

The Transition To School in Ireland: What Do The Children Say?

Mary O'Kane

Introduction

Internationally the transition to school has been recognised as being one of the most significant times in the life of a child, with consequences that are long lasting and far reaching (Margetts, 1999; Bernard Van Leer Foundation, 2006; Fabian and Dunlop, 2006). However, there has been limited research into transition from an Irish context. This paper presents some initial findings from the research project *Building Bridges: The Transition from Preschool to School for Children in Ireland*¹. It describes a sub-set of the data, the findings from child discussion groups involving children who started school in September 2005.

Methodology

The project aimed to view transition from an ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1998) and consider it in terms of the influence of contexts and the connections between these contexts across time. In order to do this a variety of methodological approaches were employed².

The researcher developed the methodological approach while working from the premise that children's development is embedded within the social and cultural context they inhabit, and that the relationships within these contexts are all-important. Much can be learned about children's direct experiences by observing them within these contexts, and by including them as partners in the research process. To facilitate this partnership, one of the considerations when developing the methodological approach was the right of the children to have a voice in research relating to their lives, and the belief that a child making the transition to school could be a competent participant in such research. The lack of research which facilitates the voice of the child to be heard has been noted internationally (Clarke, *et al.*, 2003; Dockett and Perry, 2005) and nationally (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform [DJELR], 1999; Department of Health and Children [DHC], 2000). The intention in this study was to better understand the perceptions of the children themselves, and child discussion groups were one aspect of including the children in the research process. Children with signed parental consent forms were invited to take part and all children invited chose to take part in the discussions. A conscious

Note:

- 1 This research is funded by a scholarship through the CECDE (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education), and is being undertaken as a PhD by Mary O'Kane, through Dublin Institute of Technology, supervised by Dr. Nóirín Hayes.
- 2 Further details of other aspects of the study can be found in O'Kane and Hayes (2006), and O'Kane (forthcoming).

decision was made to group friends together when deciding on participants. In total, ten group discussions took place over the course of the project, involving forty-seven participants.

Findings from Child Discussion Groups

For reasons of confidentiality all the children's names have been changed, their teacher is referred to as Mrs. Murphy, and the school principal is referred to as Mr. Delaney.

When asked why children had to go to school, the children were quite clear, they were there to learn. As Fiona explained *"to learn things, to learn to read."* [Fiona, (1) 21-6-06]. Tommy expanded *"to learn, and to read, and to do work, and to have good fun"* [Tommy (3), 21-6-06].

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. They differentiated between Friday morning 'play-time' (free play) and the rest of the school week. The free play time was clearly a time that many of the children valued highly, when asked what they did on the other days Daragh replied *"We just do work"*, Ruairi agreed *"We do listening."* [Daragh and Ruairi (1), 16-9-05]. This work-play dichotomy was also reported by Sharp and White (2005). It is clear that although a play-based approach to learning is advocated for children of this age (Department of Education and Science [DES], 1999) the children themselves regard what they do as work. It is also worth noting that when the children spoke about playschool, they did not mention work. Daragh *"You play all day...and you play every day...and I was playing with water, and sand and water, and paints"* [Daragh (1), 16-9-05]. So, 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."* [Daragh (3), 14-2-06].

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. Griebel and Niesel (2001) found that break time was also very meaningful for the children in their study of transition, and suggested that this focus on the familiar gave the children an opportunity to seek continuity during a time of change. It was clear from some of the discussions in the present study 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, a preference that has been noted internationally (Ledger, 2000; Clark and Moss, 2001; Sheridan and Pramling Samuelsson, 2001). 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.

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"* [Daragh (3), 14-2-06]. The following conversation between Daragh and Mark highlights the issue:

- 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: *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.*

[Excerpt from Group 2, 19-9-05]

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. However, bullying was also mentioned as being experienced by Daragh and another boy during other discussion groups. 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 (O'Kane and Hayes, 2006). Fabian and Dunlop (2002) propose that the stresses involved in starting school are decreased with better social understanding, and that teachers and parents are well placed to empower children with the social skills needed to cope with the transition. The preschool years in particular are cited as being of particular importance in this regard. The researcher would agree that 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.

'The Yard' (the commonly used term for the school playground) was mentioned in many contexts during the conversations. Feeling about the yard varied among the children. It was mentioned in conversations about favourite places in school, however school

observations conducted by the researcher, and teacher comments, suggested that this was not the case for all children, particularly at the beginning of the school year. 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. Conversations including one of the children clearly highlighted how his experience of the yard had changed over time. During a discussion group held in September 2005, Callum mentioned finding the yard very noisy, and spoke very quietly when speaking about the yard *"I just walk. There's nobody really to play with...and there's nothing really to do."* [Callum (1), 9-9-05]. Indeed, Callum spent a large amount of time during the first weeks at school alone in the yard, or in the company of the Classroom Assistant. However, by February 2006 Callum was much more comfortable playing in the yard, and cheerfully explained how to play his favourite game to the researcher, which he played with other boys from his class and an older class. Other children mentioned the yard/grass as being their favourite place to play in school. Although there was no formal equipment available for use by the children, playground observations found that children soon learned to form their own games, or involve each other in games that they knew already, and organised games (usually involving some form of chasing) developed quickly.

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 Mrs. Murphy playing a clear role in instruction, and in terms of making decisions with regard to 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. Ledger (2000) highlighted the changing role of the child making the transition from preschool to formal schooling as being of importance. She suggested that the new role of the child in the classroom was of *"a child who worked, a child who was obedient, and compliant."* (Ledger, 2000: 281). The children in this study expressed similar views of how they saw the role of school child.

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:

"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!"

[Erin, First Discussion Group 14-02-06]

Any form of corporal punishment is forbidden in Irish primary schools, so Erin's vision of Mr. Delaney slapping children is part of the mis-information that has developed among the children. Interestingly, 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, and told me on other occasions that this was a punishment for the older classes only. 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 in discussing the fact that this could take place, often with great dramatic effect!

Conclusion

The findings reported in this paper represent preliminary data analysis of a wider data set. Full analysis will be complete by the end of 2007, and will include additional data from preschool and primary school teachers, parents, and the seven case study children.

Analysis of the child discussion group data is at a very early stage, and for that reason it is too early to draw any formal conclusions. However, the children have shown that they are well able to express their opinions on school life, and their experiences in school. They have 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 can confidently describe their own world-view, and have provided insights into life as a junior infant that are both perceptive and informative. The responsibility now lies with the researcher to take the time to explore their thoughts, and learn from what they have to say.

References

- Bernard Van Leer Foundation (2006). Transitions in the Early Years: A Learning Opportunity. *Early Childhood Matters*, November 2006, No. 107.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. and Morris, P. A. (1998). The Ecology of Developmental Processes (in) Damon, W. and Lerner, R. M. (Eds.) *Handbook of Child Psychology: Vol. 1. Theoretical Models of Human Development* (5th Edition). New York: Wiley, pp. 993-1029.
- Clark, A. and Moss, P. (2001). *Listening to Young Children: The Mosaic Approach*. London: National Children's Bureau.
- Clarke, A., McQuail, S. and Moss, P. (2003). *Exploring the Field of Listening to and Consulting With Young Children*. Nottingham: Thomas Coram Research Unit.

Department of Education and Science (1999). *The Revised Primary School Curriculum*. Dublin: The Stationery Office.

Department of Health and Children (2000). *The National Children's Strategy: Our Children - Their Lives*. Dublin: The Stationery Office.

Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (1999). *National Childcare Strategy: Report of the Partnership 2000 Expert Working Group on Childcare*. Dublin: The Stationery Office.

Dockett, S. and Perry, B. (2005). Researching with Children: Insights from the Starting School Research Project. *Early Child Development and Care*, Vol. 175, No. 6, pp. 507-521.

Fabian, H. and Dunlop, A. W. (2002). Inter-conneXions. Paper presented as a parallel session at the *Progress with Purpose* Conference, March 18th 2002, Edinburgh.

Fabian, H. and Dunlop, A. W. (2006). Outcomes of Good Practice in Transition Processes for Children Entering Primary School. Paper Commissioned for the EFA Global Monitoring Report 2007, *Strong Foundations: Early Childhood Care and Education*. Paris: UNESCO.

Griebel, W. and Niesel, R. (2001). Transition to School: What Children Tell About School and What They Teach Us. Paper presented at the EECERA 11th European Conference on Quality in Early Childhood Education, *Early Childhood Narratives - Early Childhood and New Understanding of the Mind*, 29th August - 1st September, Alkmaar, Netherlands.

Ledger, E. (2000). *Children's Perception of Their Everyday Lives with a Focus on the Transition From Early Childhood Centre to School*. Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Otago, New Zealand.

Margetts, K. (1999). *Transition to School: Looking Forward*. Paper presented at the AECA Conference Darwin, July 14th-17th 1999.

O'Kane, M. and Hayes, N. (2006). The Transition to School in Ireland: Views of Preschool and Primary School Teachers. *International Journal of Transitions in Childhood*, Vol. 2, pp. 4-16.

O'Kane, M. (forthcoming). *Building Bridges: The Transition from Preschool to School for Children in Ireland*. Dublin Institute of Technology, Unpublished PhD Thesis.

Sharp, C. and White, G. (2005). *'It is Different...Because You Are Getting Older and Growing Up'*. *How Children Make Sense of the Transition to Year 1*. Paper presented at the EECERA Conference, 1st September 2005, St Patrick's College, Dublin, Ireland.

Sheridan, S. and Pramling Samuelsson, I. (2001). Children's Conceptions of Participation and Influence in Pre-school: a Perspective on Pedagogical Quality. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, Vol. 2, pp. 169 - 194.