlier, she felt she was definitely right to hold Jack back. "*I would be prefer him to be up there in the top end of the age range, than for him to be at the bottom at 4, the youngest in the class. It's more maturity than capability in terms of writing or whatever.*" [Cathy, I.1] She also

noted that she had encouraged Jack to take part in activities, such as summer-camp, which she felt would be good preparation for him starting school.

During the second interview, Cathy reported that Jack was very nervous for the first few days going to school, in fact she was very nervous herself “*probably more nervous than him*” [Cathy, I.2]. She reported that Jack seemed happy enough with her leaving the classroom, but she added that she tended to ‘hover’ in the yard waiting until the children went into class to see if he was doing OK. Indeed during the first interview Mrs Murphy noted that Jack “*can be a bit unsure of himself at times, he loves having his friend Cathal nearby*”, an opinion confirmed by classroom observations. She felt he “*seemed to need the security*” [Mrs Murphy, I.1] of Cathal. Box 1 shows Jack’s lack of confidence in engaging in conversation with Janice, and his apparent uncertainty as to what to do in this situation is clear.

Box 8.9: Excerpt from Field Notes, Week 1

Jack sees Cathal [who he knew from preschool] across the room. He moves across the classroom to stand beside Cathal. Cathal is sitting beside an empty seat, with Janice sitting on the other side of the empty seat. Jack moves the empty chair to sit in the seat between Janice and Cathal. Janice says “No, that’s my sisters place”. Jack looks at her but doesn’t react in any way. She repeats “That’s my sisters place, see her bag is there” [she shows him the bag under the table]. He acknowledges this with a nod of his head, he appears unsure what to do, he stands for a few moments, looking first at Janice, then at Cathal, who both just look back at him. No conversation takes place, he then moves to another table. Cathal picks up his bag and follows Jack over to the other table, and sits down at a free space beside Jack.

Classroom observations highlighted Jack’s need to stay close to the children that he knew well from home or preschool. During the first few days of school, it was noted that while on the yard, Jack stayed close to his two best friends at all times [Field Notes, Week 1]. In the classroom, he deliberately chose to sit beside two of his closest friends, and actively sought out their company at all times. However, Jack’s confidence quickly grew. Cathy reported that he soon “*found his feet*” in the classroom [Cathy, I.2]. She acknowledged that it often took him time to get comfortable in new situations. Indeed, classroom observations confirmed that although Jack took some time to confidently

negotiate classroom life, he actually had a very good understanding of the unwritten rules and regulations of this environment. This was noted in field notes during the first few weeks of school in September. Although children realised that they must put their hands up to answer a question, they often did this without knowing the answer. Children were often noted to have their hands in the air before Mrs Murphy had even finished asking the question. Jack was quick to understand that he should know the answer before putting up his hand, and reminded other children of the rule when they put up their hands before a question was finished: “*She didn’t say the question yet*” [Jack, Field Notes, Week 2, Day 3].

Both Mrs Murphy and Aideen noted that Jack was one of the most popular students in the class [I.2]. Indeed, when asked what qualities she felt had helped him settle in school, Cathy noted: “*He’s a friendly little fella, and he’s gentle, he’s not rough, he’s friendly and easy going. He is kind of popular, he’s not being left out.*” [Cathy, I.2]. This was confirmed by Mrs Murphy, who noted “*He is very popular, and with regard to behaviour and social skills he is just right. He’s kind, he’s gentle, he’s mannerly, and he’s sociable. He loves putting up his hand, and he is so enthusiastic as well, so eager, he really puts his heart into things.*” [Mrs Murphy, I.2]

8.6.2 The Preschool ‘Expert’

During the first weeks in school, Jack was one of the children who referred back to life in preschool on many occasions [Box 8.10].

Box 8.10: Jack: Field Notes

Mrs Murphy teaches the class an Irish rhyme involving raising their hands in the air [“Suas, suas, suas” – up, up, up], then putting them down by their sides, [“síos, síos, síos” – down, down down] then standing up and sitting down. Jack tells her “I know that from playschool”. [Field Notes, Week 1, Day 1]

As the children line up to go back into the classroom, Jack tells me that he lined up in playschool too. [Field Notes, Week 1, Day 1]

Teacher tells the class to put “lómha treasna” [hands crossed], Jack says out loud “I know that from playschool” [Field Notes, Week 1, Day 3]

However, it is important that children leave behind the preschool culture and learn the culture of school in order to fully cope with the demands of the school environment. Jack appeared to seek reassurance from the similarities between preschool and school, thus building a sense of security in the new school environment. He coped with the challenges of being the novice (and lowest ranking in the school hierarchy) by using and referring back to his role as ‘expert’ in his preschool. In many ways the links made by Jack helped while he took the time to gain an understanding of the school rules, and helped him navigate the new environment.

8.6.3 The Oldest in the Class

Cathy proposed a maturationist view of readiness when discussing her decision to hold Jack back a year before starting school. Although he could have started the previous September at four years six months, she chose to keep him at preschool for an additional year, and wait till September 2005 for him to start formal school. She explained, particularly as he was a boy, she did not feel that he was mature enough to start school. Her views were shared by Ross and Ruairi’s parents. Cathy proposed that the year would benefit Jack in terms of academic gains, ability to sit still and listen, and maturity throughout his educational career. At the end of the school year, she reported that she was very glad she had kept him back the extra year. *“Oh, I’m delighted I kept him. I think he’s the oldest, but that doesn’t bother me, I don’t care that he’s the oldest, he seems to be fine. To think he could be half way through Senior Infants now, I really couldn’t imagine him in that situation.”* [Cathy, I.2]. She felt that the maturity stood to help him in every way. Although she reported that she had found the decision difficult, she felt that she had definitely made the right decision both in the short term, and for his long term educational future. Indeed, Mrs Murphy commented in interview, that Jack was one of the oldest children in the class, and she agreed that the extra year had benefited him, as he was definitely, in her opinion, ready for school this year. She

advised that he “*puts in much more effort than some of the other children, some of whom may be a bit brighter, but he would get better results, particularly with written work, because he does put in that effort.*” [Mrs Murphy, I.3]. Indeed she commented, that although it took a little time for him to gain confidence in the school environment, he was the most ready for school of all the children in the class.

8.6.4 Reflections on Jack’s Transition

Although Jack could confidently negotiate the preschool environment, it took him some time to adapt to the new school environment. Jack had to make a transition from ‘preschool expert’ to ‘junior infant novice’. He could confidently negotiate the preschool world, and used this knowledge, referring back to preschool to assist him in coping with the demands of the primary school classroom.

Cathy had very clear ideas about the age at which a child is ready to start school, and many times during our interviews she referred back to her ideas about readiness and the best age for a child to start school [Box 8.11].

Box 8.11: Cathy Interview 3

As for age, a year at that age makes such a difference, it is impossible to teach children of four and five years old together. The five year olds would be more willing and able to learn, but the four year olds, I think would just want to play, you know. It’s not fair on the kids. I really think it is a way for people to have their children minded, send them to school, rather than pay to have them minded. It really isn’t fair. If the preschool was not so expensive they would send them to preschool instead. The four year olds are too young to be sent to school really.

Cathy did not appear to be focusing on academic gains in her decision to hold Jack back an extra year. She mentioned that she expected that the extra year maturity that Jack would gain at this stage would not only benefit him now in terms of ability to sit still and listen to the teacher, but would be of benefit to him in later years. Specifically she mentioned entry to secondary education, when she felt that boys were more immature

than girls, and she would prefer him to start second level education a year older. Indeed, her view that Jack's maturity had stood well to him during the year, was one shared by Mrs Murphy and Aideen. Cathy commented in her final interview that his confidence had developed considerably since starting school, although she did remark that he was "still a bit unsure of unknown things". She felt that although he had undertaken a year of playschool, he had not really known what to expect from school "You know it was a big change from the smaller group of 10. They have to be quieter too, they can't do what they want to do, if she wants you to colour this page you have to colour that page, you know." [Cathy, I.3]. On the other hand she commented that once settled in the new setting, he had been very happy. Mrs Murphy agreed, noting that Jack "has a very good work ethic, he puts in a lot of effort, and works hard, he is doing brilliantly." [Mrs Murphy, I.3]. It appears that Jack's age, his ability to use his network of friends from preschool, and to refer back to knowledge gained at preschool to assist him in the new school environment, resulted in his coping very well with the demands of the primary school classroom

8.7 Rachael's Story

8.7.1 Background

Rachael lives on the same road as Jack, and two of the other children who started at Springwood School in September 2005. She lives with her parents, and older sister Amy, who is three years older than her and a pupil at Springwood. She was five years old in the November after starting school, and had attended two years of preschool. Firstly, a local Montessori school for one year, followed by a local playgroup for a second year prior to starting school. Gemma⁵ (Rachael's mother) reported that she felt Rachael was definitely ready for school, "Seeing how she was able to get on with the teachers and with the other children. How she liked the bit of structure. And she ran into school [preschool] every day without even giving me a kiss goodbye [laughter] I felt all that was

⁵ Due to time constraints, Gemma took part in one parent interview only, however she was happy for Rachael to continue to take part in the full study.

an indication that she was ready to move on.” [Gemma, I.1]. It was clear during early conversations with Gemma that she saw any discontinuities between Rachael’s experiences at preschool and those at primary school as inevitable. “I really don’t worry about things like that” [Gemma, I.1]. She was aware of the different philosophies and expectations being implemented in the two educational settings, and seemed aware that these different philosophies may well link to different classroom practice. However, she was confident that Rachael would navigate any changes successfully. She cited a previous conversation with Mrs Murphy where Mrs Murphy had mentioned that it can be difficult getting the balance right with a class of children some who had experienced two years of preschool, and some who may not have been to preschool at all, as being important in her eyes. She commented that this conversation was “one of the reasons that I wasn’t worried that the playschool didn’t do the Montessori, I felt just give her the year to play, and she will be doing the letters and numbers anyway.” [Gemma, I.1].

8.7.2 Rites of Passage

At the first home interview Rachael told the researcher that she was looking forward to going to school. She spoke about her new pink schoolbag which she bought on holidays. Rachael and her mum told the researcher the story of how and when they purchased her schoolbag, which was clearly a fond memory for both of them. They also spoke about what Rachael would be wearing at school. The uniform at Springwood school is optional and Gemma had decided that Rachael would not be wearing it. However, they had bought a new pair of pink cowboy boots, which Rachael was saving to wear to school. She was very excited about these, and proudly showed them to the researcher. It was clear that the new schoolbag and boots held great significance for Rachael, and that she was enjoying assisting her mother in making purchases for her start in primary school. She also had all her school books which her mum was keeping safely upstairs for her. They were not yet covered so Rachael was not allowed to play with them, but she explained that once her mum had covered them [for protection] they could go into her schoolbag. It was clear that Rachael and her mother had spent much time preparing all the requirements for her school start, they had purchased both formal materials necessary,

and some special extras (such as the pink boots) which were all waiting in anticipation of school start. Although Amy had started school a few years before Rachael, it was clear during the discussion that an atmosphere of excitement has purposefully been created when planning for school start in Rachael's household.

8.7.3 The Free Spirit

Gemma explained that Rachael coped well with the introductory visit to school. The following passage highlights her beliefs about the differences in her two children, and how they approach situations.

Box 8.11: Gemma, Interview 1

Gemma: On the meet and greet day, she just ran in and sat down and started doing stuff right away. She was very comfortable. Although she didn't take the blindest bit of notice of Mrs Murphy! [laughs] Mrs Murphy came around and had a word with them all. She said to me, oh yes, this is Amy's little sister, oh Amy was so quiet and reserved (although I know her better than that!) [laughter]. So I said, let me tell you, Rachael is a totally different kettle of fish! [laughter]. So I have warned her!

Researcher: And in what way is she different?

Gemma: Well, she takes no as yes! And things just go completely over her head. Amy would be much more cognitive of everything, she's thinking all the time, and she is much more aware. Whereas Rachael is a total free spirit.

Indeed, Gemma's warning that Rachael was a very different child to Amy may have been well advised. Mrs Murphy reported that she had expected Rachael "*would be a better listener than she is, and I thought she would be a bit more enthusiastic, but at times she's not that enthusiastic... she is very kind, and loves giving hugs, and her attitude is, ah sure, if we do a bit of learning as well that's fine*" [Mrs Murphy, I.1]. However, both Gemma and Mrs Murphy commented that Rachael was ready for school intellectually. Both remarked that she was capable of good standards of work, however, this was not always her priority. As Gemma explained: "*I do feel that she is ready intellectually, she really is ready. In fact, she can be a bit lazy in that respect, she needs a bit of a*

challenge. She would be quite contented to do nothing! [laughter] Where Amy would be pushing to do more, she would be quite contented to fly through life on dreams!" [Gemma, I.1].

However, although both Gemma and Mrs Murphy were in agreement that fun and laughter were very much a part of Rachael's world. Gemma's comments about Rachael being a bit 'lazy' as regards her work, were supported by both the initial classroom observations, and by Mrs Murphy's comments early in the year. During the interviews at the beginning of the year, and during the second term, Mrs Murphy mentioned on many occasions that if Rachael just listened and concentrated a bit more that she could do very well academically. But she felt that Rachael, just wasn't very interested in the academic side of school. She advised during the second interview that Rachael was "*Doing OK. She is not observant, she doesn't want to be observant...she didn't know the difference between "splashes" and "water". She baffles me, I couldn't believe she didn't know the difference between "splashes" and "water". I think she could do better academically.*" [Mrs Murphy, I.2]. However, by the end of the year, Rachael had not only maintained her happy-go-lucky approach to school life, but had also developed academically, and was now taking more of an interest in the academic side of school.

8.7.4 Loves the Craic!

By the second day of school, Rachael was organizing the girls from the class at break-time into a game of chasing [Field Notes, Week 1, Day 2]. She was enthusiastic and confident in the yard in a way which is perhaps not matched by her performance in the classroom and confirmed by Mrs Murphy. However, Mrs Murphy also noted that Rachael "*loves life and is a very popular girl. All the children know her and want to play with her, even in the older classes. The boys love her too! They were changing seats today, and everybody wanted to sit with Rachael*" [Mrs Murphy, I.1]. Aideen noted that Rachael was very loving and caring, and felt that was probably why she was so popular. During both formal interviews and informal conversations with Mrs Murphy and Aideen,

references were constantly made to Rachael's confidence, cheerfulness, and her love of friends [Box 8.12].

8.12: Mrs Murphy on Rachael.

"She is having a great time, the fun is very much her focus and she loves that part of school" [Mrs Murphy, I.1]

"She's super-confident, cheerful, and friendly. She can be a bit chatty at times, but she just loves friends. She thrives on people, and knows everyone in the school, let alone the class." [Mrs Murphy, I.2]

"Rachael is a gas girl, loves fun, entertainment, and loves being the centre of it." [Mrs Murphy, I.1]

Gemma commented that she felt this happy-go-luck and confident approach of Rachael's would stand to her during the transition to school [Gemma, I.1]. When asked if she had deliberately tried to foster these skills in Rachael, or whether she felt this was Rachael's general temperament, she advised that she felt these were some of Rachael's natural talents. This was clear to her, she advised, when comparing Rachael to her older sister.

8.7.5 The Caring Child

Although Rachael was noted to be a fun loving child, her caring nature was also a focus of interviews with Gemma, Mrs Murphy and Aideen. Many times the relationship between Rachael, and Lara, a child in the class with additional needs, was mentioned. Rachael had taken on the role of 'protector' to Lara, she sat beside her, she saved a place for Lara when the children were lining up, and if Lara was out of the class when lunches/snacks were to be taken out, Rachael took it upon herself to organise Lara's lunch for her [Field Notes, Week 1-3]. Both Mrs Murphy and Aideen mentioned that she was "*exceptional*" [Aideen, I.3] in her care of Lara. Aideen related a story of how at play time Rachael was playing with Lara and a tea-set. Aideen noted that their play would not have been the normal play for children their age, but Rachael had brought herself happily down to Lara's level and they played happily together. Aideen also

mentioned that Rachael lets Lara go ahead of her in the line, even if she is first in the line, something that most of the children would find very difficult to do (give up their place in the line) [Aideen, I.3]. Indeed, Mrs Murphy noted that some of the other girls do follow Rachael's lead and take care of Lara. Although Mrs Murphy noted that some of the other girls are "*cuter, and have noticed that Rachael gets 'kindness' stars, so at times they take care of Lara in the hope of getting stars!*" [Mrs Murphy, I.3]. However, it was noted that Rachael's popularity meant that her behaviour did have an influence over the other children, and her natural kindness was viewed as a positive influence in the classroom.

8.7.6 The Confident Negotiator

Rachael confidently approached classroom life from day 1 [Box 8.13]. She took control of who she would sit beside and where they would sit. She was happy to leave her mother and begin her life at school.

Box 8.13: Field Notes, Day 1

9.15am. The bell rings and parents start to say goodbye. Rachel surveys the room with a confident air, smiling. She takes another child by the hand [who she knew from preschool] and shows him her schoolbag. She leads him over to where she is sitting, without looking back at her departing mother.

She approached new situations with confidence, and does not get easily upset by the classroom banter, as shown in the following excerpt from the classroom observations [Box 8.14].

Box 8.14: Field Notes, Week 2

Tommy says to Robbie "Your hair is sticking up" while laughing at Robbie's hair. Tommy tells Ross "Look, his hair is sticking up". Ross, sitting on the other side of Robbie, says "His hair is like a girl". Robbie bursts into tears. Jack and Rachael are sitting at the same table and overhear this conversation, then Jack says to Rachael laughing "There's something in your hair." Tommy says to Rachael "There's a great big spider in your hair". Both Jack and Tommy are laughing at Rachael and their joke. Rachael laughs, touching her hair, "I'll go and look myself in the mirror" she then walks

towards the girls toilet. As she nears the toilet she stops and starts telling Mary about the spider in her hair while laughing. She is clearly enjoying the joke being played on her. She is clearly not concerned that there really is a spider in her hair.

We can see here how Robbie reacts to the boys laughing at his hair and suggesting that his hair is “like a girl”. Although Robbie appears confident at most times during the day, the veneer of confidence is easily shattered when confronted with a situation where he feels he is the subject of the other boy’s jokes. Rachael however easily deals with the boys making a joke about there being a spider in her hair. She does not believe that there is a spider, and laughs at their joke, while playing along telling them that she will go and check in the mirror. She handles the situation with confidence, and is entertained, rather than upset, by the joke the boys play on her.

She was also clearly able to find solutions for any problems she encounters, as this excerpt from observations from the second day of school demonstrates [Box 8.15].

Box 8.15: Field Notes, Day 2

Jack moves his bag over to the table where Rachael and another child he knows from playschool are sitting. He looks at the group at the table unsure of where to sit. Rachael tells Callum, who is already sitting beside her, I want Jack and John to sit beside me. She clearly wants Callum to move place, so that Jack can sit beside her, but Callum ignores her. Jack and John look at Rachael and say nothing. She looks around at the seating situation, she tells Jack to sit in her place, and she moves herself and John down one space to make room for the three of them to sit together.

Rachael takes control of the situation, while Jack hangs back and waits for her instructions. She does not confront Callum, but when he does not do as she wants, she finds a solution to her problem of wanting to sit beside both Jack and John. She tells Jack to take her place, while she moves herself and John down one seat so that she is sitting in the centre of the two boys. Although Callum ignores her hint to move, both Jack and John are clearly happy to follow her instructions.

8.7.7 Reflections on Rachael's Transition

Gemma and Mrs Murphy were in agreement that Rachael was a 'free spirit' and that fun and enjoyment of life and school, were very much her focus. Both felt that the academic side of school was less important to Rachael, and although she was academically competent, she was more likely to put effort into the social side of school life than the academic side. It was not evident in classroom observations however that Rachael's social and emotional skills were harnessed in terms of supporting her learning. However, she proved herself to be a confident classroom negotiator, and by the end of the year Mrs Murphy felt that she had developed academically. It is clear that Rachael's confidence and self-esteem supported her during her first year of school. A child's sense of self-esteem and self-worth is intrinsically linked to how they are viewed by the people closest to them. Rachael appears to negotiate life within a positive circle which affirms her sense of belonging. Her pro-social and empathetic behaviour actively creates situations which then lead to others reinforcing her self-worth. Unfortunately not all children will have the same levels of self-esteem and self-worth as Rachael.

Rachael's natural kindness was also viewed as a positive influence in the classroom. Her relationship with Lara was noted by teaching staff as being exceptional in terms of the kindness shown by Rachael. Mrs Murphy noted that Lara was not always easy for the other children, including Rachael, to interact with, however Rachael showed great maturity in the way she made allowances for difficult behaviour while still interacting with Lara in a kind and supportive way [Mrs Murphy, Interview 3]. Her confidence, self-esteem and caring nature endeared her to both staff and pupils alike, and she clearly enjoyed all the social aspects of school. It was not clear that her experience in junior infants had made the best use of her positive dispositions in terms of supporting her learning, only time will tell if she reaches her full academic potential.

8.8 Janice and Fiona's Stories

8.8.1 Background

Janice and Fiona are twin girls who live with their parents and four siblings, in a residential area close to Springwood School. They were 4 years and 11 months at school start. They have two older sisters and one older brother who all attend Springwood school. They also have a baby brother. Janice and Fiona are fraternal twins, and look very different. Although no information was gathered during this research on the financial situation of the families, Sarah (their mother) advised the researcher that Mr Delaney offered her the opportunity to take advantage of the Free Text Books for Disadvantaged Children Scheme, which she was pleased to take advantage of⁶. Thus she was awarded a grant to cover the cost of school books for all her school-going children.

8.8.2 'The Twins'

During the first home interview, Janice and Fiona happily drew pictures of themselves going to school, and I noticed that each girl drew a picture of herself alone, suggesting to me that they saw themselves as individuals rather than as a 'set of twins'. In the final interview, Mrs Murphy reminded Aideen that when drawing a picture of themselves in a happy situation in a workbook that day "*Did you notice they didn't draw each other, they both included [younger brother] and [older brother] but neither of them drew the other one in their picture of feeling happy. I was amazed!*" [Mrs Murphy, I.3]. Mrs Murphy reported that she also tended to see them more as individuals than sets of twins that she had taught in previous years. She did wonder if the fact that they are physically very different might impact on how they are viewed. She also noted that Janice and Fiona worked more individually than previous twins she had taught, in fact she said she didn't usually call them "the twins" at all. She said that both Janice and Fiona have very good

⁶ Under this scheme, funded by the Irish government, disadvantaged families are given a grant to cover the cost of school books for their children. Principal teachers have flexibility in administering the funding in schools based on their knowledge of particular families circumstances. The scheme is intended to give practical assistance to those pupils whose families are experiencing a particular hardship because of unemployment, prolonged illness of a parent or other family circumstances that leads to financial hardship.

imaginations, and are well able to play with the toys making up their own games. She said it is clear that they are able to entertain themselves. She said they are probably the best in the class at making up their own games, and amusing themselves.

However, even though they have individual identities, the fact that they are twins meant that they had the support of a sibling when making this transition. Sarah reported that she felt the fact that they had each other would make school start easier for them, and her! She noted:

I remember with the first, I was very emotional. She didn't know anybody and that made a big difference...But they have each other, they get on well, and they really look out for each other. So I'm not a bit worried. Now they would kill each other [laughs] but if anyone else gets involved...! [laughter]

[Sarah, I.1]

8.8.3 Parent Expectations

Sarah's memories of school were not good, part of which she puts down to the fact that she started school very young. Her own experience of school may well influence her attitudes towards school today. She advised that she had attended the parent information evening as she wanted to be prepared if there were any new information that she should be aware of. She also commented that part of her reason for going was so that she was seen to attend, and remarked that very few parents attended. Her own experience, and the experience of her eldest son (who she told me was bullied for a while in the Junior Infants class) may also be reflected in her views that the most important skill for children to possess on starting school is the ability to tell the teacher if there is something wrong, or if they are unhappy. She advised that she had told all her children that they must tell the teacher if anything bad is happening, particularly anything that might happen on the yard, as she felt it was the most likely place for bullying to happen as there was less teacher supervision. She also noted that it was important for parents to be aware of their children, and to look out for anything not being right, as she felt children will not always tell you if they are unhappy at school. She considered the fact that Janice and Fiona have each other as being important in this regard. She felt that as there are two of them,

it was less likely that they would be bullied. She also noted “*they’re in the middle of six, they can both stand their ground.*” [Sarah, I.1].

8.8.4. Janice’s Transition

Mrs Murphy reported at the first teacher interview in September, that Janice had settled into school life very well. Janice made lots of friends and was very popular among the other children. During February, Mrs Murphy reported that Janice would definitely be the louder of the twins, particularly in playtime “*she would be the one in charge*” [Mrs Murphy, I.2]. She is popular, and as with Fiona, everyone wants to sit beside her. Mrs Murphy advised that she feels Janice is more content than Fiona, and that she is the more confident of the two. “*She can be a bit of a rogue at times, but friendships are no problem to her*” [Mrs Murphy, I.2]. She noted that Janice is invited to every birthday party, boys and girls. Although she is physically the smallest in the class, she does not let this stand in her way on any occasion, and will take on any task. She also has the confidence to negotiate her way around classroom life. Classroom observation from the second day of school highlighted how Janice had the confidence to make it clear to Jack that the seat beside her has been reserved by Fiona. [Box 8.9]. Mrs Murphy did note however that initially both Janice and Fiona, but particularly Janice, found it a bit difficult to take direction from her: “*They would take it a bit personally*” [Mrs Murphy, I.1]. She said that Janice would look very upset if she gave her any form of direction but since the first weeks she was developing well in this area.

Generally, Mrs Murphy feels that Janice is happy at school, perhaps happier than Fiona. During the final interview, Mrs Murphy noted that “*Janice dominates Fiona in the yard, but not in the academic stakes, she definitely doesn’t, and yet when they are playing outside Janice is in charge, she notices things and is very observant.*” [Mrs Murphy, I.3] Aideen agreed that Janice “*rules Fiona to some extent*” [Aideen, I.3] but yet she noted that they can be the best of friends. Mrs Murphy advised that Janice could be a bit bossy to the other children in the yard, however all the children loved her [Mrs Murphy, I.3].

Indeed, Sarah commented “*Janice is a cheeky money, for the teacher herself told me that, now not cheeky as in bold...*” [Sarah, I.3].

Although initially Mrs Murphy advised that Janice loved to colour, and was very particular about her colouring, wanting it to be perfect, Janice became less attentive over the second term of school. By February 2006, Mrs Murphy reported that Janice had difficulty concentrating in the classroom. During classroom observations Janice was often recorded as ‘staring into space’, or ‘looking around room’ [Field Notes, Feb 2006]. These recordings were usually found during whole class oral activity, she was much more attentive when doing written work. In contrast to Fiona, Janice was daydreaming during the second term a lot more than she used to, and Mrs Murphy felt that this might be because the work is getting harder [Mrs Murphy, I.2]. She noted that this happens particularly if they do any work regarding words and letters. Although Janice had told her that she is doing them at home herself every evening, Mrs Murphy reported that she did not feel that Janice was getting any help at home with her work, and that any work on the words was being done by Janice herself or with the help of her older siblings. Having said that she reported that Janice is always thrilled when she gets her words or letters right, she really wants to get them right, and is always thrilled when Mrs Murphy praises her for her work.

Sarah confirmed Mrs Murphy’s assertion that Janice particularly likes to colour, and also advised that she “*likes to do her numbers and letters and that...*” [Sarah, I.2]. Sarah suggested that Janice was much more conscientious about her work than Fiona. She noted that this trend continued throughout the year, and advised in her final interview: “*I seen even with the homework last week Fiona didn’t do hers, but Janice did, you know.*” [Sarah, I.3]. But although Janice seemed to be putting in much more effort in terms of her work at home, which would tie in with Mrs Murphy’s comments about Janice wanting to get her work right, Sarah also confirmed Mrs Murphy’s assertion that Janice was not coping as well with the demands of the Junior Infants curriculum as Fiona. Sarah noted that word recognition was one area where she could clearly see a difference in the ability of the girls “*Fiona would get a lot of them right, or know her words,*

whereas Janice would come along and it'd be 'the' and she wouldn't have a clue." [Sarah, I.3]. Having said that, Mrs Murphy did report on some areas in which she had seen real improvement in Janice through the year, particularly in terms of her drawing ability. Aideen did report that she spent time working with Janice individually to improve her colouring and her written work generally. She reported that Janice loves her helping, and reacts very well to having some support.

8.8.5. Fiona's Transition

Classroom observations highlighted that Fiona, although she did not seem in any way upset on starting school, stayed close to Janice, and was a quiet child. At the first interview in September 2005, Mrs Murphy noted that Fiona was quieter than Janice, but she also felt that Fiona would find schoolwork easier, "*Fiona works more steadily, and progresses further*" [Mrs Murphy, I.1]. Fiona was the case study child in whom the greatest changes were observed from September 2005 to February 2006 in terms of her growing confidence [Field Notes, February 06]. Mrs Murphy also reported that she had indeed gained confidence. She advised that only recently had Fiona begun to put her hand up to answer a question. However she did say that Fiona was often dreaming in the classroom, although this situation has started to change. She had initially been concerned that Fiona was not listening at all, but then realised that "*she is actually taking stuff in although she appears not to be listening. Fiona has quite a good attention span, better than I realised, and definitely seems to be daydreaming less and less.*" [Mrs Murphy, I.1]. Although she did say that Fiona is not working up to her full potential. As noted above, Sarah commented that although Janice put in effort at home, this was not the case with Fiona. "*Fiona just can't be bothered, too much like hard work! But you know, Fiona knows all her letters and her words, she would be the better reader. It just comes naturally to her*" [Sarah, I.2].

On a personal level, Mrs Murphy added about Fiona "*she is kind and gentle and mannerly, and is quite good at making new friends. Everyone wants to sit beside Janice and Fiona.*" [Mrs Murphy, I.2]. But she did say that sometimes she looks at Fiona and

wonders “*if she is really happy, she often doesn’t look happy*” [Mrs Murphy, I.2]. She mentioned that the twins had been coming to school without any drinks, and she had told their mum at the parent teacher meeting. They now have drinks and she felt that one little thing had made such a difference to their happiness levels! She said Fiona can be “*a bit reticent at taking on tasks*” [Mrs Murphy, I.2], and is less confident than Janice. However, she related a story about how Fiona had missed a day of school, and realised the following day that she had missed the previous page on her workbook, so without being asked she went on to do that page herself. Mrs Murphy was clearly pleased that she had taken the initiative to complete the page. Aideen reported that both Janice and Fiona love praise, she recalled how when Mrs Murphy praised Fiona on her colouring “*the child was thrilled*”. [Aideen, I.2].

At the final interview in June 2006, Mrs Murphy reported that “*Fiona did really well on her letters test, having been missing for her two weeks holidays just before it.*” [Mrs Murphy, I.3]. She also noted that Fiona had caught up on pages in her workbook that she had missed, and was keen that she complete them. However, she again noted that she feels that Fiona gets no help at home, and the fact that she did so well in her letters test was down to her own effort. Twice during the interview Mrs Murphy made it clear that she felt family circumstances played a part in Fiona’s tendency to be very quiet: “*She’s a great girl, now orally if I am honest she is a bit weak, but sure the other one [Janice] just shouts her down...She is a very quiet child, but she probably doesn’t get much of a say at home.*” [Mrs Murphy, I.3].

8.8.6. Reflections on Janice and Fiona’s Transitions

The initial transition to school appeared to be made easier for Janice and Fiona as it was made together, which would substantiate Bronfenbrenner’s suggestion that such transitions are easier in the company of another (1979, p.211).

Mrs Murphy was concerned about Janice’s difficulties with her letters and words. She highlighted Janice’s social skills and her attention to detail in her written work, but

believed that Janice tuned out of oral work as she was finding it difficult. Both Mrs Murphy and Aideen reported that in their opinions Janice wanted to do well in her oral work, and she responded very well to Aideen giving her some individual attention both to improve her colouring and her letters. It was not clear however that opportunities were available to build on Janice's own skills and work on her confidence with the oral work, which may highlight a lack of flexibility in the curriculum. The lack of such opportunities may also reflect the practical difficulties and time limitations for individual work with class sizes such as this.

Sarah was clearly aware that she was being judged as a parent when Janice and Fiona were starting school. She possibly felt that they would be judged also. During the first weeks of school start Mrs Murphy noted that the twins usually arrived in matching outfits, faces washed, with hair brushed and tied up. Over the course of this first term Mrs Murphy and Aideen noted that this changed. The girls often came to school in clothing that was considered inappropriate in terms of warmth or comfort, hair unbrushed, without having had breakfast, and without lunches. At that point Sarah was no longer seen as being a responsible parent in the eyes of the school staff, who felt she was not preparing the children for school in appropriate ways. Sarah seemed unaware that she was not meeting the school's expectations for parenting. She advised that Mrs Murphy had said she was a "*great woman*" [Sarah, I.2] coping with her six children. She seemed to believe that Mrs Murphy saw her as coping well with her role as parent, unaware of her low status in terms of parenting in the school.

Sarah also explained her views on giving children the freedom to explore and learn, while enjoying their free time. I mentioned to Sarah that I had noticed during observations that Janice and Fiona were very skilled in imaginary play, and I felt this may have played a part in why the other children want to play with them, in essence if the girls thought up the best games, they would be more popular playmates. As detailed in the excerpt below, Sarah advised that she consciously allowed her children freedom to play and that she felt this was an important part of childhood:

Well, you see, I never set boundaries when they went out to play, if they wanted to go out get mucky, if they wanted to climb up a tree, if they ripped their trousers, that was OK. All that is what being a kid is all about, that's how we were brought up. If they were sitting in the muckiest puddle in the road that was fine, if that is what they wanted to do, and I think that has a lot to do with it. The road sometimes floods outside, and they get out into it on skateboards, and they're on their bellies going through it, and they're the muckiest kids on the road, and the neighbours do be squirming, but to me that's what being a kid is all about, you know.

[Sarah, Interview 3]

However, there clearly was a discrepancy between what Sarah considered to be freedom for exploration without boundaries, and the practicalities that Mrs Murphy and Aideen considered to be important from a parental point of view in terms of keeping children safe and healthy. *“There is no consistency. They had one coat between them yesterday, and they were fighting about the coat”* [Mrs Murphy, I.2]. Although items such as coats were available to the children, she felt it was up to the children to go and get things before school if they wanted to take them. Aideen advised that their older sister had told her that she gets the twins up in the morning and does their hair. On occasions the twins had mentioned to Aideen that they had not eaten before coming to school. She noted that if a child is coming to school hungry or cold it will then affect their ability to learn. Aideen also commented on the condition of the twin's books. During one of the classroom observations I noted that Aideen was using cellotape to stick together the remnants of Janice's copy book which had come in her bag in pieces. Aideen commented that she was surprised that if a parent had seen that book that they would not try to fix it for the child. She felt that Sarah was probably unaware of the condition of the books. Clearly there was a divide between the expectations that Mrs Murphy and Aideen had about the level of care that is needed at home to ensure that a child comes into school physically able to learn, and Janice and Fiona's home environment. Mrs Murphy and Aideen clearly had some concerns about how the twin's home life might be affecting their classroom performance. The staff were also concerned about the impact of hunger, cold, etc on the twins ability to learn. However, the impact of how Sarah was seen by Mrs Murphy and Aideen, also transferred to their views on whether she helped her children in the education. They expressed a belief that the twins were not helped in any way with homework (other than by their older siblings) however, as shown in the excerpt below,

Sarah told the researcher how she sat Janice beside her when preparing the dinner and went through all her sounds and words with her. The staff were unaware of this assistance to Janice in her learning.

Box 8.17 : Excerpt from Sarah, Interview 2

Mary: What do you think they like about school?

Sarah: Well they don't like getting out of bed in the morning! [laughs]. Well they come in and they do their homework straight away, like the bag is just up on the floor, they sit on the floor and they do it. It's not even me, it's them. From day one, they were so excited about getting the homework because they had the full month without it, they were coming in and they were delighted. They still like doing it. Now Janice wouldn't be as good as Fiona at the reading, or the words, I'm wondering does teacher think I'm not bothering at all, but...even when the dinner's on I would sit her on the worktop with me and we go through the words. She's having a little bit of trouble with that...

In ecological terms, inconsistencies in the beliefs of important figures in different Microsystems can impact on the child. If links between home and school are strong and expectations are similar, this will have a positive impact on children. Differences between the beliefs and expectations of Sarah and the teaching staff might well impact negatively on the twins.

8.9 Teacher Perspectives

This section explores the transition from preschool to school as outlined by Mrs Murphy and Aideen, and offers some insights into their view on the process.

8.9.1 Attitudes and Beliefs

Mrs Murphy and Aideen had similar views when asked about the skills and attributes that were useful for children to possess on entry to school. These were: independence (in terms of ability to look after themselves and their property); general social skills including the ability to play together; the ability to listen to the teacher; and to be able to

concentrate for short periods of time. These were very similar to the views of teachers in Phase I [Chapter 7, Section 7.4.3]. Aideen suggested that the ability to take direction from the teacher was also important. She remarked that when children have the ability to sit and listen to the teacher it makes a big difference, “*if all 30 children had that ability it would make life a lot easier*”. [Aideen, I.1]. Mrs Murphy stressed the importance of independence skills, and said that if children started with the ability to know their own belongings it would be very helpful. She also noted that lunchtimes can be a difficult time for children in practical terms. She has found that often children are given too much, or items that they cannot easily cope with, in their lunchboxes. In one particular case when Mrs Murphy told a mother that her child was upset that they did not have enough to eat at lunchtime, the mother responded that she wasn’t giving her any more or she wouldn’t eat her dinner at 2pm! Mrs Murphy suggested that this showed how “*some parents have no understanding of life in school*” [Mrs Murphy, I.3]. She felt that the child being well fed, and thus better able for the classroom, was more important than the mother’s dinner schedule.

Mrs Murphy noted also that the children in this class who were really ‘ready’ on starting, and who were really blossoming in the school environment were the oldest in the group. They had all been over five on starting. She had been slightly concerned that some of this group might be a bit bored in school, but this hadn’t happened, and they were working very well. She felt that it was easy to spot the older children in a class (indeed the researcher was able to pick out the oldest children in this particular class) and noted how difficult it could be for some of the younger children to be compared to children nine or ten months older, although she did state that there were exceptions to this rule. She cited the example of the youngest child in the class “*can you imagine if she was just starting off now, how good she would be*” [Mrs Murphy, I-3].

8.9.2 Policies and Practices

Mrs Murphy is an advocate of the Revised Curriculum (DES, 1999) in terms of its approach to oral language work. She concentrates on developing phonologic and phonemic awareness in her class. She places a clear emphasis on oral work, and tends to

encourage physical movement and dance when working on songs, rhymes etc. She tends to organise whole-class teaching on a 'theme' basis, integrating many different subject areas of the curriculum. In practical terms, her lessons allow for many areas of the curriculum to be incorporated into one teaching situation. For example, when reading from a large format book, she encourages children to follow the print orientation as she points, she encourages discussion about the illustrations, she incorporates earlier discussions on other topics (for example nature) and how they relate to the story, she relates events in the story to their own real-life experiences. After the story she follows up with songs and rhymes linked to the theme. She uses the 'shop' area to introduce mathematical concepts, develop Irish vocabulary, and social skills. She also incorporates Irish into every aspect of classroom life, and most of the daily instructions are given in Irish. She often introduces action songs and rhymes between activities, often related to the activity just undertaken, to keep the children's attention. The children spend much of their day moving around the classroom, as does Mrs Murphy herself. Not once did I observe her sitting at her desk.

When asked if there was one thing that would make life in the junior infants classroom easier, Mrs Murphy noted that a full time assistant made a big difference. She laughingly suggested that an electric pencil parer would also make a big difference to the time she spends on that task! She felt that having a full time assistant is a great help. Aideen agreed that even just to make sure the children all have workbooks open on the same page, and are actually working on the same work, is a task in itself. She noted that the 'housekeeping' tasks, like tying shoelaces, doing up zips and buttons at coat time, peeling oranges, take up so much time. Both noted that parents forget at times to think carefully about what their child can do before sending them off to school with things that they cannot easily handle themselves. Mrs Murphy advised that on one of the first weekends each September, she gives the children the homework of learning to put on their coats themselves! Aideen advised that she feels that children should be given some time at the beginning of the school year to learn all these tasks to ensure they can all care for themselves. Mrs Murphy advised that she felt preschools should focus more on these aspects than the academic work, whereas now she finds that half the class come into

school knowing letters/letterland etc, while others don't. She would prefer them to come to school better equipped with independence skills, and she would teach them the letters all together [Mrs Murphy, I-3].

Working without an assistant she advised is more difficult. She also noted that it is very difficult to do small group teaching with the junior infants group, you have to be circling around all the time, and it is very difficult to keep the attention of the groups on task. When she did not have an assistant, after Easter when she was doing letters, she would have to have another adult in the room for this work, she felt it would be too difficult to have a small group doing letters, and keep the rest of the class occupied at the same time.

8.9.3 Communication

In terms of communication with preschools Mrs Murphy reported that she has none. She also advised that children come to Springwood from many different local preschools so in this regards communication would be difficult.

She reported communicating with parents at the parent teacher meeting, through notes sent home, and with any parents who come to the class and request to speak to her. She specifically mentioned having to speak to two parents on many occasions about head lice. The children were continually experiencing difficulties with head lice, and she felt it was affecting their ability to relax and concentrate at school. In the interests of the child, she felt it was important to repeatedly send notes home to these parents [Mrs Murphy, I-3]. She also mentioned difficulties with a small minority of parents who she feels will not help their children with their work at home. She felt that a few of the children who were having difficulties with their letters could really benefit from some input from their parents, however this was not forthcoming. She felt that the children were keen to learn and wanted to improve on their letters *“there is an amount of initiative from the children, but there isn't the support from the parents... I mean as a parent you just need to be turning the pages of the book with them, just general things, it doesn't take much time, just little things, it makes a difference.”* [Mrs Murphy, I-3].

She was not in favour of a questionnaire from either parents or preschool teachers to be passed to teachers of junior infants classes, as she would prefer to make up her own mind about individual children. As for evaluations, she reported *“I wouldn’t like tests to be done at preschool level and passed on to school, they are really only starting off, and I would not like them to be tested in any way at that age. The only thing they test them on in infants is letters, and that is really to see if they need learning support, that is the only reason to test them”* [Mrs Murphy, I-3]. She does pass information on children to the teacher of the Senior Infants class. *“Yes, I do, I have a little form I pass on to [Teacher]. It details their academic progress, artwork, maths, also general information on children, their oral work, their social skills, whatever. Say for a shy child, you would always tell the teacher that she is very shy. But at the same time, I would always say to her, if I am passing on information on weaknesses, that this is this year, and the child will probably improve greatly as the time goes on. So she is getting information from me on all the children, if playschool teachers are giving me information, it is not all the one opinion, I would be getting information from different people who might have very different ideas.”* [Mrs Murphy, I-3].

8.9.4 Summary of Teacher Perspectives

Mrs Murphy and Aideen shared the views of the teachers in Phase I with regard to the skills that were important for children to possess on arrival at school. These were: independence, social skills, the ability to concentrate and listen to the teacher. She felt that the children in this class who were most ready for school were the oldest in the group. She would prefer that both preschools and parents prepare children for school in terms of independence rather than academic terms. She was also critical of some parents who she felt did little to support their children’s learning. She reported communicating with parents at the parent teacher meeting, through notes sent home, and with any parents who come to the class and request to speak to her.

Mrs Murphy actively promotes oral language work in her classroom, and encourages active learning. She reported that having a full time assistant is a great help at infants level.

8.10 Parents Perspectives

This section explores the transition from preschool to school as outlined by the case study parents, and offers some insights into their view on the process. 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 that parent’s views were accurately represented, while also keeping in mind issues of confidentiality [Section 6.7].

8.10.1 Attitudes and Beliefs

Generally speaking, the parents in Phase II shared the school’s understanding of pedagogy, discipline, and educational goals. Although there was some miscommunication between Mrs Murphy and two of the parents. Generally the children were supported in their transition to school by parents who were willing and able to support their child in whatever way necessary. Parents were keen for their children to make progress at school, were pleased and proud of their children’s successes.

All the parents expressed a belief that their children had gained from their preschool experience. They all spoke of the children gaining in social terms however preacademic skills were also mentioned by 2 parents. All the parents spoke of the children playing at preschool, and seemed aware that the children were learning through play. Most mentioned that they expected a new focus to emerge in junior infants on a more formal type of learning.

Part of Phase II was to investigate what the parents and teacher involved felt were the qualities that children should possess on arrival at school. Oonagh felt that confidence

and self esteem were the most important skills, however she stressed that it was important for a child to be able to speak up in the classroom. Gemma also felt that confidence was important, as was *“the ability to mix, to communicate properly. I think communication is a big thing, that they can understand and make themselves understood.”* [Gemma, I.1]. Sarah also emphasised the importance of communication, she felt it was very important that her children had the confidence to talk to the teacher. However, Sarah, Margaret and Patrick, tended to focus more on academic concepts, mentioning the ability to count and know their alphabet [Box 8.18]. Eimear, herself a teacher, was the one parent to mention independence skills, both in terms of being able to work independently of the teacher, and in terms of being able to look after themselves and their belongings, and voiced the opinion that, generally speaking, five year olds are more independent than their four year old classmates. She also mentioned being *“able to sit down and behave themselves. Not to be too babyish, running around and stuff, messing or that.”* [Eimear, I.1]. Cathy also mentioned being able to listen to the teacher, and to do what the teacher told the child, although she noted that she did not feel academic skills were important.

Box 8.18: Margaret and Patrick Interview 1.

Margaret: Well to be able to sit down and do the work is important. Just to be able to do what they are asked to do. To be able to do some kind of writing as well. The basics, like write their name.

Patrick: Yes, he can do stuff like knowing his alphabet, and count to 100. He can do basic maths, and he can write his name. Stuff like that is important. To be able to pay attention, concentration, that’s important. Ross’s concentration would be a bit low, that would be the one thing....

In terms of preschool experience assisting a child when making the transition, the parents expressed very similar views as they have expressed earlier, with each parent tending to believe that preschool prepared children in terms of the skills they themselves considered to be most important. For example, Eimear focused on independence skills and learning to listen to the teacher, while Margaret, Patrick and Sarah again felt that preschool prepared children more in terms of academic skills.

8.10.2 Policies and Practices

The issue of class size was noted by all of the parents as being an issue: *“Well, I definitely feel that class sizes should be reduced. I know they have classroom assistants, and that is great, but even still I think they should only have 20 in a class, 20 is plenty in every class. Even in terms of the size of the classroom, the junior infants classroom in [Springwood school] is quite big, but sometimes when they are older they are in prefabs and they are all squashed in.”* [Cathy, I.3]. When asked what differences Callum might find between his preschool and junior infants class, Oonagh noted the class size as being the main one. Oonagh’s older son started some years ago in a class of 44 children. The school had advised parents that this number would be for one year only, with the class splitting into two groups of 22 in Senior Infants, but she commented on how intimidating such a large group had been for some of the children starting. *“What bothered me most about it, was that was they thought school was all about during that first year, and it isn’t”* [Oonagh, I.1]. All the other parents mentioned that moving from a small group to a class size of 30 was something that their children would find difficult to adapt to.

The parents all reported being generally happy with the policies and practices at Springwood school. However, communication with the school was an issue for some parents, as detailed below.

8.10.3 Communication

When asked about communication with parents Mrs Murphy advised that she was happy for parents to come to talk about any issues they may have. However, the issue of how easy it is in practice to meet with Mrs Murphy is questionable. Eimear mentioned that she would not like to disturb Mrs Murphy [I.2] Cathy agreed [I.2]. So although communication is never actively discouraged, are parents really getting the message that the door is always open? It was interesting to note in conversations with two of the case study mothers, that in previous years, when their older children were in the junior infants class, groups of mothers would wait outside the door of the classroom to collect their

children. However in 2006 the mothers wait outside the school, at the school gate, for the children to emerge. It is unclear why this change took place. When asked about this change, Mrs Murphy advised that no conscious decision had been made to ask mothers not to wait outside the classroom door to collect their children. She suggested that the mothers from the previous years classes were mostly mothers whose first child was attending the junior infants class, and therefore they were more anxious, and liked to wait outside the classroom door to collect their children. Most of the current mothers already had an older child in the school, and therefore were more confident, and were happy to wait at the school gate for their children to leave the classroom independently and come to them. She did note however, that she was as happy for the mothers to wait at the school gate, as when they waited outside her door the noise level (many of the mothers have young children with them) could be a distraction for the 2nd class pupils in the classroom beside her class.

8.10.4 Summary of Parent Perspectives

The parents believed that their children had gained from their preschool experiences particularly in developing their social skills. They all spoke of the children playing at preschool, but expected a more formal approach in junior infants. The skills they felt were most important for a child to possess on entering school were varied. An emphasis on communication skills was noted. Confidence and social skills were mentioned, as was the ability to sit and listen. Three parents tended to focus more on academic concepts. The one parent to mention independence skills was herself a teacher. The parents all reported being generally happy with the policies and practices at Springwood school, however, it was not clear that parents felt comfortable about levels of communication. The issue of class size was noted by all of the parents as being an issue.

8.11 Children's Perspectives: Child Discussion Group Data

The theoretical framework for the study encouraged the inclusion of the perspective of the children themselves, and discussion groups were considered to be the most effective

way of eliciting their views. This section explores issues relating to the transition from preschool to school as discussed by the children.

8.11.1 The First Days at School

When asked, the children had clear memories of their first few days at school. Four of the children in the class had been upset and tearful during the first few days at school [Appendix 40 & 41]. In each of the discussion groups the children spoke about their memories of the children who found school start difficult, and made suggestions as to why these children were upset [Box 8.19].

Box 8.19: Child Discussion Group [14-02-06(1)]

Tommy: I was playing, and then my mam went, and then we all started playing, and then we did work, and then we sitted down. I don't know what we did then.

Mary: And was anyone sad that day?

Tommy: Yeah, one was sad. Sadie, it was Sadie that was sad. She was crying, and she was crying again the other day...

Ross: And Robbie was crying.

Cathal: She [Sadie] was always crying, because she wanted to stay with her mam, and she was out in the hall and she was slapping Mrs Murphy because she wanted to get to her mam. She really wanted to stay with her mam...

Erin: And her mam had to go to work maybe...?

One of the children who had been upset attended one of the discussion groups, and as detailed below, his reasons for being upset involved interaction, or fear about interaction, with the adults in the school setting.

Box 8.20: Child Discussion Group [14-02-06(2)]

Callum: I was excited, but Sadie was crying.

Joshua: And I was.

Rachael: Yes, he was.

Mary: And can you remember why were you upset Joshua?

Joshua: [Silence for a minute - then] No

Joshua: It was a bit scary, I was a bit scared, because all adults were talking to me an all, and that was a bit scary.

Mary: Yes, because there were lots of parents in the classroom too that day,

	<i>weren't there.</i>
<i>Joshua:</i>	<i>Yes, and to get them all to stop talking to me, I had to go out to [secretary's] office...</i>
<i>Joshua:</i>	<i>And I was crying because I didn't know Mr Delaney [School Principal] yet.</i>

One of the topics reported with excitement during discussion groups held in September 2005, was the prospect of getting homework. Although the children were aware that this would mean changes in their home lives, as Callum reported on the first day that homework was given *"I was allowed to watch telly when I got home from school, but now I'm not. I'll have to do my homework."* [19-9-05(2)]. Children eagerly reported that their mothers or their older siblings would help them with their homework. The children definitely viewed the prospect of homework with excitement, with Mark advising *"The first thing I'm going to do when I go home, I'm going to do my homework"* [19-9-05(2)], and Callum advising *"It'll be kind of fun, because my sister told me"* [19-9-05(2)]. For some of the children this excitement carried on into the school year, as reported by Niall *"I like doing my homework"* [21-6-06(2)] and Daragh *"I like eating my lunch, and eating bars. And I love homework, I absolutely love it!"* [21-6-06(2)]. However for some children the appeal of homework did not last through till the end of the school year, as reported by some of the case study parents, and some of the children themselves.

Finally, when asked why did children have to go to school at all, the children were quite clear, they were there to learn. As Fiona explained *"to learn things, to learn to read."* [21-6-06(1)]. Daragh elaborated *"to learn things about God, and things like that...like, eh, Jesus and things."* [21-6-06(2)]. Tommy expanded *"to learn, and to read, and to do work, and to have good fun"* [21-6-06(3)]. Margaret added *"we have to learn Irish [as well]"* [21-6-06(3)].

8.11.2 Play Versus Work

When talking to the children it became very clear that they saw a difference between play-time and work-time. When asked what was their favourite thing to do at school, the

majority of responses centred around play. For example, “*Playing! Playing is the best thing to do.*” [Erin, 14-02-06(1)]. The children were allowed free play time on Friday mornings, when they could choose whatever activity to take part in, and this was mentioned by many of the children. The children clearly saw a division between play-time on Friday mornings, and the rest of their week which they saw as being spent at work [Box 8.21]

Box 8.21: Child Discussion Group [16-9-05(1)]

Mary: *And what do you do on the other days?*
Daragh: *We just do work.*
Ruairi: *We do listening.*
Mary: *So you do work and listening.*
All: *Yes*

Friday morning play-time was clearly a time that many of the children valued highly, as noted by Callum when I asked him when they could play with toys: “*On Friday only [sad voice]*” [14-2-006(1)]. However, although play was a focus in most of the children’s conversations about school, and their favourite thing to do, two of the children mentioned how much they loved the ‘work’ that takes place at school. “*I’d do loads and loads and loads more of work. And I’d do exams, and I’d do plusses, and reading*” [Tommy, 21-6-06(3)]. So, although two of the children expressed a liking for all things work related, and clearly enjoyed the challenges of the new school curriculum, most of the children highlighted the free play aspect of their week.

When asked about the differences between playschool and school, not surprisingly play was clearly an important factor. Daragh: “*in playschool you play with toys every day, and in school you don’t.*” [14-2-06(3)]. When discussing differences between playschool and school, the conversation also often involved lunch, and the fact that the children now have two lunch breaks, as compared to one at playschool. It was clear from some of the discussions that the children associated the two breaks with the opportunity to play outside twice during the day. Generally speaking, the children often spoke about playing

outside, whether speaking of playschool or school itself. In terms of playschool, the children often mentioned the toys that they had access to while playing outside, particularly when discussing what was different about school and playschool.

8.11.3 Favourite Places Inside and Outside

The children were asked about their favourite places inside and outside at school. Favourite places inside included the P.E. hall [Daragh, Sean & Rachael, 21-6-06(2)]. Rachael mentioned her reason for this was because the trampoline was in the P.E. hall. Daragh mentioned P.E. that takes place outside as being a favourite also as did Sean [21-6-06(2)]. Other favourite places outside included ‘the grass’⁷ [Ross, Sean, 21-6-06(2)] and ‘the yard’ [Noel, Daragh, 21-6-06(2)]. Some of the reasons given were that they could play with children from other classes, and could play with their friends when playing out on the grass. The yard generally was a subject that came up in many contexts in the conversations. Family and friends also appeared to be an influence in this context, Two of the girls also noted that they liked to play outside as it gave them the opportunity to play with their siblings: Margaret *“I like the grass because I can play with my sister”* and Erin *“and I can play with my sister”* [21-6-06 (3)]. Ronan mentioned his favourite place was 2nd Class, *“because my sister is there”* [Ronan, 21-6-06(1)]. Callum also mentioned his favourite place was 6th Class, again because a friend was in that class [Callum, 21-6-06(1)].

8.11.4 What Don’t They Like About School?

Both Ryan and Cathal stated at times during the discussions that they did not like school. As Ryan advised: *“I like when we go home!”* [21-6-06(2)]. He also went on to say that going home was his favourite thing about school. Cathal was even more vocal, *“I hate every book except maths. I hate school”* [21-6-06(1)] and Erin was in agreement *“So do I, except Fridays.”* [21-6-06(3)]. In another discussion group, when Ryan and Cathal

⁷ The outdoor space the children have access to at breaks/lunchtime is a half paved, half grassed area. They usually refer to the grassed area as ‘the grass’ and the paved area as ‘the yard’. One of the school rules is that the children are not supposed to play on the grass on a wet day.

were asked if there was anything in particular that they did not like about school they replied as follows: Ryan “*mine is doing work*” [14-2-06 (3)] Cathal “*mine is doing work too!*” [14-2-06 (3)].

When asked specifically about what things they did not like about school, forms of teasing and bullying were mentioned by some of the children, Daragh “*The thing I don’t like so much is people calling you names*”. [14-2-06(3)]. The following conversation between Daragh and Mark highlights the issue:

Box 8.22: Child Discussion Group, [19-9-05(2)]

Mark: My favourite thing is running on my own, and someone is trying to catching me.

Mary: And do you like them trying to catch you?

Mark: Or teasing me, is worse.

Mary: And would you prefer them to leave you alone?

Mark: Yeah.

Mary: Are they trying to play chasing with you?

Mark: No they’re trying to even get me, it’s worst.

Mary: Why is it worse pet?

Daragh: Do they hit yeh?

Mark: No. [laughs]

Daragh: Do they stamp on yeh?

Mark: No. [laughs]

Daragh: Do they pinch yeh?

Mark: No. [laughs] They’re playing a rough game with me.

Mary: Who was playing a rough game with you?

Mark: Two girls.

Daragh: And nine people were calling me freckle face, they were much older.

Mary: And what should you do if people are playing rough with you or calling you names?

Daragh: You just walk away.

Mark: And what if they keep following you?

Callum: You just tell the teacher.

Mark: What if you are crying and no-one can hear you?

Daragh: Someone will tell the teacher for you.

The above excerpt shows how Daragh and Callum were able to help Mark work out what best to do if he was being teased, or treated roughly, by other children. Both Daragh and

Ryan mentioned bullying again during a later discussion group, “*And you get bullied sometimes...by bigger people. Sometimes when I play with [big brother’s] friend, when I play with them, sometimes they say ‘no, you’re not playing’, sometimes...and they pushed me on the ground.*” [Daragh, 14-2-06 (3)]. Although Daragh had been able to talk through with Mark how he should deal with the situation he was describing, it is clear that Daragh has had some experience of bullying himself. Daragh is popular with both his classmates and the teaching staff, he was mentioned by the teacher as being one of the brightest, most enthusiastic, and most confident children in the class. He would not be the typical of the type of child who might be susceptible to bullying. However, it is clear that both Mark and Daragh, and to some extent Ryan, have experienced some form of bullying behaviour very early in their school career.

8.11.5 The Yard

The Yard (often known as the playground) is the play area designated for the Junior Infants, Senior Infants, 1st and 2nd Classes. The older children have a separate play area. The Yard consists of an open basketball court, a concreted area, and a large grass area which children may use if the weather is dry. The Yard was mentioned in many contexts during the conversations. It was mentioned many times in conversations about favourite places in school, and indeed playing outside was mentioned many times when asked about their favourite thing to do in school. However school observations conducted by the researcher [Appendix 40 & 41] and teacher comments, suggested that this was not the case for all children, particularly at the beginning of the school year [Box 8.33].

Box 8.23: Child Discussion Group [16-9-06 (1)]

Mary: Do you know, when my little girl started here, she found the yard a little bit scary, because it was so loud, and there were so many people.

Ryan: And I did as well.

Daragh: I didn’t.

Ruairi: I didn’t.

Ryan: Sometimes if I get scared in the yard, I go get my big brother.

Mary: Well done Ryan, that was a clever thing to do.

Interestingly, Ruairi was one of the children observed by the researcher, and noted by the classroom assistant, as hanging back from the main group of children during his first weeks on the yard. He tended to stand back near to the wall of the school, away from the activity. It appeared as if he was apprehensive about taking part, however, his comments that he was not scared, suggest that perhaps he was just happier to observe until he was comfortable enough to take an active part in play. The following conversations including Callum, show how his experience of the yard, has varied over time. The first excerpt was from early in the school year:

Box 8.24: Child Discussion Group [9-9-05(1)].

Mary: *And what is your favourite thing?*

Callum: *Outside playing.*

Mary: *I remember in the beginning I found the yard very noisy.*

Callum: *I did as well.*

Mary: *And are you used to it now.*

Callum: *[very quietly] Yes.*

However, as the conversation developed it became clear that Callum's feelings about, and experiences of, the yard, were not as clear cut as may have seemed. Having said that outside playing was his favourite part of the day, he then gives some insight into what he does in the yard:

Box 8.25: Child Discussion Group [9-9-05(1)].

Mary: *And what sort of games do you play in the yard?*

Fiona: *Chasing.*

Jack: *Chasing.*

Mary: *[to Callum] And is that what you play?*

Callum: *No.*

Mary: *So, what do you play?*

Callum: *I just walk. There's nobody really to play with.*

Mary: *Is there not?*

Callum: *No. And there's nothing really do to. [sad voice]*

The conversation changes, however Callum brings the conversation back to the yard, telling the researcher that he runs around in circles on the yard. He was unable, when asked, to say who he ran around with, but could easily advise that Jack played “*with his friends*” (in an ‘isn’t that obvious’ tone of voice) [Callum, 9-9-05 (1)]. So although Callum suggests that playing outside is his favourite thing to do, he clearly has some reservations about the yard. He cited not having anyone to play with, and having nothing to do, as being the reasons for this. The tone he used when advising that Jack played with his friends, suggested to me that perhaps Callum did not feel that he had made any friends at this stage in the school year. Playground observations, and comments from the Classroom Assistant confirmed that Callum spend a large amount of time during the first weeks at school alone on the yard, or in the company of the Classroom Assistant. However, the following excerpt, taken from a discussion group held in February 2006, suggested that at that point, Callum was much more comfortable playing in the playground.

Box 8.26: Child Discussion Group [14-02-06 (1)]

- Mary:* *And what about you Callum, what’s your favourite thing in school?*
- Callum:* *Lunch [all laugh]*
- Mary:* *If lunch is your favourite, what’s your second favourite?*
- Callum:* *‘Captain of the Runners’.*
- Mary:* *And what is that?*
- Callum:* *Somebody is on and they pick a team, and they have to catch the people and put them into jail, and the other person has to try and tip them, and if they get tipped you can run back into den, and that’s the game.*
- Ross:* *And somebody might run over to them, and I might get tipped, and I would run back over to them, I could go back to the den.*
- Callum:* *We play with Kevin, and Ronan, and you [to Ross] and 1st class...*

Chasing games such as ‘catch’ and ‘jail’, ‘Power Rangers’ and ‘Yu-Gi-Oh’ were mentioned, particularly by the boys, as being their favourite games to play on the yard. Towards the end of the school year, there was a new addition to the yard. On the basketball court had been painted a hop-scotch grid, and a trail along which children were

to follow, while hopping, skipping, and jumping as directed (in words painted on the ground) which some of the children mentioned as being fun.

8.11.6 The Rules

One theme which developed during the conversations with the children was the rules and regulations that they were expected to follow at school. Certainly the rules that govern one educational setting may not apply in another. This can cause misunderstandings and confusion. It is vital that children develop an understanding of the new rule systems if they are to successfully negotiate classroom life. The rules were mentioned in various contexts, and the children had a very clear understanding of what they were expected to, and were not expected, to do in school. The children explained that the bell meant it was time to go out to the playground, then it meant it was time to line up to go back inside. They explained that they were not allowed to play on the grassed area when it was wet, and that they were not allowed on the bigger playground reserved for the older children.

Classroom observations early in the year confirmed that it did not take long for the children to properly understand the rules, and Mrs Murphy took every opportunity to remind them of the classroom rules. For example, one rule was that the children should put up their hands before shouting out an answer. It was noted during classroom observations that during the first few weeks of school in September, the children realised quickly that they must put their hands up, however they often did this although they did not know the answer. In fact, often a group of children would have their hands in the air and shout out ‘me, teacher’ to encourage Mrs Murphy to pick them to answer the question before she had even finished asking the question. Clearly they did not know the answer to the question that hadn’t yet been asked, but they were very keen to be the person chosen to answer. Often it was noted in field notes, that having put their hands up, if asked to give the answer, children looked blankly at Mrs Murphy, and could not answer the question, this however, did not dampen the enthusiasm for raising hands! Mrs Murphy often had a tactful reply for these children, such as *“Don’t worry, you’ve just forgotten”* [Field Notes, Week 2, Day 2]. However the children soon got used to the

idea that they should only put up their hands if they thought they knew the answer to the question.

The children clearly understood school in terms of children deferring to adults. They seemed to allocated the role of disciplinarian to Mr. Delaney rather than to Mrs Murphy. Perhaps they found it difficult to reconcile their view of her as the teacher that they clearly liked, and her role as disciplinarian. Although Mrs Murphy was spoken about in terms of needing to comply with her rules, Mr Delaney was consistently quoted by the children as a deterrent from behaving badly. The children were also very clear on what would happen if they did not follow the rules, as the following excerpts show [Box 8.28].

Box 8.28: Child Discussion Group Data

Rachael: I would say teacher would send [boys name] to Mr Delaney's office, because he's bold.

Callum: If you poke, you are sent to Mr Delaney's office. Because Joshua was trying to look at [unclear] and Ronan kept poking him and then he was crying, and he was trying to bite him, and that was his last chance.

Joshua: I was sent to Mr Delaney's office because I walked home on my own, no not on my own...

Luke: You walked home with Johnny.

Joshua: Yes. But we didn't walk home, the bus found us...[The two boys had tried to walk home rather than wait for the school bus, but were found by the bus driver]

[14-4-06(2)]

The children were clearly able to express their concept of discipline and punishment for 'bold' behaviour. Although they had very clear ideas about what happened to children who were 'bold' these were not necessarily accurate representations, but more dramatic versions, often passed down by older siblings, as shown below [Box 8.29].

Box 8.29: Child Discussion Group Data

Daragh: Yes, if you go to Mr Delaney's office, they have big metal sticks... one time [elder brother] went because a big boy was bullying him, and he saw these big metal sticks, and Mr Delaney was hitting him

	<i>with it.</i>
<i>Mary:</i>	<i>Do you think that's what happens in Mr Delaney's office. I think maybe he is telling you a joke?</i>
<i>Daragh:</i>	<i>No, he told me!</i>
	<i>[14-2-06 (3)]</i>
<i>Ronan:</i>	<i>Yes, you put up your hand, and you stay with your hand up.</i>
<i>Erin:</i>	<i>Yes, because if you put your hand up and shout, right, you will go to Mr Delaney's office, and he would lock the key.</i>
<i>Mary:</i>	<i>Would he?</i>
<i>Erin:</i>	<i>Yes, he would bring the key off with him.</i>
<i>Mary:</i>	<i>And have any of you ever been in Mr Delaney's office?</i>
<i>All:</i>	<i>No. [emphatically]</i>
<i>Mary:</i>	<i>Then how do you know that? Who told you that?</i>
<i>Erin:</i>	<i>No-one, but we saw Mr Delaney.</i>
<i>Rachael:</i>	<i>My sister told me.</i>
	<i>[19-9-05 (1)]</i>
<i>Erin:</i>	<i>Mr Delaney said if anyone was bold, he would just bring them to his office, and if anyone was bold he would bring them to his office for nine days, and every day for nine days he would give them a slap, because they would be bold!</i>
	<i>[14-02-06 (1)]</i>

Any form of corporal punishment is forbidden in Irish primary schools, so Erin's vision of Mr Delaney slapping children is also part of the mis-information that has developed among the children. Although the children spoke about being sent to Mr Delaney often, and used the threat of being sent in their general conversations, they actually knew that this was not really an option for the junior infants class, as Fiona explained "*We've only started school so we don't go to Mr Delaney.*" [19-9-05(2)] and Daragh confirmed "*When you are big in school and you are bold, you will be sent to Mr Delaney. If you be bold in a big class. If you're 7 and 8 and 9.*" [16-9-05(1)]. So, although they knew it was highly unlikely for a junior infant pupil to be sent to Mr Delaney's office, they took great pleasure about discussing the fact that this could take place, often with great dramatic effect!

The children were also very eager to talk about the 'star' reward system in place in the classroom, where good or bad behaviour could gain or lose a 'star' for their table. They

explained that to earn a star you had to “*be good*” or “*be quiet*” [Rachael and Erin, 19-9-05(1)]. Robbie advised that “*you have to get an answer right*” [19-9-05(1)]. Callum and Daragh advised you had to “*be good*” and “*remember things*” [19-9-05(2)]. “*Sometimes when you are really, really, really good at work, or colouring you get a star, or when you are really quiet.*” [Callum, 14-02-06(1)]. Most of the explanations offered for gaining a star involved ‘being good’ in some way, in particular speaking in Irish was offered by some of the children as a reason for getting a star.

The children also clearly understood the behaviour that would cause them to lose a star, although it was clear that some of this knowledge had been gained by trial and error.

Box 8.30: Child Discussion Group Data

Mary: And can you tell me what sort of things you have to do to lose a star?
Daragh: If you're bold. If you slap people, and kick people..
Daragh: No robbing people's lunch.
Mary: And has anybody lost a star?
Fiona: Yes, Joey.
Mary: And how did he loose a star?
Fiona: He scribbled.
Callum: No he didn't do that, he copied Sinead when she nearly fell off her chair.
Fiona: No, he laughed.
Daragh: He laughed when she fell off the chair.
[19-9-05 (2)]

Mary: And how do you loose stars?
Callum: You would be bold...
Mary: And what would you do to be bold? What is bold?
Callum: Well Ronan is really bold. He bited someones finger yesterday.
Cathal: It was Sean.
Callum: And he is mean, and Lara is on your chair.
Cathal: One or two people rubbed off the 'clar ban' [clar ban = whiteboard in Irish] with their hands.
[14-02-06 (1)]

8.11.7 Summary of Child Discussion Group Data

The children saw their school life as consisting of ‘work’ and ‘listening’ most of the time. In contrast Friday morning free-play was seen as time for play. This was the one time during the week when the children had the autonomy to make their own decisions about what to play with, who to play with, and how they chose to play. The teacher would suggest that for much of the day the children are learning in an active way, using play based techniques, and classroom observations confirmed that much of their time is spent actively involved in activities such as singing (usually involving actions) and dancing. From the perspective of the children this was not what they classed as ‘play’ but often what they classed as ‘work’. ‘Play’ to the children, was what adults working with them would define as ‘free play’. As Mark advised: “*I play when I don’t have school.*” [19-9-05(1)].

The children often mentioned break-time and playing outside when discussing life at both school and preschool. Feelings about ‘the yard’ varied among the children, for some children it was a time they clearly looked forward to, others took some time to adapt to the yard. The children noted a difference in levels of outdoor equipment available at preschool level as compared to school. The issue of bullying or playing roughly also emerged in the discussion on playing outside.

The children often referred to the rules which they must obey at school, and the reward and punishment systems in place. They were clearly aware of the power systems in place within the world of school, with teacher playing a clear role in instruction, and in terms of making decisions with regard to good behaviour or bold behaviour. The formal routines in school with which the children had to quickly become familiar were very clear to the children, and they could explain with ease situations in which they were expected to behave in a way appropriate to school life. They were also aware that they must listen to the instructions of the teacher, and act on them. The children saw the role of school child as one who obeyed the rules, and complied with the teacher’s wishes.

8.12 Summary

The experiences of the seven case study children were all different, indeed this is reflected in the different headings used while telling the story of each child's transition, the headings themselves reflect the individuality of each transition. However, each child experienced the process of becoming a 'school child', which involved socialising into the discourse of the primary school, and adapting their behaviour to meet school expectations. This process was easier for some of the children than others. It became clear that some children adapt easily to a new educational environment, however for others it can be a more difficult task. None of the case study children could be said to have had serious difficulty in their transition, however all have had some minor issues, some of which have been happily resolved, others which may go on to become more serious issues over time if not addressed. Generally speaking they have adapted well to the transition to formal schooling and were able to meet the challenges that this transition brings with it.

Mrs Murphy and Aideen shared the views of the teachers in Phase I with regard to the skills that were important for children to possess on arrival at school. These were: independence, social skills, the ability to concentrate and listen to the teacher. She felt that the children in this class who were most ready for school were the oldest in the group. Indeed three of the parents in the study reported holding their children back a year before starting school as they felt this would better prepare their children in terms of maturity and social skills. The parents believed that their children had gained from their preschool experience particularly in developing their social skills. They all spoke of the children playing at preschool, but expected a more formal approach in junior infants.

During the transition to school the parent also has to adapt to the new role of 'school parent'. This is particularly important for the parents of first-born children who have no previous experience of school. Schools often have expectations of parents which may not be made as clear as those expected of the child. How the parents fit into this new role, and the expectations that schools have of them, may also impact on the transition for the

child. Some of the case study parents were very aware of the unwritten school rules, particularly those who had some ‘insider’ experience of school life, and were aware that they were now being judged as a ‘school parent’. A lack of communication between some parents and staff was noted. It was clear that communication could be better in some cases. Even parents who appeared empowered in the school situation, were unsure about initiating contact with the school.

The children themselves have shown that they are well able to express their opinions on school life, and their experiences in school. They cheerfully offered their thoughts on their experiences of school, have shown a willingness to engage in discussion, and demonstrated that they clearly have the ability to get across their views. Their understanding of rules and power systems within the school environment is very apparent. They could confidently describe their own world-view, and provided insights into life as a junior infant that are both perceptive and informative.

In conclusion, the individual case studies are embedded in the socio-cultural context of the individual home, preschool, and school environments. It is not claimed that generalisations can be made from these studies. However, it is suggested that they provide rich insights into the individual experiences of the seven case study children during the period of transition. It is hoped that the experiences of these case study children, in combination with the complete findings of the ‘Building Bridges’ project, will provide a tool with which to de-construct and better understand this experience for children in Ireland.