SUPPORTING EFFECTIVE TRANSITIONS IN EARLY YEARS: AN INSPECTOR’S PERSPECTIVE ON PRACTICE AND POLICY

Keynote Address
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AT
IRISH NATIONAL TEACHERS’ ORGANISATION & EARLY CHILDHOOD IRELAND SEMINAR
TRANSITIONS ACROSS EARLY YEARS EDUCATION

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Oscailt / Opening

A Chairde: Ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil do Shelia Nunan agus do Teresa Heeney as ucht an chuiridh a thug said dom labhairt ag an gcomhdháil seo ar maidin. Is ócáid stairiúil an cruinniu seo mar, go bhfios domsa, seo an chéad uair riamh a tháinig baill Chumann Múinteoirí Éireann agus baill Luath-Óige Éireann le chéile chun an luath oideachas a phlé.

I want to thank Shelia, Teresa and their two organisations for the invitation to attend this historic seminar and for the opportunity that it gives to me to share some thoughts with you about transitions in early years education.

Introduction

To get us started, I want you to do a little reflection for me. Think of a time of transition in your life: perhaps, when you went to college for the first time; or when you began your first serious adult relationship; or when you moved house, or took up a new job; or when you contemplated retirement. Think about how you felt; how you reacted.

Transitions like these can be occasions when we are excited and full of anticipation, when we look to fulfil our dreams, when we grow most quickly. Yet they can be periods of enormous stress, worry, anxiety and even regression. We know, too, that some adults cope better than others with such transitions. How well did you cope? Who helped you most to cope?

If we, who have years of experience behind us feel challenged by change, how much more challenging can transitions feel for young people? Think of the child’s transition from being at home all day to spending part of the day in an early years setting; the move from the familiarity of the early years setting to the primary school; moving from one classroom or one teacher to another within the primary school; and progressing from primary to second level education.

Each of these transitions, and many more, are big steps for all children to take. Supportive and stress-free transitions (or at least transitions in which stress is minimised) are likely to influence greatly how well young people develop their potential socially, physically and academically, not only in the early years phase but throughout the rest of their lives. And we know, too, that some children, like some adults, are more vulnerable to the stresses involved in making transitions successfully.

**We** are the adults who know how challenging transitions can be. That’s why we have the responsibility to ensure that as far as possible, children are supported, encouraged and helped to make those exciting and challenging transitions in the best possible environment. It’s our privilege and our duty to find the best way of promoting a continuum of learning across the education system. In that way, we can smooth and support each child’s transition from home to early years setting to school and beyond.
An historic event

That’s why today’s seminar is so important. The INTO and Early Childhood Ireland – representing two of the major groups of adults involved in supporting young children – are to be commended for bringing together today all of the groups of adults involved in supporting children’s transitions – parents, early years practitioners, teachers, school leaders, evaluators, regulators, curriculum developers, advisers and policy makers.

Both INTO and Early Childhood Ireland have strong track records in this regard. Over its 150-year history, INTO has initiated many campaigns and published many policy papers and reports on infant or early years education. Since its establishment, Early Childhood Ireland has advocated strongly for practices that would support better transitions for young children. It is to be welcomed that you both have come together around this significant topic of transitions.

And, I think it is worth noting that this initiative from teachers and early years practitioners comes against a background where other key actions are falling into place. The recent commissioning of the National Parents’ Council-Primary by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), to represent parents’ voices formally in the early years sector, ensures that a third key group is engaged fully in this, and other conversations, about early years provision. And as we will see later in the morning, it is really good that academic researchers like Professor Emer Smyth of the ESRI, and policy makers like Assistant Secretary General Bernie McNally in DCYA, and colleagues in my own Department of Education and Skills (DES), are equally well engaged in today’s conversation.

My approach this morning

As one of those involved in evaluating and advising on early years provision, the DES Inspectorate is delighted to be involved today. But what do we bring to the conversation? In the next few minutes, I want to talk from the perspective of someone who is involved in looking at the continuum of children’s learning from the earliest years through to adulthood. I hope I can make some helpful observations about both continuity and discontinuity for the learner. I’ll talk mainly about the juncture between the early years and primary phases on the continuum, but also refer to further stages in the life of the learner.

This talk is not meant to be a comprehensive review of policy research or inspection – rather it is based largely on the observations of early years inspectors and other inspectors in the Department, and also on the analysis, thinking and conversations that we are engaged in, both within the Inspectorate, with you our partners in the Irish system, and with our colleagues abroad.
A structure for the talk

I want to consider four themes concerning transitions:

At the outset, I think we need to be clear what we are talking about when we use the word transitions, so I want to say a few, short words on that.

Secondly, for me the core of this issue revolves around the young child and the set of experiences that he or she encounters; the experiences through which he or she is cared for, grows and develops. Of course these learning experiences occur in a myriad of places – at home and in many different environments – but primarily I am going to talk about those experiences that we seek to provide or facilitate for the child in early years settings or in schools.

Thirdly, I think that it’s important to note that we know that some children are more vulnerable than others in their growth and development, especially during transitions, so I want to say a few words about how we could have particular regard for these learners at times of transition.

Finally, I want to consider the adults involved and the things we can do to enable us to support children in the transitions that occur during their learning journey. That involves talking about the professional life of early years practitioners and teachers; the work of evaluators; and how early years settings and schools can, through their engagement with parents, support both parent and child during transitions.

What do we mean by transitions?

Firstly, what do we mean by transitions? Can you think back to that change experience that you thought about when I began – when you moved house, for example. All those memories and emotions – the joys and sorrows that you experienced – did they all occur on one day when you crossed the threshold of your new home? I doubt it.

There were, I am sure, many weeks and months of thinking, preparation, delights, anticipation, concerns and fears before you moved. And following your move, I am sure it took you many weeks, perhaps months, to settle into your new home. I bet you ate the same comfort food in the new home as in the old; you probably brought some of your old familiar furnishings or keepsakes to your new flat or house; the former phase of your life continued to shape and enrich the new phase you had entered.

That’s because transformative transitions are not once-off events at a point in time – they are dynamic change processes that stretch back into our past experiences and forward into the new experiences that we are engaging with.\(^1\) The transition is not simply a once-off physical move from A to B; we do not leave A behind and live only in B. Rather a transition is a sustained episode of learning and growth in itself, in which the child is an active agent.

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So that means transitions are not about “making the young child ready for school” (or the older child ready for post-primary school). Transitions for young children are not single events for which the early years practitioner has sole professional responsibility (nor the primary school teacher for the transitioning 12-year old). They are phases of learning during which all those caring for the child – parents, practitioners and teachers – must cooperate together to understand and support the child during a key phase in their lives.

Transitions and the learning experiences we want for children

How well, then, do the learning experiences that we as adults provide or facilitate for the child respect and accord with the notion of the child on a continuous learning journey? Do they support the notion of valuing and building on the child’s past experiences to enrich his or her current and future learning?

Curriculum frameworks try to express what we believe to be important learning and care experiences, and the outcomes we aspire to for our children. Just as important, they express the values we hold about the care, growth and development of each child and young person.

I think it is interesting to look, for a moment, at two of the more recent curriculum frameworks that we have produced in Ireland – the Junior Cycle framework for 12 to 15 year olds, and the Aistear framework for 0-6 years.²

There are obvious parallels and connections in the conceptualisation of these curricular frameworks – the emphasis on communication (defined, in the Junior Cycle framework, as literacy and numeracy using the broadest sense of these terms); the development of learners’ thinking and exploring; the importance of well-being; the development of identity and belonging, or managing myself and working with others.

More striking still is the emphasis both frameworks place on the child or young person being active in his or her own learning. One the fundamental aims in the reform of Junior Cycle has been to change the learning experiences of young people of that age to enable and empower the young person as a creator and leader of his or her own learning. The Framework for Junior Cycle emphasises activities and skills such as experimentation, creativity and risk-taking.

Essentially, the junior-cycle student is expected to become a much more active agent in his or her own learning – and as you know, the concept of “the agentic child”, engaging with the world and leading his or her own learning, needs no explanation to an audience of early years practitioners. There is cause for optimism here, therefore, that even when we look at two distinct phases of children’s learning, we can find many parallels and linkages in the aspirations we have for these learners – linkages that certainly have the potential to ensure a certain continuity in children’s learning and development.

Ironically, the phase between the periods covered by the Aistear and Junior Cycle frameworks may appear to be somewhat out of step with both of these frameworks. It has to be said that the Primary School Curriculum was developed in the 1990s, so it is over twenty years old and it was written before Ireland made a conscious and long-overdue decision to make universal early years care and education available.3

To be fair, the principles underpinning the Primary School Curriculum, and its accompanying guidance, emphasised strongly how a child-centred curriculum could be provided in an integrated way across the curriculum areas. It strongly recommended play-based and constructivist approaches. But we have to ask ourselves what happened between design and implementation?

Many aspects of the Primary School Curriculum were widely praised, and many parents and children speak positively about their enjoyment of primary school. However, as one who was involved in the design of the 1999 curriculum, I can now reflect that some of its features did not pay sufficient regard to the implications of what a truly child-centred education might look and feel like, particularly for four and five year olds and younger children more generally. I think it is true that its presentation in subject booklets, for example, may not have been helpful in supporting teachers to provide a truly integrated learning experience that could allow the child’s growth and development to happen organically. The extensive nature of the curriculum and the guidelines that accompanied it had the effect of reinforcing a more subject-based approach at the expense of cultivating the dispositions for learning that we now see articulated in the Aistear framework and in the underpinning framework for junior cycle.

All this meant that when Aistear came to be developed for 0-6 year olds about a decade later, the Primary School Curriculum and especially the sections of it that dealt with the learning experiences for young children were not well aligned with the experiences being promoted in Aistear. Indeed, the overlap between the Primary School Curriculum and Aistear for four to six year olds served only to highlight the gap that had opened up in what was considered best practice for early years education.

Several school leaders and teachers of infants have used the curricular autonomy that they have to go beyond the practice of the published Primary School Curriculum. They provide exciting and wonderful learning experiences for young children – experiences often informed by Aistear while retaining some of the best elements of the 1999 curriculum. These best practices build on the competences, knowledge and dispositions developed during the child’s pre-school experience, and they support the learner and his or her parents in the transition from early years settings to school.

Schools are also feeling the impact of early childhood education being universally available and the consequent raising of school entry age. Undoubtedly, therefore, we need significant reform of the curriculum for primary schools and that is why the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) has embarked on an extensive review and redevelopment of the primary curriculum which builds on last year’s consultation on an appropriate structure for the curriculum and time allocations within it. Work on changing the languages and mathematics elements of the curriculum has already commenced.

Such a reform of curriculum is a real opportunity for us to encourage the practices that we need to provide for the continuum of learning and effective transitions between early years and primary years. In this regard, we are no different to many countries – many systems are grappling with this challenge and there is much we can learn from research here at home and curriculum change in several of our European neighbours, including issues about emphases on play, self-regulation, the optimal range of learning experiences and even the length of the learning day.⁴

Curriculum reform at primary level in Ireland will inevitably need to be complemented by a matching review of Aistear in due course, if we are really to set out a viable continuum of learning for young children. While Aistear has been widely praised as a curriculum document, it has not been without its implementation challenges. Some early years practitioners and organisations have argued that the curriculum framework is challenging to work with, largely because of a lack of sufficient professional development support for it in initial and continuing professional development. Indeed, the NCCA has also noted on a number of occasions what it has described as the relative absence of national CPD to support the implementation of Aistear. Whatever the cause, the Aistear framework has proved to be demanding for practitioners to access and use, so much so, that the DES and DCYA commissioned the NCCA in 2015 to produce the Aistear-Síolta Practice Guide to

support practitioners in the implementation of the emergent and inquiry based learning advocated in Aistear.⁵

Finally, on the issue of curriculum reform more generally, I see no reason why we should not eventually seek to have a common overarching framework for young people’s learning spanning from 0 to 18 years. To date, in Ireland, we have tended to undertake curriculum reform in distinct phases of the education system at different times – early years, primary, junior cycle, senior cycle. Such phased development allows for the particular needs of learners at each phase to be considered in detail and that is of course valuable. However, given that a single body – the NCCA – has overall responsibility for curriculum development across all of these phases, there may be opportunities to consider the value of a single overarching curriculum framework as one possible mechanism to facilitate good transitions for learners.

During curriculum development for each distinct phase, it might also be valuable to ensure the involvement, not only of teachers and practitioners from that phase, but also practitioners and teachers from other phases. For example, while development of the curriculum for the primary school will be led by primary teachers and experts, the involvement of early years practitioners and post-primary teachers might assist greatly to ensure continuity in children’s learning; similarly, reforms at second level could benefit significantly from greater involvement of primary teachers and third level lecturers working alongside second-level teachers and experts.

The lived reality in settings and schools

Of course, curriculum statements and frameworks are simply statements of what we aspire to provide for children. The lived reality can be quite different. As inspectors, my colleagues and I have the great privilege of observing the intimacy of the learning experiences that occur in early years settings and schools day in and day out. As our reports show, we are fortunate that these settings and schools are led and staffed by many gifted and dedicated professionals. Many settings and schools provide excellent care and learning opportunities to the young people that they serve and we write about the strengths that we see in their practice in our reports.

For a moment, however, I want to talk about where practice is less ideal – not because this is a frequent occurrence but rather because these instances may point to the challenges that we have to tackle if children’s learning and growth is to be optimal, and if transitions are to be successfully achieved.

Inspectors from the Department of Education and Skills have been working in early years settings in the ECCE (Early Childhood Care and Education) programme for over two years now. One issue that came to the fore early on for us as we observed practice in these settings was the pressures that settings felt to “prepare children for school.” Sometimes

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early years practitioners told us they felt this pressure as a result of the expectations they believed that others had of them (including parents, primary schools and inspectors). Practitioners felt, rightly or wrongly, that in the competitive commercial world in which they operated, parents believed that a mark of excellence would be when early years children had “learned their letters” or begun reading before they went to “real school.” Ironically, Professor Emer Smyth’s research shows that the vast of majority of teachers in primary schools do not hold these views.\(^6\)

However, such beliefs can lead to a formalisation of learning and an erosion of the play-based approaches that are critical if the child is to be agentic in his or her own learning. This approach to transitions fails to respect the nature of the child and his or her learning as an early years learner. (In fact, it also fails to respect the sort of learning that our education system is attempting to emphasise not only at early years but in primary school and at junior cycle.)

Inspectors have a similar concern about the learning experiences in many infant classes. Our experience suggests that while excellent play-based approaches may be used skilfully by many teachers of infants, children experience them less frequently as they progress through junior and senior infants. Attempting to gain some of the benefits of Aistear, some schools have decided to provide at least some Aistear-style opportunities by creating “Aistear hours” in their timetables, an approach that may be well meant but is clearly at odds with the underpinning principles inherent in Aistear.

Inspection has highlighted that by the time that young children are six or seven years old and enrolled in first class, their experience of school can be predominantly one of frequent whole-class teaching and considerable periods of seated individual work on undifferentiated tasks. While both approaches may have some value as part of a range of methodologies, an over-reliance on them can limit the possibility for child-to-child and child-to-adult engagement.

An over-reliance on these more formalised approaches is not ideal if we want to create a seamless transition from early years to primary. Equally important, these approaches do not fulfil the aim of the Primary School Curriculum to enable the child to progress in his or her learning at a pace that is suited to his or her needs and interests. This means that a frequent recommendation that inspectors make to individual teachers (and not just teachers of infants) is to use small group work more frequently so that the pace and nature of the child’s learning can be more suited to their needs.

I am not going to analyse all the reasons why learning and teaching become overly formalised at a relatively early stage of the primary school years but I will mention a few. I have already referred to one factor – that is the beliefs held by parents, practitioners and teachers about each other’s expectations of what “school” should be. All of us, including inspectors, have a role in dispelling those myths.

A second constraint in the primary school relates to the numbers of children that are typically enrolled in primary classrooms. The average class size in many (though by no

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means all) primary schools is significantly higher than the adult to child ratios that are required in early years settings here in Ireland and internationally. Changing class size in schools, of itself, is no guarantee that teachers’ approaches and methodologies will alter. That is why many studies have shown that, despite its popularity, lowering pupil-teacher ratios in schools has little or no effect on the standards achieved by learners (other than for specific groups such as children in early years settings) unless teachers’ practice changes fundamentally. However, it is undeniable that having fewer pupils in infant classrooms could support the provision of the sort of learner-led, play-based learning advocated in Aistear and in a revised Primary School Curriculum.

Given that the growth in Ireland’s primary-age school population has peaked and enrolment is expected to decline in the next decade, some have argued cogently that a case could be made that any demographic dividend could well be used to lower adult-child ratios in infant classes. If this was combined with significant changes in teaching approaches and more appropriate design of these learning spaces, Irish children could benefit from greater continuity in learning and, more importantly, a learning experience that would be better suited to their needs and future learning.

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7 Recent research summarised by the OECD shows that smaller ratios and group sizes were associated with positive child-staff relationships in early-years services for children aged 3 to 6 although child-staff ratios and group size do not appear to be consistently linked to child development and learning. See OECD (2018). Starting Strong: Engaging Young Children: Lessons from Research about Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care. OECD Publishing, Paris, p. 43, 44, 49.

I am indebted to the Educational Research Centre, Drumcondra, for the following additional information on class size and student learning:


Research findings also suggest that for class size reduction benefits to be optimised, teachers must adapt their practice for smaller classes (Zyngier, 2014). Where this does not happen, for example, where teachers do not have the skills, experience or motivation to change, then the full potential of a reduced class size will not be realised. See Hattie, J. (2005). The paradox of reducing class size and improving learning outcomes. International Journal of Educational Research, 43, pp. 387–425.

The challenged learner

Can I turn now to the learner with additional learning needs? Some children experience greater challenges in their learning. This can arise for a range of reasons including physical, linguistic, ethnic, intellectual, social, family, economic and other factors. Over the last two decades the school system has invested heavily in putting in place a range of supports to facilitate the learning needs of these children. Policies such as those on special education and DEIS have been developed and implemented. National bodies such as the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) and the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) have been established. Additional staffing as well as extra financial and professional development supports have been provided to schools.

It has been good to see steps being taken in recent years to provide such supports in the early years sector. The advent of AIM (the Access and Inclusion Model which provides a programme of supports designed to ensure that children with disabilities can access the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme in mainstream pre-school settings) has been particularly welcomed by parents and practitioners in the sector. The recent announcement by Dr Katherine Zappone, Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, that a scheme of additional DEIS-style targeted funding would be made available in the early years sector is a clear indication that the need to support vulnerable learners is recognised.\(^8\)

National and international evidence suggests that at-risk learners and their families become even more vulnerable at times of transition, so ensuring continuity of supports across the transition phase could play an important role in the overall success of the child’s progress. The new special needs resource allocation model in primary schools is introducing a more needs-based model which is better aligned to more recent reforms in other sectors, including AIM, and this should help transitions. But I think it is widely recognised that consideration has to be given to making available coordinated psychological, health and other services to early years children in settings and schools, particularly to children from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with special educational needs. I am glad to know that these issues are under active consideration by DCYA, my own Department, the Department of Health and the Health Service Executive (HSE) in the context of the development of the Early Years Strategy.

The role of the adults

Practitioners, teachers and parents

We know that high quality, child-centred interactions between practitioners and children, or teachers and children, are strongly associated with improved child development and well-being, as well as socio-emotional and academic outcomes in both early years and primary settings. This means that the ways in which we recruit, develop and retain the professionals to whom we entrust our children are critical in ensuring high quality care and learning experiences for those children. Indeed, recent findings from the OECD suggest that

\(^8\) Speech by Minister Katherine Zappone at the Open Policy Debate on the Early Years Strategy, Thursday, 7 June 2018. Available at https://www.dcy.gov.ie/viewdoc.asp?Docid=4714&CatID=11&mn=&StartDate=1+January+2018
workforce development, namely in-service training, is the policy intervention with the strongest evidence for higher process quality in early-years settings and better child development and learning. This professional development is just as important for enabling successful transitions for the learner.

We can’t consider any of the issues concerning practitioners, teachers and their professional development without acknowledging the historical developments in Ireland that have brought us to where we are now. Primary education and primary teaching are long-established features of Irish society; in contrast, high quality early years provision has not been widely recognised as an important and vital public good until relatively recently, so its infrastructure is at an earlier stage of development.

There are many positives in both the early years and primary systems, the most important of which is that we attract many dedicated and inspired people to work as teachers and practitioners. Irish public policy has valued teaching as a career – primary teaching became a graduate-only profession in the 1970s, and during the last decade and a half, it has gradually gained the right, through the Teaching Council, to set standards for the registration of its membership and for the content of teacher education programmes. Very considerable sums are spent on teachers’ continuing professional development and the importance of this CPD has been recognised in the Teaching Council’s work on Cosán and in Minister Richard Bruton’s Action Plan for Education commitment to develop a strategy for teachers’ professional development.

Universally available, state-provided early years provision – a radical step achieved in a very short period of time through the leadership of the DCYA and an enterprising early years sector – has highlighted the importance of early years practitioners. Early years education focussed inspections carried out by the Inspectorate of the DES have, I hope, added to the recognition of the key educational role that early years practitioners play.

As a result, many initiatives are underway to provide better initial and continuing professional development opportunities for early years practitioners, and the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs has recently stated her commitment to “attract and retain a well-qualified workforce, [and] enabling continued professional development across their career.” We have seen the provision of a greater range of undergraduate and diploma courses, the establishment of the Better Start Quality Development Service, and the funding of training programmes through city and county child care committees and organisations like Early Childhood Ireland, Barnardos and other NGOs. The National Síolta-Aistear Initiative, which is developing and delivering nationally approved CPD in Aistear for practitioners is a really good example of DCYA, DES, Better Start and NCCA working in collaboration to provide much needed learning opportunities for serving practitioners.

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12 Speech by Minister Katherine Zappone at the Open Policy Debate on the Early Years Strategy, Thursday, 7 June 2018.
It is also worth noting that financial incentives are provided to settings that are under contract to DCYA to encourage them to employ better qualified graduate practitioners. Significantly, Minister Zappone has announced that she is giving consideration to the introduction of a new “voluntary or opt-in contract to deliver high-quality early childhood care and education to young children and their families.” She has stated that “in return for meeting agreed quality criteria under this contract, providers will receive additional funding.”

While there is not yet any equivalent of the Teaching Council for the registration of early years practitioners, processes have been put in place by DCYA and the DES to review and set standards for graduate and diploma programmes. All of this indicates, therefore, that we are on a trajectory that will enhance the initial and continuing professional development of early years practitioners, and can only enhance their status and working conditions in the long term.

Within this context we can take steps to improve transitions for learners. One practical step relates to the content of professional development programmes for both practitioners and teachers. Enabling all teachers and practitioners to understand and implement the principles and practices that lead to successful transitions is essential.

A second practical step is greater use of common professional development. Many countries have moved to providing a considerable degree of shared initial and continuing professional development for early years practitioners and primary teachers. In Ireland, the Sahlberg review of teacher education and the consequent consolidation of teacher education into larger teacher education institutes was specifically intended to ensure that professional programmes for early years practitioners and teachers would take place in the same institutions. I think there would be benefits in exploring the possibilities of collaboration between support services such as Better Start and the Professional Development Service for Teachers, particularly in ensuring common understandings and coherence in supporting the implementation of Aistear.

A third, and perhaps the most important step to mention in supporting successful transitions, is the fostering of collaborative practice and professional respect on the ground. The NCCA’s innovative project on early years to primary transitions has developed excellent materials to enable practitioners, teachers and parents to exchange information, involve children in their own transitions, and ensure that transitions are the sort of positive learning experience that we need. But the project has also shown that getting transitions right is not just about the exchange of information, important as that is. It has demonstrated that the professional encounter and collaboration that takes place between the practitioners and teachers, and between both of them and the parent and child are much

13 Ibid.
more important. Both practitioner and teacher have much to learn from each other; both have much to gain by collaborating with the parent; and I would argue that these should be continuing and respectful conversations, not confined to a once-off annual event.

**Inspectors**

Inspectors are a further group of adults that can and should support successful transitions. One of the ways in which inspectorates like ours can support best practice is to describe it in our evaluation frameworks and their accompanying signposts. We can also emphasise its importance as we observe practice in settings and schools, advise practitioners and teachers, and report on standards.

That’s why we have specifically included the need to think about and build good practices around transitions in the framework we use in the Early Years inspections we carry out. The following is one of the statements of quality and its accompanying signpost for practice that we have included in the EYEI framework:

**EARLY YEARS EDUCATION FOCUSSED INSPECTION (EYEI) FRAMEWORK**

Statement:
- Transitions into, from and within the setting are managed effectively to support children’s learning and development

Signpost for practice:
- Policies and practices have been developed to promote the sensitive management of transitions within and between settings

And here is a parallel statement of highly effective practice in *Looking at Our Schools*, the quality framework for primary schools:

**LOOKING AT OUR SCHOOLS 2016**

- The principal and other leaders in the school build and maintain very productive relationships with other schools, and education providers to extend learning opportunities for pupils

Tá an téama céanna le feiceáil sna critéir d’aitheantas mar scoil Ghaeltachta: *(The same theme is to be found in the criteria for the recognition of Gaeltacht schools)*:

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16 Inspectorate, Department of Education and Skills (2016). *A Guide to Early-years Education-focused Inspection (EYEI) in Early-years Settings Participating in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme*. Dublin, DES.

CRITERIA FOR RECOGNITION AS A GAELTACHT SCHOOL

- At primary level, establish useful and mutually beneficial language and cultural links with the local naíonraí

We have been able to report on excellent examples of practice around transitions in early years inspection reports. Here is a recent example:

EXTRACT FROM EYEI INSPECTION REPORT

Excellent systems are in place to support transitions to primary school. These include sharing of comprehensive information with parents and the local primary schools. Junior Infant teachers from the local primary school visit the pre-school and the children visit the local primary schools prior to transition. Staff have attended training in autistic spectrum disorders along with staff from local primary schools to support the transition of children from the setting to primary education.

Interestingly, when our recommendations or “actions advised” in our early years reports are analysed, we can see that there are particular challenges in relation to transitions for early years services. The most frequent actions advised in respect of transitions relate to communicating with parents and making connections with primary schools.

MOST FREquent ACTIONS ADVISED IN RESPECT OF TRANSITIONS

- Fostering concrete strategies to enable and promote meaningful partnerships with parents in the learning and development of their child
- Developing relationships with primary schools and teachers to support children’s smooth transitions to primary school

Some of the challenges we see relate to the lack of a common language, and the absence of support or guidance for practitioners and teachers in both settings to share and exchange their experiences.

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19 Inspection reports arising from the Early Years Education-Focussed Inspections (EYEIs) of the Department of Education and Skills are available at www.education.ie
20 An analysis of the trends and findings from the first early years education-focussed inspections carried out in 2016 and early 2017 was published in January 2018. See Inspectorate (2018). Early Years Education-focussed Inspection: Findings and Future Developments. Dublin, DES.
information. The NCCA work I mentioned earlier, as well as publications like *Ambitions for Transitions*, developed by ABC Start Right in Limerick21 and similar resources, will be really valuable in addressing these needs. The NCCA findings, in particular, will be invaluable for initial and continuing professional development for both teachers and practitioners, and they have the potential to improve practice significantly if implemented consistently by settings and schools.

We also have more work to do within the DES Inspectorate, particularly in regard to how we evaluate and inspect in infant classes. The recruitment of early years inspectors and their collaboration with primary inspectors who are early years specialists have certainly strengthened our awareness and capacity to encourage best practice in transitions and practice in infant classrooms.

One of the changes to be made in the next revision of our current inspection framework is to highlight even more explicitly the need for better attention to be paid to transitions, both into and from the primary school. Having early years colleagues within the Inspectorate, has highlighted for us the value of advising schools on this aspect of their practice. In a recent inspection report, for example, the issue of transitions was highlighted in our recommendations to a school, and we received this school response:

**SCHOOL RESPONSE TO WSE RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Board [of Management] agrees to continue developing our links with feeder preschools and to establish effective links with preschools within the local community. This should further enhance the smooth transition into Junior Infants.

During the final term the principal and the Home-School-Community Liaison teacher visited many preschool services in the local and surrounding areas and met key personnel.

Following recommendations in the [inspection] report, a formal Transition document for our school was created with the assistance of the pre-school staff. We will continue to liaise with the local services and will build on the links within our local community to implement our transition programme. This important work will inform our transition policy and this will be available on our school website.

I know that we have to build on examples like this, and make transitions a much more visible part of our own *Looking at Our Schools* framework and our evaluations in schools.

Finally, inspection can help to inform policy as well as practice. Earlier this year we published our analysis of the trends, strengths and challenges that we observed in early years settings,22 and we take regular opportunities to discuss with our colleagues in the

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Department’s Early Years Policy Unit and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs the possible policy responses that we believe would address emerging issues and improve provision for children. I know that long-term policies that will address several of the issues that I have discussed today (and many more besides) are being considered by Minister Katherine Zappone and officials in DCYA as part of the development of the Early Years Strategy and we have been delighted to be involved in consultations on that Strategy.

Transitions will become the sort of successful learning experiences that we want when policy and practice envision education as a true continuum from 0 to 18 and beyond. That’s why inspectors, working closely with colleagues across a range of policy areas in the Department and with colleagues in other government departments, have helped to ensure that several national policies include specific actions or provision for each phase of education including early years, primary and beyond.23 Ensuring that policies encompass all phases of education can only help in aligning provision and easing transitions. Our challenge as practitioners, teachers, parents, evaluators and policy makers is to ensure that we do all that we can to deliver the child-centred coherence necessary to translate this vision into real life experiences for all our leaners, irrespective of their age and stage of participation in our education system.

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23 For example, some recent Department and government policies that have included specific reference, provisions or actions relating to early years education as well as to primary and further phases of education include:

- **Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: the National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020 (2011)**
- **A Framework for Sustainable Development in Ireland (2012)**
- **Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017-2022 (2016)**
- **Creative Youth: A plan to enable the creative potential of every child and young person (2017)**
- **STEM Education: Policy Statement 2017-2026 (2017)**