

CHAPTER 9:

INFORMING TRANSITIONS:

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

“What did you learn at school, Hans Thomas?” Dad asked

“To sit still,” I replied.

“It’s so difficult that we spend years learning to do it.”

(Gaarder, 1996, p.46).

9.1 Introduction

The aim of this Chapter is to review the findings which have emerged from the study, and discuss them with reference to the research questions posed at the outset, and the literature reviewed in Chapter 5. The objectives of the study were to investigate the transition from preschool to formal schooling for children in Ireland, from the viewpoints of preschool teachers, teachers of junior infants classes, parents and children themselves. The study was concerned with presenting an overview of the policies and practices in place in preschool and primary schools in Ireland relating to the transition to school. The theoretical framework encouraged the inclusion of all stakeholders in the process. It was hoped to provide insights into this important transition from children, parents and staff. The key themes which emerged from the research related to the following areas:

- Children Experiencing Transition
- Families Experiencing Transition
- Professionals Supporting Transitions
- The Role of Continuity
- The Role of Communication

These are discussed in greater detail below.

9.2 Limitations of the Research

As this was the first investigation into the transition from preschool to school in Ireland, it was decided at the outset that the project should try to provide a comprehensive view of this transition. Rather than focus on any one area of transition, or one group/type of children that might be considered to be at risk of experiencing a difficult transition, it was decided to view transition in general terms, and gather baseline data which would be specific to this transition in the Irish context. This meant in many ways that the project was destined to be broad in scope, and that the methodology should allow for this. Therefore this project has been an initial exploration into a very complex topic, and in tandem with providing some answers, it has raised some important questions. It is hoped

that the data from this research will provide a baseline from which further more in-depth studies into transition in its complexity can be developed.

9.3 Children Experiencing Transition

9.3.1 Children at Risk

The teachers in the study were in agreement that transition problems occur for less than 20% of children which is in line with international findings. Children with low self-esteem; those children who have difficulty concentrating, sitting still and listening; and those with behavioural problems, were considered to be most at risk. Self-esteem, a sense of self-worth, and a confidence that you can cope in the new school environment is important for children, and those children with low self-esteem are less likely to exhibit such confidence. Case Study Child 5 (Rachael) demonstrated clearly how confidence and self-esteem can support a child during transition. A child's sense of self-esteem and self-worth is intrinsically linked to how they are viewed by the people closest to them. Relationships with our primary care-givers, family, and friends can create and reinforce self-esteem. Rachael appeared to negotiate life within a positive circle which affirmed her sense of belonging. Her pro-social and empathetic behaviour actively created situations which then led to others reinforcing her self-worth. Unfortunately not all children will have the same levels of self-esteem and self-worth as Rachael. Green, speaking of the impact of the microsystem and the interactions the child experiences in the settings of home and school, remarks:

“As children encounter their immediate social world, they develop new skills, but are also building their sense of what kind of person they are and a sense of what they might become. Experiences at home or in school may have strengthened or weakened the child's capacity to lead a happy and productive adult life. Unfortunately, low self-esteem and limited aspirations are the fate of many children, and each child who grows up feeling this way represents a loss to the entire community” (Green, 1994, p361).

The researcher would suggest that following on from the theoretical approach of Vygotsky it is the responsibility of the teacher to help scaffold and support children who might be at risk through the transition process. Learning during interaction between child and 'expert' involves a co-construction of meanings whereby the child develops the cultural tools that enable further mental development. Clearly the beliefs and perceptions of teachers, and the aspirations they have for children, have the potential to greatly influence the children during this important year. If teachers are in agreement that these three groups of children are at risk, and there are no structures in place to support these children, then there is a danger that these beliefs may reinforce the risk factors. Previous research has found that teachers often have implicit images of children and operate these images as norms against which they judge each new class of children (Peters, 2007). These images can be influenced both by their first impressions, and the teacher's knowledge of older siblings, in fact 'reputations' can be earned very early in the first year of school. Past reputations, the behaviour exhibited by the children, and the reactions from the teachers to this behaviour may promote a vicious circle of behaviour. It is not clear from the findings that any supports have been put in place to facilitate transition for these at risk groups.

The findings suggest that on entering school children in Ireland are expected to adapt to environment where concentration, sitting still and listening are highly valued. The view that sitting still and listening is an appropriate way for children of this age to learn is highly contested. The Revised Primary Curriculum proposes that children are active learners, and should play an active part in the learning process; at no point does it advocate sitting still as being useful in terms of children's learning. Indeed, Mrs Murphy was noted to take a very active approach to learning in her classroom, but it is acknowledged that this is just one classroom. The INTO also advise that movement rather than learning while sitting still is important in the infants classes (2006). However there appears to be a difference between rhetoric and reality, as the skill of sitting still is one that teachers say they value in the classroom. It is clear to see why teachers of large classes would find this skill useful in terms of classroom management, and the ability to listen and concentrate useful in practical terms. Some of the parents in the study also

mentioned the skills of listening, being able to concentrate, and act on instructions as important at infant level. They reported these skills among the reasons they held their children back to start school at five rather than four years old. However it has to be questioned whether sitting still is a skill that we should in reality be expecting from such young children.

The skills of concentration and listening identified by the two groups of teachers as being important at infant level also serve as a reminder that children are making a transition of expectations as well as physical setting. They are moving from a socially focused learning environment to one in which they are being judged and compared with each other. As noted in Chapter 2, learning environments in preschools are usually child-centred, consistent with a competence model. Children are given a range of learning opportunities to build on all areas of development with play being considered to be an important learning tool. They are also active players in the learning process, usually afforded a good deal of autonomy and choice in the learning activities that they engage in. Although the revised curriculum used at infants level in primary schools also places an emphasis on child-centred learning, there is a greater emphasis on direct instruction, and a necessity to implement a pre-set curriculum. The children in the study were clearly aware of the differences between preschool and school in terms of ‘work’ and ‘play’ and were shown to equate play with times when they could actively control their environment. It seems that different behaviours are expected from children at preschool and primary school level. Indeed teaching staff in the study noted that Case Study Child 3 (Ruairi) was the ideal pupil because he was obedient, listened well, understood what being taught, and was “*so easy*” to have in the class [Mrs Murphy, I.1]. Children, it seems have to leave behind the role of ‘active explorer’ and must conform to the rules of school, which include listening to instructions and acting on them.

It is interesting that neither group of teachers highlighted disadvantage in their top risk factors, although the literature suggests this is an important feature (Entwisle & Alexander, 1993, 1999; Brooker, 2002, 2005; Preparing for Life Group, 2006). A higher percentage of junior infant teachers than preschool teachers agreed that children from

disadvantaged backgrounds, or children from minority groups, were at risk of a difficult transition. However, both disadvantaged and minority groups were categories in which 36% and 35% of the preschool group responded “neither agree or disagree” respectively, suggesting that a large number of preschool teachers were unsure of their views regarding these factors. The difference in opinion does suggest that the two groups of teachers view these children, and/or transition to school, from different perspectives and this warrants further investigation. Teachers in DD preschools and primary schools were more likely to predict higher levels of children at risk, however although these sub-groups expected more difficulties, they did not associate these directly with disadvantage itself. More indirect explanations may be necessary for why they consider children to be at risk.

It was also interesting to note the contrast between the views of the case study parents and the teachers in the questionnaire relating to boys. The teachers did not view boys as being more at risk of experiencing a difficult transition because of their gender. However, several of the case study parents made the decision to hold their sons back a year before starting school. Indeed one parent specifically mentioned that she did not follow this practice with her daughters. It would be interesting to explore this apparent disparity in opinion further.

9.3.2 The ‘Ready’ Child

School readiness is the extent to which the child is considered to have developed the necessary personal, social, and intellectual skills to succeed in formal schooling. Chapter four highlighted some concerns that the concept of school readiness places too much responsibility within the child to be ready for school (Meisels, 1999; Dunlop, 2004; Ackerman & Barnett, 2005). One of the primary concerns about the concept of readiness is the associated development of ‘testing’ of children to assess if they are ready for school, and the fear that the preschool years would be spent preparing a child for school, rather than being accepted as an important phase in their own right. However, children who are not considered by teachers to be ready for formal schooling are at a disadvantage

during the transition to school. The behaviours identified above by teachers as placing children in 'at-risk groups' not only affect the child in making their transition to school, they also effect how the child is viewed by the teacher. This reminds us of the importance of children experiencing preschool programmes which encourage the development of confident and competent learners who can capitalise on the various learning environments in which they find themselves in future. It has been suggested that ECCE settings which encourage active, child-initiated leaning experiences are particularly successful in terms of preparing children in terms of later school success (Marcon, 1999; 2002).

The two groups of teachers were in general agreement on the skills identified as being of importance to children starting formal school (social skills; independence; language and communication skills; and the ability to sit, listen and concentrate). These findings are very similar to those noted in international research cited in Chapter 4 (Corsaro & Molinari, 2000; Rimm-Kaufman et al, 2000; Dunlop, 2003; Dockett & Perry, 2004, 2005; Peters, 2007). The suggestion being that if children could interact well, follow rules and directions, act independently, and express themselves well, they were more likely to experience a successful transition. This brings us back to the issue of the ability to concentrate, sit still and listen. The emphasis on such skills raises the question as to whether schools are actually ready to meet the needs of the range of children while equipping them with an active rather than passive learning environment. However, it is worth noting that if teachers value the skill, then it is the children who have these skills that will be considered more 'ready' by teachers, and adapt more easily to teacher expectations.

A higher percentage of teachers of junior infant classes placed a greater emphasis on independence/self-help skills than their preschool colleagues. It is easy to see why teachers would value such skills in terms of classroom management. Perhaps the larger numbers in classes at primary level means that these skills are considered to be more important than at preschool level, with their lower adult-child ratios. This emphasis on independence, social skills and communication skills, combined with the lack of

emphasis on academic skills, would suggest that the teachers in this study feel that parents should not be so concerned about preparing their children academically for school, but concentrate on equipping them with the social and independence skills necessary for classroom life. However, although teachers value the skill of independence, parents may not be as aware of the importance of these skills. The one parent in the study who mentioned such skills as being important was herself a teacher.

It would also be interesting to know in what way preschool teachers promote the skills of independence. Preschool practitioners suggest these skills are important for children to have on arriving at school, and advise that they focus on supporting the development of these skills. However, the teachers of junior infants classes suggest that many children do not possess these skills. Children could only benefit from support in self-regulation and confident classroom negotiation. It is suggested that such support would be useful both at preschool and primary school levels. However, an important point here is whether the preschool and primary school teachers are really working from the same definition of independence. Independence can be seen in terms of ability to look after yourself and your belongings, to act independently. However, it could be seen at preschool level in relation to separation of child from the family. It is not clear the exact definitions that the two groups of teachers are working from, and further clarification of language use between the two groups is warranted.

Differences which may be attributed to language usage within the two educational spheres were noted in other areas. No junior infant teachers mentioned 'can follow directions/task completion' as an important skill. They referred to the ability to "*carry out simple tasks independently*" or "*should be able to...sit down and listen to simple instruction*". These teachers may in fact be referring to what the preschool practitioners term as "*ability to follow direction*". It is unclear whether the difference found in emphasis on independence and ability to follow direction is a true difference in opinion, a different use of terminology, or a different cultural understanding of these concepts. This clearly is an important issue.

Both groups of teachers also emphasised communication and language skills. This is not surprising considering that communication and language skills are closely linked with literacy skills. The primary school curriculum notes the importance of oral language, and an emphasis on oral language (both English and Irish) at infant stage is encouraged in the curriculum. This emphasis on language and communication also ties in with the Vygotskyian view on language development and the use of ‘inner speech’ dialogues to support further learning.

9.3.3 Differences in Teacher Opinion

It is also important to consider the areas in which the preschool and primary school teachers may hold different views with regard to skills important for children to possess. As Margetts (1999) reminds us, there is no reason to believe that the two groups of teachers might hold similar beliefs or have similar expectations, considering the differences in their training. Other researchers have suggested that differences in the traditions of preschool and primary school stem from the fact that each setting is based on its own traditions as well as the prevailing ideological, economic, and social values of the time (Dahlberg & Taguchi, 1994). Indeed, differences in cultural expectations, and distinctions in meaning between the two groups of teachers have been identified in previous Irish research (Hayes et al, 1997).

Preschool practitioners mentioned confidence and emotional skills more often than the teachers of the junior infants classes, although these skills were not in the top skills mentioned by either group. This would support Daly’s assertion (2002) that although preschool and primary school teachers acknowledge emotional development as being of importance, both groups, but particularly the primary school respondents acknowledged that they did not spend a great deal of their time focusing on such development. It is not clear why these skills are valued less highly at primary level, but it appears to reflect a lack of focus on pupil’s emotional welfare.

The two groups also differed when considering the importance of including academic skills in preschool curricula. Sixty-seven percent of the preschool group reported including academic skills in their curricula, while 74% felt such academic skills should be included. Teachers of junior infants classes were not in agreement on this issue, with only 25% reporting that preschools should incorporate academic skills into their curricula.

These findings from preschool teachers above are interesting when considered along with the earlier finding that only low numbers of preschool practitioners believe that academic skills are important for children to possess. So although the preschool group do not believe these skills to be of importance themselves, many actually include, and believe such skills should be included, in their curricula. The reasons for this disparity in what the teachers believe to be important and their practices in the classroom are not clear. The teachers were not asked if they felt any pressure to teach academic skills, however other Irish research has also found a disparity between what teachers consider to be personally important for children as compared to their classroom practices (Hayes et al, 1997). The findings from this study suggest that in terms of academic skills, there appears to be a lack of agreement between theory and practice at preschool level.

Differences were also apparent in views on problem solving skills and preacademic skills. Fifty-five per cent of preschool teachers were in agreement that problem solving skills were important, as compared to 23% of teachers of junior infants classes. It is possible that this could be related to different uses of language noted above. Or perhaps these skills are considered to be of greater value at preschool level. Perhaps the two groups have different views on what in fact these skills involve, or their definitions of such skills. Differences were also noted with regard to preacademic skills, with a greater emphasis by the preschool teachers. However, 39% of preschool practitioners ticked “neither agree or disagree” for this question, suggesting that they are unsure as to the importance of such skills at junior infant level.

These findings must also be considered in tandem with the earlier responses suggesting that academic (rather than pre-academic) skills were not considered important skills for children to possess on making the transition to school. However, studies have shown that there is more verbal instruction at school, and a much greater focus on literacy and numeracy (Rimm-Kaufman et al, 2000; Dunlop 2002; Margetts, 2002). Parental expectations can also be called into question, with parents cited as reporting that preparation in academic terms was important in preschool, and demonstrating a lack of understanding of importance of play as a central learning approach in the infants classroom. As Griebel & Niesel (2001) state, the academic expectations of parents become more emphasised on transition to school. It is possible that preschool teachers feel pressure from parents to prepare children in academic terms for the junior infant class, or they may be influenced by their own beliefs about expectations at primary level. It would be interesting to explore this area further.

Finally, although low levels of communication and transfer of information were reported between the two groups, both groups reported that they felt such communication should take place. The DD sub-group at both preschool and primary level were more open to communication, both in terms of communication taking place generally and the passing of evaluations from preschool to primary school. The reasons for the DD sub-groups showing greater openness to communication and sharing of information are not clear.

9.3.4 Work Versus Play

Data from the Child Discussion Groups in this study reminded us that the children were very capable of constructing their own understanding of the transition to school. Allowing them to express their views, within small friendship groups, in a setting in which they were comfortable, enabled them to reflect on their experiences and express their opinions with confidence.

The children involved in the discussion groups mentioned ‘work’ and ‘listening’ as being how they spent their days at school. The implication being an expectation that school

children should work quietly and listen to their teacher. However, classroom observations in this study found that much of the children's time was spent actively involved in activities such as singing (usually involving actions) and dancing. The children were active for much of their day. Some children mentioned singing and dancing as things they liked to do in school, however in general conversation it was clear that such activities were not classed by the children as play. Friday morning was the one time during the week that the children considered as play. This was the one time 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. Indeed when considered along with the teachers' views on importance of sitting still and listening, this would reinforce the children's views that school is a place to work rather than play. This may, in some part, be due to the influence of curriculum. The infants classes curriculum in Ireland very much promotes active learning. However, it should be noted that in practice, the ability of a junior infants teacher, with a class of approximately 30 pupils, ranging in age from 4 years to 5.5 years, some with no preschool experience others with two years preschool experience, some with additional needs, some who may not speak English as their first language, may find it difficult to fully meet the needs of each individual child. This is acknowledged to some extent in the introduction to the Curriculum, which concludes that success of implementation depends on additional resources and supports (DES, 1999).

9.3.5 The Role of Play

The findings above lead us to question the role of play in preschool compared to the junior infants classroom. The Irish primary school curriculum gives precedence to learning processes and emphasises that education should be viewed as an integrated process. The child is seen as an active agent in his/her own learning, and a developmental approach to learning is emphasised. The distinctions made by the children in this study between work and play were made with reference to autonomy and free choice, be that inside or outside the classroom. This would link in with Meckley's characteristics of play, the first of which is that play is a child-chosen activity (2002). The children were also comparing their experience of school to their other educational experience of

preschool. For most of the children, their experiences of preschool appear to have involved greater levels of free choice, and greater levels of activities which they classed as being 'play'. When the children spoke about playschool, they did not mention work. Daragh "*You play all day...and you play every day*" [16-9-05(1)]. Perhaps even in the fact that they all call it 'playschool' as compared to 'preschool', a term many parents or ECCE professionals might use, suggests that they see it as a place where they were free to play. In comparison, most of their time in the junior infants classroom is spent engaged in activities chosen by the teacher. Baumer (2003) identified a concern that the transition from preschool to formal school involves crossing the boundary from the activity system of play to that of formal learning. Indeed the need for a greater balance between child-centred and teacher-directed play at school has been identified (Sylva et al, 2003, 2004; Taggart 2007; Thomas and Sheppard, 2007). Time spent at school appears to be much more of an adult-controlled world for the children as compared to their preschool experiences.

Infants classes have in the past been criticised as being overly formal (OECD, 2004). This may be linked to the large numbers in the classroom, issues pertaining to classroom management, or indeed teacher training. There is a strong tradition within ECCE services of a focus on play to extend children's learning and development, with a belief that well-supported play opportunities can challenge children and extend and support their learning (Bruce, 2001; Brennan, 2004; Wood & Attfield, 2005). Perhaps the extent to which the infants classes curriculum encourages learning through play needs to be examined in more detail. However, this must be considered along with the constraints to achieving a high quality play-based experience such as the need for a high level of resources, time for staff to properly engage as play-partners, time to observe, discuss and reflect on learning, and theoretical and pedagogical skills (Bennett et al, 1997). It is acknowledged that these factors may prove constraints to engaging in extending and challenging children's learning through play-based activities in Irish infants classes.

The responses of the children to the issue of play also leads to the question, is all play equally effective in encouraging learning in children? Research highlights the

importance of interactions during children's learning and the benefits of shared learning contexts while learning through play, and the importance of interactions and relationships in terms of children's learning (Malaguzzi, 1993; Rinaldi, 1993; Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2002; Brooker 2005, forthcoming). Firstly at preschool level, lower quality preschool experiences lacking in such quality interactions may not be preparing children adequately for learning and this acts as a barrier to success transition to the learning environment of the primary school. A high quality play-based learning approach where the adult actively extends and supports the child's learning should be more beneficial to children. Indeed, it has been suggested that the most effective form of play at preschool level is play which involves shared construction of knowledge between individuals (Brooker, 2005). Secondly, high quality preschool experiences must be followed by high quality primary experiences to be fully effective. There is a need to question whether the pedagogy of the infants classroom is best suited to effective learning opportunities for children at this level. Periods of sustained shared thinking have been identified as being particularly important in terms of extending children's learning (Sylva et al, 2003, 2004; Taggart 2007). However, opportunities for sustained shared thinking are limited at infants level. The lack of appropriate training in play-based philosophies and time for reflection were noted as being challenges to the development of a more play based practice.

9.3.6 Outdoor Play

Outdoor play was noted as being a difficult experience for some of the children, however others expressed a marked preference for outdoor activities. 'The Yard' and playing outside were mentioned many times in conversations about favourite places in school, but for many children this was not the case, particularly in the early days during their transition to school. Research in Chapter 4 has highlighted the fact that name-calling and other stereotyping can become common practice during unsupervised break times. It has been recommended that staff should take bullying actions seriously, and should undertake social engineering on behalf of isolated children. It was clear from Child Discussion Group data that both Mark and Daragh, and to some extent Ryan, had experienced some form of bullying behaviour during break-times very early in their school career. The role

of adults in supporting children's social relationships is clearly important here, both in providing rule-systems with regards to acceptable behaviour, and in supporting children who are experiencing any form of bullying, and indeed in working with the bullies themselves. Teachers in Phase I of this study have suggested that children with well developed social skills, confidence, and well developed communication skills are more likely to make a successful transition to school. They also suggested that children with low self-esteem are most likely to experience difficulties. The role of teachers, both at preschool and primary level in helping children develop the skills to cope with change is important. The preschool years in particular are important in equipping children with the social competence which the teachers in this study feel is necessary to enable them to meet the challenges they will face on entry to school. It is in the best interests of the child to equip them with the social and interpersonal skills necessary to negotiate not only classroom life, but assist in building new relationships. It is a concern that children are reporting experiences of bullying in their first year of school, and this warrants further investigation.

The children noted a difference in levels of outdoor equipment available at preschool level as compared to school. Perhaps more equipment, not necessarily expensive equipment, available in the yard would assist children in the early stages of transition. It is clear that the yard can be a difficult place to negotiate for children who may be less confident, have less well developed self-esteem, social skills and language skills, or children who are shy. During the early days at school an organised activity, for example some form of team game, led by teachers could provide a context in which it is easier for these children to negotiate new friendships. It is suggested that teachers should actively encourage interactions and friendships with peers. They should encourage socialisation by helping children with less developed skills respond to the play routines adopted by other children in the class.

9.3.7 Adaptation to the Rules

Brennan & Hayes advise “*children want to belong and therefore they are keen to be skilful in the ways that are recognised and valued among significant people in their lives.*” (2007, p9). This was found to be the case in this study with regard to the children’s adaptation and understanding of the rules and regulations of school life. During discussion groups the children often referred to the rules which they must obey at school, and the reward and punishment systems in place. Similar findings from international research were discussed in Chapter 5 (Peters, 2000; Perry et al 2000; Dockett & Perry, 2007). The children in this study demonstrated that knowing the rules, and following the rules, was important in school. They were 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 obvious 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. When asked what they would tell children who were going to start school about school life, they responded by listing rules which they considered to be important. These findings highlight the changing role of the child making the transition from preschool to formal schooling. The children were aware of a loss of autonomy in the role of school child, and knew that they were expected to adapt to this new role, involving compliance with the rules of the classroom and the wider school context. Ledger has suggested that the role of the schoolchild in the classroom is “*a child who worked, a child who was obedient, and compliant.*” (2000, p.281). The children in this study expressed similar views of how they saw the role of school child.

Preschools usually use discipline approaches involving self-regulation or guidance on behaviour, however at school level this usually changes to more intricate reward and punishment systems (Dockett & Perry, 2007) such as the ‘star’ system at place in Springwood school. This has clear implications, as Dockett and Perry advise, in terms of

children believing that either they themselves, or other children in the class, are ‘bad’ (or ‘bold’ in the case of the present study) if they are not achieving the same level of rewards as their classmates. Indeed, the children in Springwood school could all cite examples of, and name the students involved in, instances where children lost a star. In the case of Springwood School, where stars are gained by children for the table at which they sit, and can be lost by children not for themselves as individuals, but from the group total, there are implications involved in the use of such systems. Such a system may work well from a teacher’s perspective encouraging policing by children of children, however repercussions may be felt by the children who are seen to cost the group rewards. It is not clear that such a system of behaviour control is necessarily beneficial to children themselves.

9.4 Families Experiencing Transition

It became clear during the study that the transition from preschool to school was not only a transition for the child, but also impacted on family life in various ways as outlined below.

9.4.1 The Role of the Parent

The Case Study data showed that parents were very aware of the expectations of teachers and the view that teachers were judging them against previously held images of the ideal school parent. In terms of ‘transitions capital’ (Dunlop, 2007; 2007a) the Case Studies suggest that the role of school parent and how this is viewed both by individual parents and teaching staff, will impact on the ‘transitions capital’ of the individual child. Differences between how some parents are viewed by the school, and how they believe they are viewed, was also a theme running through the case studies.

The Case Studies also demonstrated how difficulties can arise if parents are not seen to take on board the role of school parent. Sarah, the mother of Janice and Fiona, was not seen to be performing the duties necessary for this role. Mrs Murphy and Aideen clearly

had some concerns about how the twins 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. Indeed research has highlighted the need for adequate nutrition and nurturing to support children in their learning (McCain & Mustard, 1999). 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 their education. They expressed a belief that the twins were not helped in any way with homework (other than by their older siblings) however this was not the case. Sarah had an understanding of her daughters' abilities and indeed gave Janice extra help with her words and letters at home. This would support research findings that teachers are often unaware of parent's home assistance to children in their learning (Brooker, 2002). Patrick and Margaret, however, were seen as successful parents because they conform to standards which Brooker suggests are considered important by teachers, in that they ensured that Ross undertook a school-like education at preschool level, they also have a responsible attitude towards parenting, they are supportive of the school and the teacher, and emphasise the importance of school education to Ross himself. So, although both Sarah and Patrick mentioned the importance of attending the Information Evening, it seems that Sarah's inability to perform in other areas considered important to the teaching staff, did not earn the 'credibility' that she expected to as a result of attending. If Patrick remains supportive of the school ethos and practices, he should continue to be seen as a model parent. However, Patrick's expectations are high. If for any reason Springwood school does not continue to perform as Patrick expects, this situation may not continue. In ecological terms, Bronfenbrenner suggested that inconsistencies in the beliefs of important figures in different Microsystems result in slower development for the child. If links between home and school are strong and expectations are similar, development for the children involved is likely to be strong.

The parents were also aware that they were being judged in their new role as school parents. They were aware of the need to behave in a way that was acceptable to Mrs Murphy and the school in general. For example, Sarah attended the Information Evening as she wanted to be seen to attend. Eimear and Cathy also reported not interrupting the

teacher to discuss their child, although Eimear particularly said she would have preferred greater contact. Oonagh also mentioned that she left Callum although he was upset, as she knew that teachers preferred parents to leave rather than delay in the classroom. The way in which parents reacted to being judged, and the skills and cultural capital they held, helped facilitate some of the parents in their adaptation to this role.

9.4.2 Parents Views on Readiness

Most of the parents in the study believed that age was a defining factor in school readiness, and expressed a belief that children benefit from starting school older. Studies have suggested that the tendency for parents to introduce children to formal schooling at too young an age results in more behaviour and learning problems for children, and will not result in long-term academic gains (Prais, 1997; Pugh, 1996, 2001). Most of the parents in this study however did not appear to be focusing specifically on academic gains, but as Cathy highlighted, 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.

Other than age, the parents focused on social skills, communication skills, and confidence as being important for children to possess on arrival at school. However, academic concepts, such the ability to count and know the alphabet, were mentioned by three of the seven parents. The fact that teachers cite parents as being a source of pressure in terms of promoting an academic curriculum was highlighted above. Teachers at the 2006 INTO conference on Early Years Education reported a number of factors adding to pressure to adopt a more formal teaching approach in the infant classes, one of these was pressure from parents, who it was suggested judge quality teaching in terms of academic progress (INTO, 2006).

All the parents in the study felt that their children had benefited from their preschool experiences, and all felt that these experiences had in many ways prepared their children for school. Specifically they mentioned the development of social skills, independence,

learning routines. Again three parents mentioned academic skills. All the parents in the study mentioned that moving from a small group to a class size of 30 was something that their children would find difficult to adapt to, and many mentioned this as being one of their concerns about their child starting school. They all spoke of the children playing at preschool, but expected a more formal approach in junior infants, and some mentioned being concerned about how their child would adapt to the more formal approach.

9.4.3 Parental Involvement

The rhetoric in favour of parent involvement in their children's education is high, however whether such involvement is really welcomed in practice could be questioned. Research has highlighted the importance of parental involvement in children's transitions (Margetts, 2002; Dockett & Perry, 2004). However, it is clear that Irish preschool and primary school teachers do not consider home visits to be a useful tool in generating such involvement. Similar findings have been reported in other studies. Interestingly, the first pre-primary school service to be funded by the Department of Education, the Rutland Street Project, an intervention aimed to prepare children in an inner-city disadvantaged area for school tried to incorporate home visits into the preschool programme but discontinued these. The teachers in the current study were most likely to send a letter home to parents. It would be interesting to know the reasons for valuing written communication above home visits. Time constraints may well play a part in their views.

The importance of cultural capital in terms of parent-school relationships has been identified (Brooker, 2002, 2003). This cultural capital will also be transferred to the children themselves, the implication being that children who possess high levels of cultural capital will experience an easier transition into the school environment. The Case Study findings on Janice and Fiona highlighted how differences in the mesosystem of home and school can cause difficulties. If left unreconciled, such differences of opinion may not bode well for Janice and Fiona's future school development, as Margetts notes "*children are at risk of not adjusting easily to school when there is a mismatch between the personal and cultural skills, attitudes and knowledge they bring to school,*

and the expectations of the school itself? (2005 p36). The case study data suggested that practitioners can make assumptions about parental involvement, based on the more visible aspects of capital which children or their parents display. It is a concern that such assumptions could become a self-fulfilling prophecy, if there is no clear communication between parents and schools. Different home and preschool experiences will provide children with different levels of cultural capital, and some experiences will empower children more than others. If inequalities between pupils are to be dealt with, then a greater commitment needs to be given to establishing better partnerships with parents, particularly those who may not easily fit into the role of 'school parent'. It has been identified that working in partnership with parents can have its challenges (Draper & Duffy, 2006). Partnerships may not always be equal. Staff may not be trained in communicating with parents, and may find communicating with some groups of parents more difficult than others. However, Whalley (2001) suggests that when thought and consideration is given to offering parents wide ranging opportunities for involvement, high levels of participation can be achieved.

Alton, Mizukami, Banks, Quick & Dziadul (2003) stress the importance of honesty in parent-teacher relationships. They suggest that proper parent-teacher partnerships emerge when both groups feel that they can honestly and openly share information with the other party. The case study data led to questions about communication difficulties between some parents and teachers as regards their children's progress. It was clear in the case of Patrick and Margaret that mixed messages were being received. A lack of opportunities for communication with teaching staff was also identified. Although schools may consider that they have an open door policy, it could be questioned as to whether parents feel comfortable approaching staff. Indeed parents in the current study who would be considered empowered in terms of ability to approach teaching staff noted reservations about initiating contact. This is an issue that needs further research.

9.5 Professionals Supporting Transition

Both preschool practitioners and teachers of junior infants classes are very powerful players in the process of transition. It is they who ultimately have the responsibility for implementing, or not, recommendations relating to supporting transitions for children. Their beliefs, expectations, and classroom practices will have a great impact on transition.

9.5.1 Preschool Support

Research has demonstrated the value of high quality ECCE both short-term and long-term in nature (Schweinhart & Weikart 1997; Schweinhart, 2004; Sylva et al, 2004). Such high quality preschools could be the ideal environment for children to develop the skills that teachers have noted above as being important on entry to school. These skills would benefit children both at preschool level and for their long-term future. Preschool teachers clearly have a role in supporting children in this area. They can help children to interact with adults and peers in positive ways, be responsible for themselves and their belongings, and build their self-esteem and confidence. They also clearly have a very important role to play in helping develop these skills for children who might have a lack of positive social encounters and interactions in their home life. The preschool teachers in this study clearly saw their role with regard to preparing children for the transition to formal school in terms of encouraging independence in children, including responsibility for both themselves and their belongings, and the use of classroom-type rules such as standing in line and waiting their turn. These findings would support their responses that independence and skills such as sitting still and listening are important for children to possess on arrival at school. They also saw a role for themselves in terms of discussing the transition both with parents and with children. They did not feel that preschools should prepare children in academic terms for primary school, even though, as discussed above, they did in practice emphasise academic aspects of the curriculum.

Although it is clear that a quality preschool experience can be a powerful tool in preparation for formal schooling, it is important that it is recognised as being an important stage in its own right. Fears have been expressed by both the parents and teachers in this study about a push-down of academics from primary to preschool level. This may be a by-product of the emphasis on early education as a vehicle for preparing children for primary school. The OECD (2002) advises that in most countries fears have been expressed about the ‘schoolification’ of early education. Clearly the importance of reaching a balance between preparing for formal school and valuing early education as a phase in itself must be stressed.

9.5.2 The Ready School

Teachers in the study outlined the skills they believe children should possess to cope with the demands of the first years of primary education, however it is also important that schools should be “child ready” (Brostrom, 2000, 2002; Bernard Van Leer Foundation, 2006). The aim is for each child to capitalise on the knowledge they bring to school. Brostrom stresses that this relates not only to the physical environment, but also the emotional environment of the school. It was not clear from the research findings that schools in Ireland are in fact child ready. Dunphy (2005) reminds us that infants classes in Ireland have been criticised for having an over-formal approach. Teachers have been recommended to adopt pedagogical styles more aligned with the needs of the children they are teaching, than are currently in place. In fact, the OECD reported that their overall impression of the Irish infants classroom was one of “*whole class teaching, with children sitting quietly at tables. The approach appeared to be directive and formal compared to practices observed and theoretically underpinned on other countries*” (2004, p58). Carty (2007) reports that children in more formal classrooms are more likely to dichotomise work and play. She proposed that such children see learning as being a teacher-directed activity, while play is considered to be a self-initiated activity, which was indeed a view expressed by many of the children in this study. As noted above, findings from the EPPE project (Sylva et al, 2004, 2004a) and the REPEY project (Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden & Bell, 2002) emphasise the importance of

extending children's understanding by sustained shared thinking and high-quality adult-child verbal interactions. Both studies propose that neither of these types of interactions were extensively found in ECCE settings, even those considered to be highly effective settings. Taggart (2007) asks practitioners to consider the impact of achieving higher levels of such interactions and the effect they would have on children's learning. However, the need for teachers at infant levels to increase the levels of such interactions must be considered in tandem with calls by teachers in this study for reduced class sizes, and increasing numbers of classroom assistants. Suggestions have also been made that lack of time for reflection can also result in difficulties for teachers in clearly understanding and embracing a change in teaching style and pedagogy (Dunphy, 2007).

The importance of socio-emotional wellbeing at the time of transition is well noted in the research, as cited in Chapter 4. The suggestion being that children who are socially skilled are more likely than children with less developed social skills to increase positive experiences within relationships. It is also suggested that children cope better emotionally with the transition to formal schooling when making the transition with peers that they view as friends. Findings from this study showed that encouraging new friendships for children starting school without a friend was an area that preschool teachers considered to be important, with 84% feeling that teachers of junior infants classes should encourage such friendships. However teachers of junior infants classes did not place an emphasis on this area. This finding may link to earlier findings on emotional skills where preschool teachers ranked confidence and emotional skills more highly than the primary school sample. Promoting friendships, both existing and new, in the first year of school, and pairing children with friends in the same class are strategies which could easily be promoted. It is interesting that such practices, which would not appear difficult in practical terms, are not better supported by teachers of junior infants classes. The reasons for this are not clear.

The teachers in this study were asked to identify the greatest difficulties they were experiencing in the junior infants classroom. Class sizes at junior infants level was clearly considered to be the greatest difficulty the teachers of junior infants classes are facing,

while the need for classroom assistants was also a priority. Children starting school too young, the need for greater resources at infant level, and better adult:child ratios were also issues raised. Calls for smaller classes and more classroom assistants echo the findings of international studies asking for preschool and primary school teacher's views on the first year of schooling (Wesley & Buysee, 2003). Most teachers reported that they spend over fifty per cent of their day in whole class activity. This took place for classroom management reasons rather than a belief that this was the most appropriate grouping for this age group of children. This situation may well be linked to class size and adult:child ratios. The need for smaller class sizes in Ireland at infant level has been highlighted by many stakeholders, as outlined in Chapter 2. It is clear from the findings of the present study that class sizes and adult:child ratios will impact on the ability of the schools to be adequately ready to meet the needs of each individual student. Data from the case study parents also suggests that lack of communication identified, fears about initiating communication, and breakdowns in communication will also impact on whether schools are ready to meet the needs of parents also.

Teachers in the study highlighted the need for classroom assistants. However, even though the infants class at Springwood school had a full-time classroom assistant, opportunities did not appear to be available to support each child's individual learning style. For example Rachael's love of singing and fun was not harnessed in terms of her learning and lack of interest in the academic side of school. Janice's social skills, and confidence on the yard, were not used to support her learning in the classroom. Few opportunities were available in this class of 30 pupils for any individual work between the teacher and pupils. Considered in tandem with the findings from Phase I where teachers reported spending little time working on an individual basis with children, the importance of time to engage with each child on an individual or small-group basis is clear. Some children may need access to the teacher in a smaller group situation to properly gain from their classroom experiences. It appears that in some Irish infants classes (even those with a classroom assistant) opportunities are not provided to facilitate such interaction. Clearly support for teachers, in terms of providing the environment, resources, and time to facilitate high level adult-child learning experiences which support

and extend children's learning is required. However an evaluation of the Breaking the Cycle scheme, where students in selected schools in disadvantaged areas attend classes of 15 at infants level, found that for such class sizes to be effective, other issues such as attendance issues, staffing problems (such as staff retention issues, and teaching practices), and both students and teachers educational experiences must be addressed (Weir, 2003).

9.6 The Role of Continuity

The importance of continuity between preschool and primary schools to facilitate transition for children and their parents has been identified internationally (Christenson, 1999; Margetts, 2002; Bernard Van Leer Foundation, 2006). However, this study did not find high levels of continuity, or planning for transition, at preschool or primary level.

9.6.1 Planning for Transition

Few schools or preschools in the study had a transition plan in place, and a lack of clear planning for transition, other than in basic practical terms, combined with a lack of communication between the two groups of teachers was found. Brostrom (2000, 2002) suggests that lack of resources and lack of time are two of the most visible barriers to transition programmes. However, he suggests that another hidden barrier also exists which often goes unacknowledged. This stems from the cultural differences between preschool and primary school teachers, who find it difficult to find common ground in order to communicate and co-operate effectively.

It is important to recognise the differences between the preschool system and the school system during the process of transition for a child. Indeed, as this study has found, the differences between the preschool and primary sectors in Ireland are wide-ranging, as identified in Chapter 2. A partnership between preschools and school needs to include a respect for differences between the two educational settings, while also ensuring greater levels of consistency for children across settings. Training could play an important role

in this regard. Some of the philosophical differences between the preschool and primary school sectors in Ireland may well stem from the traditionally very different training within the two sectors. Primary teacher training has been criticised for a lack of emphasis on early childhood development and learning through play (INTO, 2005). Training within the preschool sector is very fragmented, however it has been suggested that the need for pre-service training is becoming more widely understood in the ECCE sector (O’Kane, 2004). The findings of the current study with regard to preacademic skills, where 39% of preschool teachers were unsure as to the importance of such skills at junior infant level, highlight a lack of understanding by the preschool group of the primary level curriculum. Some of the qualitative data noted in Chapter 7 also suggested a lack of understanding in both sectors as to the extent and nature of the other providers’ services. Some form of joint in-service type training would bring the two groups of teachers together and provide opportunities to develop greater understanding. Such joint training might assist the two groups of teachers in reaching out to each other and work together to develop a shared vision of education from 0-6 years, and work towards providing opportunities to ease the transition for children between the two settings.

Different expectations of children at preschool and primary level can also provide difficulties in terms of continuity for children. Children with the experience of the preschool environment, may well use this experience on which to build their expectations of primary school. However, primary school is often a very different experience culturally, in terms of curriculum, and in terms of expectations. For example, the skill of making independent choices about work is valued at preschool level, however the skill of responding well to adult direction is more valued at primary level. Although fears have been articulated, as identified above, about a possible push-down of teacher-led academic work rather than child-centred play-based learning (Carr, 2000; Peters 2002; Daly 2002), if the two cultures can come together while respecting each tradition, the resulting continuity of approach could benefit children making the transition between the two educational settings. Policies are needed that would foster communication in this area.

The issue of multiple preschools sending children to the one primary school could also be considered a barrier to developing practices for transition to formal schooling. As identified in this study, Springwood school, as is the case in most primary schools in Ireland, receives children from various different ECCE programmes. Each of these ECCE settings will have its own policies, procedures, and views on transition. Margetts (2002) reports on transition networks developed in Victoria, Australia which plan transition programmes in relation to the broader community context. This works to combat the issue of many preschools feeding into one school. These networks also provide professional development for staff in wide ranging areas to combat the divisions that exist between the preschool and school sectors, and promote continuity among the two sectors. She reported a consensus among the schools that although planning a programme takes time, this is time well spent. From an ecological perspective such community wide programmes acknowledge that the child is embedded within the family, and the family within the community. Such an approach would support the ecological approach of acknowledging the different contexts involved, and the interactions between these contexts over time. A similar approach might work well in Ireland.

9.6.2 Curricular Continuity

Dunlop (2007a) suggests that by carefully examining transitions, we can gauge whether systems in place, such as curricula, are adequately supporting children at this time. The Case Study findings showed that Mrs Murphy was an advocate of the New Curriculum in terms of placing a clear emphasis on oral work and active learning. Generally speaking, the parents in the study did report an expectation of a more academic curriculum at primary level. The children saw their school life as consisting of 'work' and 'listening' most of the time, they also reported a difference in beliefs about the role of play at preschool level compared to what they saw as the work-based environment of school.

A curriculum is only as effective as the practitioners implementing it. An understanding of the theories of learning and development which underpin the curricula, and the intricacies and ethos behind the curricula is vital to it being implemented in a way that

will provide a richness of both activities and interactions in which the child's learning can be supported and extended. It is not clear from the findings of the present study that the curricula of Irish preschools and primary schools offer continuity to children during this transition, particularly in relation to play.

Daly (2002) found that more than half of both preschool and primary staff proposed that the curriculum for infant classes children should be profoundly different from the more senior classes. Reasons for this included the need for more time to play, a focus on a less academic curriculum, and to allow for smaller group teaching. Her respondents also identified the need for smaller classes in order to effectively work with the curriculum at infants level. Dunphy (2000) also noted the importance that class size and adult:child ratios make to effective classroom interaction at infants level. She suggests that they are of importance in terms of developing language skills and quality interactions, and proposes that many of the teaching methodologies appropriate for this age group depend on the adult having enough time to actively get involved with the children in terms of learning opportunities. Both preschool and primary school teachers now have the opportunity to avail of the recently launched *Síolta* framework (CECDE, 2006b, 2006c) and the National Framework for Learning, due to be launched end 2007. These two complementary frameworks may well prove to be a positive step towards providing coherent links between the two sectors.

9.7 The Role of Communication

Communication was identified in the research findings as being of importance in all areas in order to facilitate the transition to school for children. Communication between educational settings, and communication with parents were identified as being particularly important. Communication between preschool and primary school settings is vital in order to ensure appropriate continuity between the two educational institutions, and parental involvement has been emphasised during the transition to school as being beneficial for all concerned (Clarke, 2007).

9.7.1 Preschool and Primary School Communication

The importance of communication between preschool and primary settings has been noted, and it is recommended that bonds between these two settings should be strengthened. The OECD (2002) has emphasized that strong links between the two sectors can have a number of advantages in terms of developing shared goals, educational methods, and creating coherence in staff training and development. If the two cultures can come together and communicate openly while respecting each tradition, the resulting continuity of approach could benefit children making the transition between the two educational settings. Levels of communication between the two groups of teachers in the present study was reported to be low, however both groups of teachers seemed to be open to greater levels of communication. Although agreement levels are stronger in the preschool group, both groups appear to be more in favour of the communication being established by the teachers of junior infants classes. The OECD (2002) proposes that once the specificity of ECCE services is still recognised, then there are advantages to strong links with formal education. They suggest that if the developmental and educational benefits of ECCE remain in view then links will bring broad public recognition, which in turn will result in better financing, and issues with regard to staff training and pay and conditions being recognised. Greater partnership would also result in greater agreement about ECCE programme objectives and methodologies.

9.7.2. Different Uses of Language

An important issue with relation to communication between preschool and primary school teachers related to the issue of language. Some differences in the use of language within the two educational spheres were noted in the study findings. It is unclear whether the difference found are true differences in opinion, different uses of terminology, or a different cultural understanding of certain concepts. This clearly is an important issue. Dunlop (2003) found during a study of continuity and progression in children's early education in the United Kingdom, that teachers in preschool and primary settings had a shared use of terminology, however this did not reflect shared meanings. Differences in

cultural expectations, and distinctions in meaning the two groups of teachers take from the same language have been identified in previous Irish research (Hayes, O'Flaherty & Kernan, 1997) and may well be the case here. As Dunlop and Fabian advise “*a shared language to describe transitions may not be a mutual one*” (2002, p146). Considering the historical and cultural divergence between preschool and primary education in Ireland which covers nearly every aspect of both types of settings, it is possible that this is the case. This possible gap in understanding requires further investigation, particularly if greater levels of communication between the two groups are to be encouraged.

9.7.3 Communication with Parents

Some of the parents in the study expressed some concerns about a lack of home-school liaison, a finding that has been noted in other studies internationally (Clarke, 2007; Niilo, 2007). Indeed parents who would have appeared to be empowered in terms of communication skills were reluctant to contact the school. Schools historically have not considered working with the community a priority, and very often teachers view such contact as unnecessary or too time consuming to be practical (Bowman, 1999). Many teachers in the United States are reported as not having the training or experience to communicate effectively with low income families (Bowman 1997; 1999). This may be the case in Ireland also, where teacher training coursework does not concentrate on equipping teachers with the skills to work effectively with parents. With this in mind, the researcher conducted a brief review of the syllabi of three of the teacher training colleges in Ireland¹. She found that although in one college it is possible to take a BA Hons Degree in Education and Psychology, the general teacher training degrees (B.Ed) place little emphasis on communication with parents as part of their standard training. Although the courses contain modules of Psychology, these mostly relate to Educational Psychology, and Developmental Psychology.

¹ There are five Colleges of Education in Ireland for primary teachers which offer three year full-time courses leading to a B.Ed degree which is the recognised qualification for primary teaching. The Three colleges whose syllabi were examined were: St Patricks' College Drumcondra, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick, and the Froebel College of Education, Dublin.

International research has noted a marked change in levels of parent-teacher communication on transfer from preschool to primary school (Peters, 2000; Dockett & Perry 2004b). In these studies it was noted that there were generally less opportunities available for parents to make contact with schools, and the new phenomena of children taking responsibility for taking notes home to parents, as compared to individual verbal communication at preschool level. In this way, children at primary level were given the responsibility of communicating messages home to parents. Indeed the new text-based messaging service in use at Springwood school, although noted by parents as being efficient, may result in even less personal communication between staff and parents.

It should also be recognised though that parents may have different expectations about communication at primary level compared to preschool level. Speaking before school start, Patrick appeared to believe that when Ross attended school there would be fewer opportunities for communication. When talking about preschool he said “...*and Margaret could go down...*” [Patrick, I.1]. He appeared to believe it would not be acceptable to “go down” to talk to the primary school teacher in the way that Margaret had previously with the preschool teacher. Eimear also suggested that she did not feel it appropriate to interrupt the teacher. So teachers may also be dealing with parents preconceived ideas about the levels of communication that are expected at primary level.

The question of whether parents and teachers pick up the same information from joint communications was also noted in the study findings. Patrick for example received a very positive message from his parent-teacher meeting, he took away the good points, while ignoring the advice that Ross needed to work on his writing, and that Mrs Murphy was concerned about this. Perhaps teachers sometimes speak in a veiled manner, and 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. Or perhaps some parents are unwilling to accept negative messages. Clearly differences of opinion exist between Patrick and the school staff with regard to Ross’ abilities in both academic skills and social skills. The exact reasons for these differences of opinion are not clear, however

it is likely that difficulties will arise if parents and teachers are having difficulty communicating accurately.

9.8 Summary

The key themes which emerged from the research related to the following five areas: Children Experiencing Transition; Families Experiencing Transition; Professionals Supporting Transitions; the Role of Continuity; and the Role of Communication.

With regard to children themselves it was noted that the beliefs and perceptions of teachers have the potential to influence the children during this important year. A concern was expressed that beliefs about risk may become self-fulfilling prophecies without supports in place. In this regard, assisting children at risk of experiencing a difficult transition to improve the skills that might assist them during this period is recommended, in tandem with schools working towards being more ‘ready’ for the range of children arriving each year.

The children themselves outlined the work-play dichotomy, the importance of rules, and experiences in the Yard as being important to their transition. Findings from the study also supported the notion that the transition from preschool to formal school involves crossing the boundary from the activity system of play to that of formal learning. This led to a discussion on the role of play at preschool and primary level, and the influence of curriculum on this role.

As regards the parental experience of transition, it was noted that the role of school parent and how this role is viewed by parents and teaching staff, will impact on the ‘transitions capital’ of the child. Parent’s views on readiness, and the impact of these view, were outlined. Parental involvement in children’s transitions was also identified as an area of importance, however whether such involvement is really welcomed in practice was questioned.

With regard to professional support, it was identified that the beliefs, expectations, and classroom practices of both preschool and primary school teachers will have a great impact on transition. The need to reach a balance between preparing for formal school and valuing early education as a phase in itself was stressed. The study did not find high levels of continuity, or planning for transition, at preschool or primary level. A lack of understanding in both sectors as to the extent and nature of the other providers' services was also identified. The importance of communication between preschool and primary settings was noted. It was suggested that in order for a co-construction of transition to take place between the two groups of teachers, that there needs to be a mutual clarification of expectations, and a clearer understanding of language use and meanings between the two educational spheres. The exploration of these themes leads to conclusions and recommendations which are discussed in Chapter 10.