

THE TRANSITION TO SCHOOL IN IRELAND: VIEWS OF PRESCHOOL AND PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS.

Mary O’Kane and Nóirín Hayes
Dublin Institute of Technology, Ireland

Abstract

Internationally, research on the transition from preschool to formal schooling, taken from a variety of perspectives, has increased in recent years (Brooker, 2002; Dunlop & Fabian, 2003; Peters, 2004; Bohan-Baker & Little, 2004; Dockett & Perry, 2005; Cassidy, 2005; Margetts, 2005). However, we have no clear understanding of this transition in the Irish context. The culture of preschools and primary schools in Ireland are often very different. The two educational services have developed independently of each other and can vary widely in their objectives and approaches to education. This study gathered questionnaire data on the practices and policies in place in Irish preschools and primary schools relating to the area of transition, and the practices teachers in both settings feel are of most benefit to children undergoing this transition. This paper describes some findings from this data, and compares the responses of the two groups of teachers.

Introduction

Increasing numbers of young children in Ireland are attending preschool programmes prior to starting formal schooling. Therefore their experience of beginning the Junior Infant class (the first year of primary education in Ireland) is often a transition from a familiar preschool environment to a new unfamiliar environment. This period of transition is a time of rapid change in the life of a child (Margetts, 2000). With this change comes the stress of adjusting to a new setting, often much larger than the preschool setting, a new teacher, and new classmates (Ladd & Price, 1987; Ladd, 1990; Margetts, 1999; Griebel & Niesel, 1999, 2000; Fabian, 2000). School child: adult ratios in Ireland are much larger than those of the preschools, and children are mixing with a larger and more diverse group of children. Although the infant class curriculum is characterized as play-based, with a focus on active learning, the child is moving from the preschool environment where the learning context is generally more informal and less focused on the achievement of specific learning outcomes than primary school classrooms. They will now be compared across the board with classmates, and will be assessed on whether they have reached certain standards expected at junior infant level. Studies have shown that there is more verbal instruction at school, and a much greater focus on the skills of literacy and numeracy (Myers, 1997; Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta & Cox, 2000; Margetts, 2002). Teacher expectations in formal schooling are different to preschool settings, and children have to adapt to these (Rimm-Kaufman et al, 2000; Pianta & Cox, 2002). The academic expectations of parents can also become more emphasized on transition to school (Griebel & Niesel, 2001). Thus, the transition to school poses many challenges to children, and some children will be more successful than others at meeting these challenges.

The findings reported in this paper are some of the preliminary results from Phase I of the project “Building Bridges: The Transition from Preschool to School for Children in Ireland”. Full analysis of both Phase I and Phase II of this project is expected to be complete by April 2007.

The Irish Context

The issue of transition has been highlighted in various quarters as being a major one in terms of early education in Ireland, and an area in which there is a general absence of research to date (Dunphy, 2000; Walsh, 2003; Hayes, 2004; Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO), 2006).

Preschool provision in Ireland relates to any Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) setting that caters for children from zero to six years, apart from primary schools. Hayes and Kernan (2001) found that 90% of children studied in the Irish element of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement Preprimary Project (IEA/PPP) had attended some form of ECCE service. Provision takes a variety of forms, including full-time services such as nurseries and crèches, and sessional services, such as private or community playgroups, Montessori schools, or naíonraí (these are Irish speaking or bilingual playgroups). Services in Ireland are predominantly offered on a sessional basis (OECD, 2004). Daly (2002) notes “diversity underpins the range of early childhood educational provisions and their curricula in the Republic of Ireland. Objectives, training, conditions, status, the areas they cover, their relationship with parents and their methodology differ in many if not every way” (p32).

Compulsory education in Ireland begins at the age of six years, however, many children in the Republic start school as young as four (Department of Education and Science, 2002; OECD, 2004). The school system is predominantly a state-aided one, the great majority of schools are denominational, and most national schools are owned by church authorities, the majority of which are Catholic. The OECD (2004) report that half of all four-year-olds and almost all five-year-olds attend primary schools.

The age at which the child starts formal education will influence the nature of that transition (Neuman, 2002). In Europe, Neuman advises that the compulsory starting age for formal school varies between 4 years and 7 years, however children in most OECD countries make the transition to formal education at the age of six and most OECD countries provide some form of free pre-primary education which children can avail of, with the aim of facilitating transition into formal schooling (Neuman, 2002). In general, free preschool places are not available to children in Ireland, and this may account for our early school starting age. The kind of educational experiences that four year olds are receiving in Irish infant classrooms has been questioned (Hayes, O’Flaherty and Kernan, 1997; OECD 2004) and whether appropriate play-based learning experiences can be provided in these classes with current adult:child ratios and large class sizes has been raised (INTO, 2006). The latest OECD report on Ireland (2004) cited that 54% of junior infant pupils are in classes of between 25-34 children with one teacher, which they note would be classed as unacceptable in most other European countries.

The Questionnaire

This paper reports the responses to a questionnaire on the transition from preschool to formal schooling in Ireland, sent to a nationwide sample of 249 preschool teachers and 250 teachers of junior infants classes.

Two questionnaires were developed, one for the preschool teachers and one for the teachers of junior infants classes, containing related questions. The questionnaires were based on an extensive review of literature on transition to school. They were then evaluated, and refined, after consideration by an ‘expert panel’, a technique which has been used in previous educational research in Ireland (Daly, 2002). They covered sections on the service/school itself, general beliefs about the transition process, skills that teachers believe are important for children to possess on arrival at school, and transition practices in place at preschools and

schools. The questionnaire included sections with open-ended questions to allow respondents to reply in greater detail on various issues. The questionnaire was piloted both before and after review by the expert panel.

Response rates were high, with a total response rate for the preschool questionnaire of 77% and the primary school version response rate of 83%. The use of both follow-up phone calls and follow-up letters, was considered to be instrumental in the high response rates, although these rates could also reflect the importance that both groups of teachers place on this transition.

Findings

Responses estimating the percentage of children who are at risk of experiencing a difficult transition are in line with international findings (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2000; Hausken & Rathbun, 2002) with 61% of preschool teachers and 70% teachers of junior infants classes suggesting that less than 20% of children are at risk of experiencing difficulties making the transition. However, an additional 24% of both groups suggested that the percentage at risk was higher, with between 20-40% of children being at risk.

TABLE 1: Levels of agreement of Irish preschool teachers and teachers of junior infant classes that certain groups of children might be more at risk of experiencing a difficult transition to formal schooling.

Category	Preschool Teachers %	Teachers of Junior Infant Classes %
Low self esteem	79	85
Difficulty listening/concentrating	78	79
Behaviour problems	77	82
No preschool Experience	67	65
Special needs	66	74
Disadvantaged backgrounds	37	68
From minority groups	37	59
No friends starting	35	33
Youngest children	27	44
Boys	17	23
Firstborn	16	22
Urban areas	12	16

From a list of 12 categories of children (see Table 1), teachers were asked to identify the extent to which they agreed these children are more at risk of a difficult transition (agree, neither agree or disagree, disagree). Both groups of teachers more frequently identified the same three categories of children as being more at risk of experiencing a difficult transition: those with low self esteem; those who have difficulty concentrating, sitting still and listening; and those with behavioural problems. The next most frequently identified categories were children with no preschool experience, and those with special needs.

While the order of categories of children from most frequently to least frequently agreed was similar for both group of teachers, a higher percentage of junior infant teachers agreed that children from disadvantaged backgrounds, and children from minority groups, were at risk of a difficult transition. It should be noted that both of these categories (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 were then asked how they would judge if a child had developed the necessary social, emotional and intellectual skills to succeed in formal schooling; in essence which particular skills they would consider to be most important. The individual responses were categorised into emerging skill areas [Table 2].

TABLE 2: Skills teachers proposed as being important in terms of making a successful transition to formal schooling.

SKILL	Preschool Teachers		Junior Infants Teachers	
	No of times mentioned N=299	%	No of times mentioned N=384	%
Good Social Skills / Interaction	93	31	107	28
Confidence / Emotional Skills	51	17	34	9
Independence / Self Help Skills	42	14	85	22
Concentration / Ability to Listen	36	12	47	12
Communication / Language Skills	34	11	60	16
Can Follow Direction / Task Completion	31	10	0	0
General Academic / Intellectual Skills	12	4	20	5

Teachers in both groups generally provided similar responses but the frequency of responses varied for most categories. For example, following social skills, preschool teachers emphasized confidence and emotional skills (17%), and independence skills (14%), while teachers of junior infants classes emphasized independence and self-help skills (22%), and language and communication skills (16%). It is interesting that while 10% of preschool teachers mentioned the ability to follow direction, and task completion as being important in order to succeed at school, this was not mentioned by teachers of junior infants classes. This may be due to different uses of terminology and while teachers note ‘independence’ or ‘ability to sit and listen’ they may have meant ‘ability to follow direction’. However it was not within the scope of this study to interpret inference but rather to report teacher responses.

When given a list of six skill areas and asked if these particular skills were important for children to possess on arrival in the junior infants class, there was general agreement among teachers that independence and self-help skills, communication and language skills, and social skills, followed by concentration and listening skills were all important for children to possess when starting school [Table 3]. Some differences were apparent in views on problem solving

skills and preacademic skills, however it was noted that when questioned about the importance of preacademic skills 39% of preschool teachers ticked “neither agree or disagree” for this question, suggesting that they are unsure as to the importance of such skills at junior infant level. Approximately a third of both groups (32% of preschool teachers, and 35% of teachers of junior infants classes) also ticked “neither agree or disagree” in relation to problem solving skills, again suggesting some uncertainty with the importance of these skills

TABLE 3: Comparison of Irish preschool teachers and teachers of junior infants classes agreement that six individual skill areas are important during the transition to formal schooling.

	Preschool Teachers %	Teachers of Junior Infants Classes %
Independence and Self Help Skills	91	91
Communication and Language Skills	89	90
Social Skills	88	91
Concentration and Listening Skills	86	80
Problem Solving Skills	55	23
Preacademic Skills	30	13

Teachers were asked to identify strategies they use to facilitate children’s transition to school. In preschools, the most widely reported practices were: encouraging independence in children, including responsibility for both themselves and their belongings (99%); and the use of classroom-type rules such as standing in line and waiting their turn (99%). These were followed by the practice of holding a class discussion about starting primary school (81%). Teachers of junior infants classes also felt these practices were important at preschool level. However some concerns were expressed by these teachers that children were arriving at school not adequately prepared in terms of independence. Whether this is in itself a transition difficulty, or a result of different expectations of independent behaviour among the two groups of teachers, is unclear. Sixty-six percent of preschool teachers reported that they incorporated academic skills into their curricula, while 74% felt that these skills should be incorporated into preschool curricula generally. Teachers of junior infants classes reported that it was not appropriate for preschools to incorporate academic skills into their curricula (63%). Devising a written transition plan outlining practices put in place to smooth the transition process was the least popular practice, with only 10% of services reporting any written information relating to the process, although 71% of services reported that they thought this was a practice that should be in place in preschools.

The most common transition practices reported in schools involved sending letters to parents before term starts (92%), arranging for the children to visit to the school on one occasion before the term starts (77%), and arranging one meeting for parents before term starts (73%). These were also the three practices that preschool teachers felt were most useful at primary level. Interestingly, neither group of teachers rated home visits highly. Only 13% of preschool teachers and 15% of teachers of junior infants classes felt that home visits by teachers prior to school start should be in place. Neither was the option of arranging a series of child visits to school prior to start popular, with only 37% of preschool teachers, and 30% of primary school teachers stating that multiple visits should be put into place.

Levels of communication reported between preschools and primary schools were low

Communication with preschools was reported by 30% of schools only. However both groups appear to be open to greater levels of communication. Comparing the results related to communication there were differences between the two groups when asked who should be responsible for establishing the communication. For example, when asked if the responsibility should be with preschool teachers, 74% of preschool teachers agreed and 52% of junior infant staff agreed. When asked if the responsibility should be with teachers of junior infant staff, 87% of preschool teachers and 74% of junior infant teachers agreed. So, 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 two groups of teachers were also in agreement regarding reasons that led parents to send the child to school, other than a sense that their child was actually ready to start school. These involved childcare issues, working parents, and family situations, and most notably the cost of childcare (cited by 37% of preschool teachers and 40% of teachers of junior infants classes). The lack of school fees appears to be an influence. As the following two preschool teachers advised:

“Definitely cost is an issue, rather than face the cost of another year in playschool, send them off to school as early as possible”.

“Because the Government do not provide tax incentives or subsidies for the cost of childcare, children are sent to school at such an early age. If parents had a choice they would leave them longer at preschool”

Related to the comments about cost of childcare, the age at which children start school was also an issue. Seventy-seven percent of teachers of junior infants classes, and 80% of preschool teachers were in agreement with the statement *“The decision to start children in school based on age rather than on individual preparedness for school causes barriers to successful transitions”*. The two groups (96% teachers of junior infants classes, and 94% preschool teachers) were also in agreement that class sizes at infants level need to be reduced. When the teachers of junior infants classes were asked what was the greatest difficulty they were facing, class sizes at junior infants level was clearly considered to be the greatest. The issue was raised again when the teachers were asked what would they change to improve the life of teachers at junior infant level; 40% of responses cited class sizes as being the thing teachers considered most important to change at junior infant level. This was followed by the need for a classroom assistant.

Discussion

Most teachers estimated that transition problems occurred for less than 20% of children. This reflects the understanding of Stephen and Cope who suggest that, during the transition to school “some children are at risk of becoming disengaged from education at the beginning of their school career” (2003, p.262). The two groups of teachers were in clear agreement on many issues, the first being the three categories of children most likely to experience a difficult transition: children with low self esteem, those children who have difficulty concentrating, sitting still and listening, and those with behavioural problems. 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 (Fabian, 2002). As Fabian notes “personal, rather than intellectual, ability is the key to giving children the best start to school. Social confidence and a sense of success play an important part in giving children self-esteem which will, in turn, help children to approach the start of school in a positive way” (2002, p.63).

The two groups were also 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 similar to those found in international research (Rimm-Kaufman et al, 2000; Lin, Lawrence & Gorrell, 2003; Wesley & Buysse, 2003; Dockett & Perry, 2004, 2005). As Wesley and Buysse found that, if children could “interact meaningfully with each other and adults, follow simple rules and directions, and demonstrate some degree of independence in the classroom including expressing their wants and needs, then kindergarten teachers could teach them the other academic skills and knowledge they would need to be successful in school” (2003, p357). This view could equally summarise the views of many respondents in the present study.

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 how such skills, in essence the ability to negotiate classroom life without the constant attention of the teacher, would be valued by a teacher working with a class of up to 36 four and five year olds. A wide range of class sizes was reported in the study, ranging from a minimum of four children to a maximum class size of 36 children. Socially, the ability to wait turns, share, anticipate change, and ‘read’ the teacher will increase positive experiences within the classroom (Fabian, 2002; Haas-Foretta & Ottolini-Geno, 2006). 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. The teachers in this study have suggested that children with the ability to negotiate classroom life independently, equipped with good social skills and the ability to concentrate and listen for short periods of time, are more likely to be successful at primary level. These findings would support international researchers who suggest that the new rules and levels of negotiation which children have to adhere to at school are many, compared to the relative flexibility and freedom of preschool (Myers, 1997; Wolery, 1999).

Research has demonstrated the value of high quality ECCE both short-term and long-term in nature (Sylva & Wiltshire, 1993; Kellaghan & Greaney, 1993; Schweinhart & Weikart 1997; Schweinhart, 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. 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. These skills will benefit the children at preschool level, but will also greatly assist them in their transition to formal schooling, indeed connections between socio-emotional wellbeing and learning have long been recognised internationally (Margetts, 1999, 2002; Brostrom 2000; Fabian & Dunlop, 2002).

Differences were noted in relation to the teacher responses to the skills children need for a successful transition to school, for instance, no junior infant teachers mentioned ‘can follow directions/task completion’ as an important skill. This may be connected to different uses of language within the two educational spheres. 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 et al., 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. The difference found in response rates in relation to the importance of problem solving skills, academic skills, and task completion, could also have

cultural or linguistic connotations. Preschool teachers may place a greater emphasis and value on problem solving skills and task completion than teachers of junior infants classes, or the difference may lie in the interpretations of the two groups of teachers on what these skills involve. This possible gap in understanding requires further investigation, particularly if greater levels of communication between the two groups are to be encouraged. An investigation into the professional language used in the preschool and primary school sectors in Ireland could be a first step in this process.

The findings on academic skills suggest that although social skills are most frequently agreed as important by both groups, the preschool teachers rate academic skills as being of more importance on arrival at school than do the teachers of junior infant classes. It would be interesting to know the reasons for this. In a recent small-scale study in Ireland, Mahony & Hayes (2005) asked Irish parents about the importance of preparing preschool children for formal schooling. Of the 34 parents questioned, fourteen (33%) felt that preparation in academic terms was important in preschool. 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. This warrants further investigation.

Two physical differences between preschool and primary school which teachers in both settings have highlighted as being of great importance are class size, and adult:child ratios. Calls for smaller classes and more classroom assistants echo the findings of international studies asking for preschool and primary school teachers views on the first year of schooling (Wesley & Buysee, 2003). For many years, the importance of small class size has been noted in terms of enabling teachers to work with the diversity of experiences and abilities in the infant classroom (Katz, 1991; Hayes, 2004). The Government of Ireland in 2002 committed to a reduction in class sizes for children under nine years of age to below the international best-practice guidelines of 20:1. In November 2004 the National Parents Council (NPC) announced that it was “bitterly disappointed” (NPC, 2004, p1) that this target would not be met, and called again for a start to be made in class size reduction. Carr, the General Secretary of INTO, highlighted the fact that for many junior infants there is “at most eight minutes of teacher time per day for each individual child. In reality it is much less” (Carr, 2005, p12). Following on from this, it is suggested that class sizes at infant level in Ireland need to be further reduced, and that all infants classes should have a full-time classroom assistant. International research has found that both class size and adult-child ratios in ECCE influence both programme quality and children’s learning and development (Howes, Phillips and Whitebrook, 1992; National Research Council, 2001). As some of the teachers in the study suggested, two pairs of adult hands in a junior infants classroom are necessary in purely practical terms. It is suggested that having two adults in the classroom would better enable teachers to work with children individually and in small groups, and to have time to better understand the needs of the individual children. From the perspective of the children entering the junior infant classes, adult:child ratio’s which are more in line with their experiences at preschool (the preschool adult/child ratios in Ireland for children aged 3-6 years is 1:10 in sessional services, and 1:8 in full day care) would also assist them in ensuring continuity and making the transition between the two environments. The move from an environment with low adult/child ratios to one with much higher ratios emphasizes discontinuities, and research has shown that children are very aware of the different levels of adult attention within the two settings (Ledger, 2000).

Concern was expressed by both groups about the cost of preschools in Ireland, with significant numbers suggesting that the cost of preschool is a factor in parents sending their children to school at four years of age. Raising school entry age has been suggested as a way to address this issue, but this may be problematic in itself given the lack of government fee support at preschool level. Historically there has been resistance to such suggestions from

both parents and primary school teachers. One concern is that children from middle-class families are more likely to be given access to a high-quality preschool setting, and these children could make good use of an extra year at preschool. However, children from disadvantaged backgrounds may not have this choice. Free early education for three year olds in advance of entry to primary school has been suggested by both the OECD (2004) and NESF (2005) reports. Following on from this, it is suggested that to provide a free quality preschool service to all children aged three/four could well address the problem of four year olds in infants classes. Research has shown the value of good quality preschool both to the individual children and to society as a whole. It can lead both to improved performance throughout school years (Sylva & Wiltshire, 1993; Gormley, Gayer, Phillips & Dawson, 2004) and to later social benefits which persist through to adulthood (Schweinhart & Weikart 1997). These effects have been shown to be particularly strong in educationally disadvantaged children (Peisner-Feinberg, Burchinal, Clifford, Culkin, Howes, Kagan & Yazejian, 2001; Magnuson, Meyers, Ruhm & Waldfogel, 2004). A year of free quality preschool education could ensure that all children were given the opportunity to learn and develop in preschool, rather than starting formal school at an early age.

Finally, communication between the two groups of teachers was reported to be low, and few teachers reported that information was transferred from preschool to primary school. Preliminary findings suggest that both groups of teachers would be open to greater levels of communication. Although agreement levels were 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 importance of continuity in many areas between preschool and primary education 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. Although fears have been articulated about a possible push-down of teacher-led academic work rather than child-centred play-based learning (Carr, 2000; Peters 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.

Conclusion

Preliminary findings from the questionnaire data appear to be in line with much international research into teachers concerns about children transition to school. The findings have shown that the percentage of children believed to experience a difficult transition is less than 20% and for these children good transitions will not just automatically happen. The extent to which children experience a smooth transition will have long-term implications for their future educational experiences (Entwisle & Alexander, 1999; Margetts, 1999, 2002; Dunlop & Fabian, 2003; Wylie & Thompson, 2003). We owe it to all children to assist them in their journey towards the promise of an education.

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Correspondence about this paper should be addressed to:

Mary O'Kane
Postgraduate Office, Room 323
Dublin Institute of Technology
41-45 Mountjoy Square
Dublin 1
Email: maryok.oakleigh@gmail.com

