Multiple Transitions

A paper prepared for the symposium,

Early Educational Alignment: Reflecting on Context, Curriculum and Pedagogy

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Author: Dr Mary O'Kane

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Abstract

The focus of this paper is on continuities and discontinuities in terms of experiences, curriculum and pedagogy faced by young children during educational transitions. The primary focus is on the major educational transitions for a young child, vertical transitions, where the child moves to a new physical and social environment, in recognition of the importance of these transitions in terms of early educational alignment. The importance of focusing both on the funds of knowledge that children bring to transitions and on the characteristics of the educational setting is highlighted. The need to consider transitions as a shared responsibility is linked to the above. Also in terms of alignment between sectors, the importance of curriculum and pedagogy; the role of play; and the impact of external environments must be recognised. Further detailed research into these areas in the Irish context would be beneficial in order to better support children and their families during educational transitions.

Educational Transitions in the Lives of Young Children

Children in Ireland experience a broad range of educational transitions from the process of moving from home to an early childhood care and education (ECCE) setting, moving within or between a range of ECCE setting types, and the transition from an ECCE setting to school. Many researchers have highlighted the importance of these transitions in the lives of young children. Ackesjö (2013) argues that at times of transition children must interpret and negotiate both the old and the new arena as they construct their new identity in the new setting. Indeed, an important aspect of transition for young children is developing a sense of belonging in the new setting. The demands placed on children during these early educational transitions can present both challenges and opportunities, and the degree of success experienced can impact on children in many ways. Long term outcomes are apparent not only in terms of later educational success but also in terms of social development (Margetts, 2009; Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People's Services (C4EO), 2010).

The first major educational transition experienced by young children is the one from the home setting to the ECCE setting. In terms of this transition, successful management is the difference between the child adapting to the service and having 'a service that is able, like a loving parent, to enfold each and every child' (Graham, 2012, p. 3). Indeed, the *Aistear* theme of Identity and Belonging (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), 2009) reminds us of the importance of the child feeling that they belong and have a place in their ECCE setting. The importance of secure relationships

and connections, where links with family and community are acknowledged, are vital in this regard.

Within ECCE settings, children also experience many micro-transitions. Room to room transitions are inevitable as children are usually grouped by age. This system means that children make a series of moves, usually on their own and at different points during the year. These transitions may be temporarily stressful for children, bringing with them demands which can manifest both as challenges and opportunities (O'Farrelly and Hennessy, 2013). Internationally, it has been noted that the timing of these transitions is influenced by children's attainment of developmental milestones, age, and available space in new classrooms. A variety of practical transition practices such as visits to the new room are often used to support children, however, practices linked to the promotion of emotional wellbeing are less common (Cryer, Wagner-Moore, Burchinal, Yazejian, Hurwitz, and Wolery, 2000; 2005).

The transition from the ECCE setting to the primary school setting is recognised as being one of the most important educational transitions that young children experience. This is reflected in the dominance of this transition in international transitions research. The Educational Transitions and Change (ETC) Research Group (2011) characterises this transition as a time of opportunity, aspiration, expectation and entitlement. Numerous studies have found that a positive experience in this important transition is a predictor of future success in terms of social, emotional and educational outcomes (Dockett & Perry, 2007; Dunlop & Fabian, 2007; Peters, 2010; Sayers et al., 2012).

Underpinning much of the current thinking on transitions research has been the bio-ecological systems theory encompassing concentric micro-, meso-, exo-, and macro-systems (Bronfenbrenner 1979, 2005) which sees the child as one part of a process of interaction influencing her development. Within this system the role of home, preschool and school influences operate at the micro-level. The child is also impacted by agencies operating at the meso-level, the relational network with others. The organisational context is set by wider external environments at exo-system (for example, the national curriculum) and macro-system (for example, cultural beliefs) levels which also impact on children and their families during these transitions.

This overview of the current literature on transitions has identified various themes running through the research. Some of the dominant themes are discussed in more depth below, these are: funds of knowledge that children bring to transitions; transitions as a shared responsibility; curriculum and pedagogy: the role of play; and the impact of external environments.

Funds of Knowledge Children Bring to the Transition

When viewing educational transitions, the child should be the centre of the various environmental systems. The need for educational settings to connect with the knowledge that children bring to the transition has long been argued in transitions research (Peters, 2010).

Focusing on the transition from an ECCE setting to primary school, O'Kane (2007) noted that the skills identified as being of importance to children were self-esteem; social skills; independence; language and communication skills; and concentration. It was found that these skills supported children dealing with the new levels of negotiation and rules which they had to learn in the primary school setting. The work of O'Kane & Hayes (2010) and the Preparing for Life team (UCD Geary Institute, 2012) re-confirmed the importance of these skill sets. Similar findings have been noted internationally, with social and emotional skills and the friendships they result in, cited as improving children's long-term educational outcomes (Brooker, 2008; Jackson & Cartmel, 2010; Hatcher, Nuner and Paulsel, 2012). Language and communication skills have also been noted as being fundamental to success during transitions (Jensen, Hansen and Brostrom, 2013). More recent longitudinal research has found a relationship between kindergarten social competence and future wellness. Children who worked co-operatively and related well to their peers, handled their emotions well, and were better at problem-solving were more likely to be successful in later life (Jones, Greenberg and Crowley, 2015). These findings present a strong message about the long-term importance of these social and emotional skills. Indeed recently published data (Baker, Gruber and Milligan, 2015) reinforces previous research emphasising the importance of non-cognitive development in early educational settings for later-life outcomes.

The role of ECCE is very apparent in terms of supporting the child in developing these skill sets. The positive effect of preschool education on a child's social, emotional and cognitive development is well established (Melhuish, 2004; Arnold, Bartlett, Gowani and Merali, 2006) with the strongest impact being evident in ECCE settings offering a quality service, linked to staff qualifications, training and service regulation (Melhuish et al. 2000; OECD, 2011). It follows that access for children to ECCE settings has been proposed as an important contributory factor in school readiness (Whitebread and Bingham, 2011; Faulkner and Coates 2013). However, Magnuson, Ruhm, and Waldfogel (2007) in a study involving over 7000 children, reported that schools were a factor in determining whether positive differences continue, concluding that 'whether pre-school attendees maintain their advantage, is in part a function of the subsequent classroom environment' (p. 33).

So clearly, as well as considering supporting the child with the skill sets to negotiate transitions, it is also important to consider the individual contexts in which transitions take place. The value placed on individual skill sets can vary depending on the individual educational context that the child enters during transition. In terms of home and educational settings, Brooker (2008) reminds us of the impact of cultural differences and the impact these have on children's transitions between settings. O'Kane (2007) reminds us that the skill sets for success at preschool and primary level can also be different, for example, while ECCE settings place great value on active learning, at primary level the ability to sit, listen and act on the teacher's instructions is important for young children. Indeed, Thomson and Hall (2008) use the analogy of children arriving to school with virtual school bags filled with individual knowledge, experiences and learning dispositions. However, schools may only draw on the contents of selected bags, "those whose resources match those required in the game of education" (Thomson and Hall, 2008, p. 89) leaving some children at a disadvantage in the new educational context. Therefore educational settings themselves have a distinct role to play in adapting to and supporting the needs of individual children. As Brooker (2008) argues, the question to be asked is not 'what does the child know' but instead, is the child supported in applying their knowledge in the new educational setting.

Some degree of discontinuity is inevitable at times of transition, indeed this disequilibrium results in cognitive conflict and may be a basis for learning. Children themselves have reported that they expect changes during times of transition (O'Kane,

2007; Brooker, 2008). However, support must be provided to enable children to negotiate these changes. They are more likely to succeed if connections and some level of continuity and alignment exist between the settings. The concept of 'readiness' that dominated transitions research has been replaced with a broader interactionist approach considering readiness as a bi-directional concept focusing both on the child and on the characteristics of the educational setting. As Meisels (1998) argues, readiness is therefore "shaped by the skills, experiences, and learning opportunities the child has had and the perspectives and goals of the community, classroom, and teacher" (p. 11). This approach reflects the acceptance of a shared responsibility by many stakeholders in order to secure success.

Transitions as a Shared Responsibility

The central role of relationships in supporting positive educational transitions for young children must be recognised, and many researchers have called for more to be done at policy level to ensure greater coherence in practice (Graham, 2012; Fabian, 2013; Einarsdottir, 2013).

Parents play an important role in the transition process, and should be seen as important collaborators in organising the transition (Griebel and Niesel, 2006, 2011; Margetts, 2007; Reichman, 2012). In terms of family involvement, Brooker (2005) reminds us of the importance of respectful two-sided dialogue. Brooker, and also Dunlop (2007; 2007a) considering the role of parents at points of transition, outline how parental understanding of an educational setting can impact on the 'transitions capital' of the individual child. International research has noted stronger levels of parent-teacher communication both in terms of written and individual verbal communication within the preschool sector, as compared to primary school (Peters, 2000; Dockett and Perry 2004, Murray, McFarland-Piazza and Harrison, 2015). Overall, the research suggests that more effective strategies to promote family involvement and communication between families and educational settings are needed.

In terms of the need for professional responsibility, it is clear that greater levels of alignment and coordination between preschool and primary settings will produce more positive child outcomes (Wright, 2009; Bablett, Barrat-Pugh, Kilgallon, and Maloney, 2011; Ahtolaa, Poikonenb, Kontoniemic, Niemia, and Nurmi, 2012; Petriwskyi, 2013).

Internationally, researchers have called for formal policies to be put in place to promote greater liaison and continuity of learning between two educational settings, with an emphasis on building on children's prior learning experiences. The overall argument being that a planned approach to building relationships is necessary (Einarsdottir, 2013; Fabian, 2013). It is clear that greater continuity between the sectors would better support children making educational transitions. The need to develop supportive relationships is critical in terms of this continuity.

In the Irish context, preschool and primary school systems have developed very much as separate entities, and vary in several ways in terms of their objectives and approaches to education, resulting in differences in pedagogy and curricula (O'Kane, 2007, O'Kane and Hayes, 2013a). This disparity and lack of coordination is an issue that has been noted in many other countries (Perry, Dockett, and Harley, 2012; Dunlop, 2013; Ministry of Education New Zealand, 2013). However, it is clear from a review of these research studies that a greater level of collaborative working, involving a sharing of pedagogical practice would facilitate children making the transition between the two educational settings. Internationally the importance of exchange of information between professionals at the time of transition has been noted and is promoted widely as a tool to support children during this transition (Hopps and Dockett, 2011; Petriwskyi, 2013). The most effective transition practices involve planning, communication and collaboration between stakeholders (ETC Research Group, 2011). However, it is clear that in the Irish context ongoing professional development and reflection, with support and resourcing to enable staff to provide the best possible learning environments for children, is necessary for this to take place.

Internationally, programmes developed to improve communication and coordination between the two sectors have provided evidence to suggest that sustained partnerships can contribute to improved long-term outcomes for all stakeholders (Brooker, Rogers, Robert-Holmes, and Hallett, 2010; Sayers, West, Lorains, Laidlaw, Moore, and Robinson, 2012; Trodd, 2013). In the Irish context, practitioners across both sectors who took part in the small scale O'Kane and Hayes (2010) study commented very positively on the value of collaboration and communication between the preschool and primary sector. Trodd (2013) argues that a commitment to inter-professionalism is required by all parties, requiring "the highest level of inter-professional working" (xxvi)

once again highlighting the need for joint responsibility in establishing and maintaining links.

Clearly, joint educational experiences for professionals from the two educational settings would enable greater alignment in teaching strategies. This in turn would better support children during this important transition. In the UK context, transitions are gaining importance in professional training. A revised version of the Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) standards was published in 2012 (Teaching Agency, 2012) and it now includes the need to support children through a range of transitions. Indeed, the Department of Education in the UK has developed a Transition Support Programme with a view to raising the standards of educational transition support. One of the main aims of the programme is to achieve greater co-ordination and cross-sectoral consistency (Department of Education (UK), 2012). A similar policy approach is long overdue in the Irish context.

Curriculum and Pedagogy: The Role of Play

Research studies, for example the Effective Pre-school and Primary Education (EPPE) findings (Sylva, Sammons, Ellis, Taggart, Siraj-Blatchford, and Melhuish, 2003, 2004; Taggart, 2007) have long argued the need for appropriate pedagogical approaches involving periods of sustained shard thinking for young children in educational settings. International research has consistently argued the case for play based learning for younger children in both the preschool and primary school settings (Bertram and Pascale, 2002; Diamond, Barnett, Thomas and Munro, 2007; Zigler, Singer, and Bishop-Josef, 2004; 2009; Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk, and Singer, 2009; Lundgren, 2009; Pyle and Bigelow, 2015). It is clear from this research that an interactive, play based curriculum is the most appropriate for children in the early years. The danger of 'schoolification' when the practice of formal learning from the primary school setting filters down to the preschool setting has been noted, and is a process that has been documented as taking place internationally (Graue, 2010; Hatcher, Nuner and Paulsel, 2012; Jensen, Hansen and Brostrom, 2013; Gunnarsdottir, 2014). International research has demonstrated that an early emphasis on academics does not result in later academic achievement (Suggate, 2009; Suggate, Schaughency, and Reese, 2008, 2008a, 2012). Indeed, it has been argued that early introduction to academic training has resulted in a damaging effect on the learning of our youngest children across the world (House,

2011). Internationally, the research argues that an academic focus at primary level should shift towards a more play based approach with a view to smoothing transitions for children.

In the Irish context, it has been questioned whether the pedagogy of the infant classroom in primary school is appropriate to the most effective learning opportunities for children at this level. The importance of developing a play pedagogy which provides opportunities for complex play is clear, but difficulties such as adult-child ratios; lack of appropriate in-service training; and lack of time for reflection impact on the development of a play based practice (Dunphy, 2007; Martlew, Stephen and Ellis, 2011). Indeed, it has been identified in the UK that the introduction of play based curricular guidance to support classroom pedagogy does not fully alleviate a pressure to prepare children in academic terms in the early years (Brooker et al, 2010; House, 2012). The tensions between play based and didactic approaches in early years education both in Ireland (McGettigan and Gray, 2012; Hunter and Walsh, 2014) and internationally (Perry, Dockett and Harley, 2012; Rose and Rogers, 2012; Baker, 2014) have been noted. Indeed, a tension between the play based ECCE classroom and the more 'work' based primary classroom was highlighted by children themselves when asked about their experiences in the primary school classroom (O'Kane, 2007; McGettigan and Grey, 2012). Although Irish primary school teachers have expressed a clear value in play based learning, they reported that introducing play as a teaching methodology is 'professionally risky' (Fallon and O'Sullivan, 2013) and have noted a pressure from parents to engage in a more academic focus at the primary school level (Nic Craith and Fay, 2013). In terms of supporting primary school teachers in this regard, recommendations include a reduction in class sizes; a more flexible curriculum; and ongoing training and professional development. A stronger research focus examining pedagogy in the infant classes would be of value, particularly linked to the use of *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009) as discussed below.

The Impact of External Environments

Although as noted above, families, ECCE practitioners and primary school teachers can support children's transitions on an individual level, it is important also to advocate for and support wider changes at the exo- and macro-system levels. It has been argued both internationally and in the Irish context that greater coordination and coherence at national level should create greater coherence across the two educational settings. Indeed, O'Kane and Hayes (2013a) argue that to capitalise on the investment made into ECCE in Ireland, greater supports need to be put in place to facilitate the smooth transition of children from that sector into the primary setting. This would support international suggestions that continuity of experience for children at times of transition benefits from policy and procedural documentation (Fabian, 2013).

It is hoped that *Síolta*, the National Quality Framework for Early Education (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education, 2006) and *Aistear*, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009) will increase connections in quality experiences and learning throughout early childhood. In terms of policy with regard to the transition from preschool to primary school in Ireland, they have important implications. While *Síolta* provides national standards for quality focusing on the contexts in which children learn, *Aistear* focuses on curriculum and learning opportunities, providing principles for learning. ECCE settings have been engaging with these frameworks since development. Uptake at primary level is less apparent, although the Association of Teachers' Education Centres in Ireland have been working to support infant teachers in this regard. They report that over 6,000 teachers have participated in *Aistear* training (Hough and Forster, 2013) which has resulted in an increase in play based learning in many infant classrooms (Nic Craith and Fay, 2013). It has been suggested by some that all infant teachers should be formally trained in *Aistear* which should then replace the infant section of the 1999 Primary Curriculum (O'Connor and Angus, 2012). It is clear that the application of *Aistear* in infant classrooms could support Irish primary schools in becoming 'ready schools' meeting the needs of the individual children as they make the transition to primary education. In this way, children making this transition would have the opportunity to further advance the capabilities developed in ECCE settings through play based activities which would extend current skill sets, and help scaffold their learning in areas that might need support.

In order to support curriculum change the need for high quality professional development is required. Continuing Professional Development programmes which are cross-sectoral would be particularly useful in terms of developing knowledge of the curriculum and pedagogy in both sectors. This should result in greater curricular alignment between the two sectors, which in turn should impact on children's transition from ECCE settings to primary school.

Research identifying examples of good practice, and disseminating information about good practice through both the ECCE and primary sectors, would be of value in this regard. Indeed, supporting children and their families at times of transition, with educational settings working towards greater alignment and continuity across borders, is central to the goals of both *Síolta* and *Aistear*.

Conclusion

The research outlined above confirms that educational transitions can place considerable demands on young children. These can manifest as challenges, opportunities, or both. The research reviewed supports the ecological systems approach that we must not only consider the characteristics of the individual children and their families but the contexts in which they are transitioning. This will better support children in taking full advantage of educational opportunities.

Questions for discussion

Communication and Continuity: It is clear that effective transition practices promote good communication and continuity between settings. Fostering stronger relationships between home, ECCE setting and primary school will better support children as they transition.

- How can research and policy better support the case for viewing transitions as a shared responsibility and promote greater coherence in practice?

Early Educational Alignment: Making links between learning and experiences at points of transition; providing opportunities for play; and stronger communication and

coordination at times of transition would all benefit our children during educational transitions. Progress at a policy level is slow.

- How can research involving stakeholders at micro-, meso- and macro- levels best be developed to offer greater coherence and alignment, and therefore enhance outcomes for all children at points of transition?

Ready Children and Ready Schools: With specific reference to the transition from preschool to primary school, the tension for children transitioning from a very active play based context to a more academic educational focus is clear. Adopting more active play based learning opportunities in infant classrooms would support children making this transition.

- It is clear that *Aistear* has a role to play in this regard. How can engagement with *Aistear* be better supported within the preschool and primary school sectors?

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