PARENT'S PERCEPTION OF HOW CHILDREN CAN BE SUPPORTED AS THEY TRANSITION TO PRIMARY SCHOOL - CRIONA BLACKBURN.
The Research Question.

- ‘How can preschool teachers support children’s transitions from preschool to primary school’?
- The encompassing aim of this small scale research was to gain an insight into parents perspectives on the issues that affect their children as they transition from preschool to primary school in the Irish context.
- The aspiration was to enhance understanding of how teachers can best support children’s learning and development during this time of considerable change in their young lives (Fabian, 2002).
- The participants were parents who had children transitioning to school in the following September or whose children had transitioned in the last two years.
So, why this research and why now?

- "There is always a moment in childhood when the door opens and lets the future in" (Green, 2007, P1). The transition from preschool to primary is one of these moments in children’s lives (DCYA, 2011; O’Kane, 2008).

- This moment has potential consequences for children’s emotional, social and cognitive wellbeing, not just in that moment but for the rest of their lives (Lee & Goh, 2012; Fabian & Dunlop 2006).

- The First principle of Siolta – Ireland’s quality framework for early years education and care (ECCE) states ‘Every child needs and has the right to positive experiences in early childhood’ (CECDE, 2008, p1).

- Therefore, it is imperative that we understand the complexity of issues and attain the knowledge to support children through transitions (Fabian, 2002). If change is to be a positive experience for children and not overwhelm them it must be carefully prepared (Fabian, 2002; DES, 1976).
Why there was a need for this research?

- In contrast to burgeoning international research into transitions (Peters, 2010; Fabian & Dunlop, 2006; Dockett & Perry, 2004), in Ireland there was very little research on transition from preschool to primary school in the Irish context (INTO, 2008; O’Kane, 2007; Walsh & Cassidy, 2007).

- However, recognition of the importance of transitions in young children’s lives in Ireland is acknowledged in emerging early years policies. Standard 13 of Siolta (2008), the quality framework for early years focuses specifically on transitions. Aistear (2010), the curriculum framework for early years overarches the preschool sector and infant classes of primary school (INTO, 2008; O’Kane, 2007).

- I would like to acknowledge the considerable research that has been undertaken by Dr. Mary O’Kane on this topic and note that her work is bringing awareness and visible positive change. Her 2008 thesis ‘Building Bridges’ provided much inspiration for this work. This research was also influenced by research undertaken by the INTO (2008).
So, why present it to you today?

- Transitions are currently relevant, as the progression from preschool to primary school is dominant in the minds of parents, children and teachers as the departure from preschool and initiation into primary school is imminent.

- Research in education, neuroscience, emotional development and transitions contend that transition from preschool to primary school may not merely impact children’s well-being in the short term, but potentially throughout their lifespan (Cozolino, 2006; Fabian & Dunlop, 2006).

- It is imperative we understand the challenges facing children and see how we can best support them in this process.
The Research Methodology

- The research methodology employed was qualitative in the interpretative paradigm. This study uses questionnaires to gauge parent’s views on their children’s emotional disposition and what strategies or issues they consider relevant to children’s transition from preschool to primary school.

- This project involved questionnaires being distributed to 30 parents. The questions focused on emotions, perceived challenges, child dispositions and school strategies involved in children’s transitions. 23 questionnaires were completed giving a response rate of 76%. The findings were then compared and contrasted to the research findings from the literary review on the impact of transitions on children’s development.
Ethical Issues

The ethics and research in this study was underpinned by two key principles:

1) Respect of Children’s Rights, guaranteed to all children under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), in particular Article 3.1, which states ‘the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration’

2) Children’s emotional wellbeing is a paramount consideration throughout their lives, but particular sensitivity must be considered during periods of transition.

Ethical permission was received from the University of Sheffield.

As anonymous questionnaires were used ethical risks were deemed to be very low.
The literature review identified recurring themes, these were poor communication, collaboration and continuity between preschools and primary schools, issues of differences in curriculum and teachers expectations, challenges to children’s emotional wellbeing, the issue of school readiness, dispositions of the child and challenges within the primary school system (Buckley & Fabian, 2006; Hayes & O’Kane, 2006; Brostrom, 2000).

The literature concurred that even for the most emotionally secure children this can be a challenging time (Lee & Goh, 2012). Transitions affect their emotional well being, ability to learn, sense of identity and evolving role within their family, community and peer friendships (Peters, 2010).

Bronfenbrenner (1979) highlighted transitions are culturally bound; the child’s success depends on the support and experience prior to and during this new challenge (Vogler et al. 2008).
Bronfenbrenner’s Ecology of Education (1976) proposed that how children learn is dependent on relationships. First relations between the child’s characteristics and the surroundings they live in, home, school, friends, community etc… and secondly the connections and communications between these environments. Therefore, successful transitions are reliant on continuity, consistency and communication between preschool and primary school (Lee & Goh, 2012; Peters, 2010; UNESCO, 2007).

Neuman (2000) noted, in OECD countries there were various barriers to consistency and communication between settings. Preschool and primary schools have different visions, cultures, qualifications, pedagogical approaches, aims, objectives, are regulated by different administrations and have to adhere to dramatically different regulations and inspections.
Policy Perspective

- The need for communication between settings has been addressed in some emerging Irish legislation.


- Aistear, the framework for Early Learning (2010) spans the early years sector and infant classes in primary school providing alignment between the sectors (Starting Strong, 2010).

- In 2011 the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy was launched with the key objective to ‘ensure that relevant information on the child’s learning and development is transferred from the home to the pre-school …..to promote smooth transitions (DES, 2011, p.55).

- However, continuity and communications remains limited between the sectors and there is a significant schism between the theory of legislation and the reality (Oireachtas, 2012).
Challenges to communication

- The tone and content, combined with the omission of preschool teachers from their research was indicative of the gulf between sectors (INTO, 2008).
- Some teachers criticized the lack of structure in preschools; ‘their behaviour was atrocious’, ‘let run riot’, ‘not waiting to take their turn, not staying in their seat’ (INTO, 2008, p60).
- Some teachers complained that preschool teachers were working on the junior infant curriculum and teaching incorrect letter formation.
- Some satisfaction was expressed that children were more mature and better prepared for primary school routines and had acquired relevant social skills. Teachers valued children’s ability to sit, listen and pay attention (INTO, 2008).
How can this gap be bridged?

- Primary school teachers have B.Ed. degrees whereas Childcare professionals are only required to have FETAC level 5, which would be equivalent to a certificate (DCYA, 2012; Oireachtas, 2012).

- Preschool practitioners will need to achieve graduate level qualifications if the sectors are to work together as equal partners (Starting Strong, 2010).

- Primary school teachers also need training in early years education to appreciate the context from which children are entering primary school (Starting Strong, 2010).
The findings – Emotional Well-being.

- Emotional well-being emerged as a major theme in the literature, critical for children’s transition and future success in school life (Peters, 2010; Starting Strong, 2010; INTO, 2006) and in this research.

- In relation to their children’s emotions, excitement tinged with apprehension was the dominant emotion, some were only excited, some showed no emotion and one child was apprehensive.

- Parent’s anxiety was considerably higher, 10 responded that anxiety was their key emotion, 5 were sad but nostalgic, 4 parents were mainly excited but a little anxious, 2 were excited and proud, 1 was happy, 1 sad and 1 didn’t respond at all.

- 15 of the parents expressed mixed emotions ‘sad and happy’; ‘nervous and confident’. The literature highlighted a scarcity of research on parent’s emotions around transitions, apart from anecdotal evidence that mirrored this dichotomy of emotion (Jindal – Snape, 2009; Fabian & Dunlop 2006).
What concerned parents?

- Most frequently, parents were anxious about their child’s ability to cope with the larger classes, higher adult-child ratios and the reduction in attention their child would receive.

- Over 33% of parents expressed anxiety regarding the longer day. 33% of parents indicated apprehension about their child’s ability to make new friends or cope without their old ones.

- The need for children to be more independent concerned 16% of parents.

- The new teacher, environment and expectations to sit and listen were expressed by 12%.

- Two parents conveyed anxiety over the playground, more structured day and the challenges of a new curriculum.

- One parent raised concerns that there was no protection for children in class; another indicated children communicating with the teacher and coping with the new routine was challenging.

- Different levels of education and experience was a challenge expressed by one parent concurring with the INTO (2008) who proclaimed this was a major challenge facing infant class teachers.
What role do Preschools play in preparing children for this transition?

- Parent’s unanimously believed attendance at preschool was essential in preparing children for primary school.
- All parents in this study affirmed their experiences of preschool were positive.
- 18 parents indicated no preschool activities were unhelpful to transitions.
- Two parents pointed to dramatic difference in adult child ratio’s from 1-7 to 1-30 as being unhelpful.
- One parent highlighted the primary school curriculum was not revised to take into account children’s attendance at preschool. Curaclam na Bunscoile the primary school curriculum was introduced in 1999 at a time when only 21% children attended preschool, today 94% children attend preschool (Oireachtas, 2012; Starting Strong, 2010).
The preschool activities considered helpful and perceptions of expectations required for primary.

- 74% listed independence as the most important skill children required to learn in preschool.

- Over 50% of parents considered social skills to be the most critical in assisting their child’s transition.

- 39% parent’s emphasised academic skills and viewed academics as the most helpful preschool activity.

- Fewer than 7% of parents mentioned self-esteem and confidence, yet later when asked directly, they rated self-esteem highly consistent with international research in transitions and neuroscience which indicated emotional well-being is essential to educational and life success (Cozolino, 2006; Goleman 2004).

- 39% considered preschool and primary to be quite similar and 28% of parents expected children to concentrate and behave in school.
What issues need to be considered as children transition from preschool to primary school? Age.

- Parents favoured a later starting age,
- 1 advocated 7 years.
- 1 5-6 years.
- 15 believed 5 years should be a minimum.
- Parents suggested at 5 plus, children were more mature, socially competent and confident and better able to sit, listen and be quiet.
Parents were asked to grade a range of 11 dispositions including childhood experiences they believed were beneficial to children starting school. 10 indicated most important and 0 not important at all.

- Parents designated independence, discipline and social skills as the most important attributes each rating 9.
- Self-esteem rated high at 8.
- As did assertiveness and attendance at preschool also at 8.
- Motivation to learn and age rated 7.
- Academic skills scored 6.
- Cultural status was rated low at only 4. This is probably indicative of the fact that none of the participants belonged to minority cultural groups.
- Position in the family also scored low at 4 points.
School Strategies.

- Parent’s highlighted many transitional challenges, but generally accepted children needed to adjust, rather than schools or transitional policies.
- The strategies they considered helpful were being provided the opportunity for the child to visit the class before they started.
- They also considered it useful to work in collaboration with other parents to help support friendships etc..
- Yet the majority of parents were not concerned if their child’s friends were in their class or not.
Conclusions

In response to the research question, ‘How can teachers support children’s transition from preschool to primary?’ Continuity, communication and collaboration between all stakeholders emerged as essential in improving children’s transitions in Ireland.

Continuity between settings is dependent on creating links between the sectors.

Aistear (2010) provides a framework that can create continuity across settings and provide an educational approach that is age appropriate, fosters interactions and is respectful to the uniqueness of each child (O’Kane & Hayes, 2010).

The newly launched DES inspections should be a positive move in having the educational aspect of both primary and preschool inspections being undertaken by the one department (DES, 2016).

Communication between primary and preschool sectors is reliant on equal training for equal partnership. In effect, preschool teachers need to attain graduate level qualifications and primary teacher’s B.Ed. degree needs emphasis on early childhood education (Starting Strong, 2010).

This research revealed parents expectations that children conform and obey. O’Kane (2007) advises children, the least powerful stakeholders in transitions are expected to make all the adjustments. The issue that emerged in the literature is that it might not be so much about children being ready for school, but schools being ready for children.
Schools being ready for children.

- OECD (2004) criticized primary school practices as ‘predominantly didactic’ (p84) and recommended restructuring Ireland’s infant schools to favour more autonomy.
- Sylva et al. (2004) identified adult-child interactions, child initiated activity, balanced with adult led activity as fundamental to improving outcomes for children.
- The Government needs to commit to reducing class sizes and providing the necessary resources to support teachers in allowing children learn in a more autonomous way while in school.
- Teaching practices need reform to reflect the ideals enshrined in their curriculums of child centred pedagogy, meeting the unique needs of each child (NCCA, 2010; NCCA, 1999).
Final thoughts....

- Parents desired a later starting age, which was supported in the literary review. The introduction of the second free preschool year if it can be implemented may assist in this regard.

- Although not highlighted by parents, preschools need to provide opportunities to discuss and prepare children for primary school. UNICEF (2008) indicated ‘the ability of the adult to be responsive to the child’ (p3) is essential. Similarly visiting their new school, meeting their teacher and classmates is essential in preparing children for transitions (DES, 1976).

- Ireland must be responsive to the challenges highlighted by parents and reform transitional practices. The views of parents, teachers and children must all be listened to and valued.

- Policy development must engage all stakeholders and reflect all perspectives.

- Smaller classes and lower adult child ratios, will allow quality interactions, enhancing children’s well-being (United Nations, 2006).

- Schools must be supportive, interactive and nurture relationships, thereby setting children on a positive spiral of learning.
References


