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Rewarding Learning

Debating the transition from play-based to formal practice: implications for Early Years teachers and policymakers

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“When a seedling is transplanted from one place to another, the transplantation may be a stimulus or a shock. The careful gardener seeks to minimise shock so that the plant is re-established as (easily) as possible”.

(Cleave, Jowett and Bate, 1982, pg. 195)

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The past decade has seen an upsurge in the Early Years literature on educational transitions (Dunlop and, Fabian 2003). The development of early childhood services has resulted in an additional transition that children have to make in the first stages of their educational journey, as they move from home to early childhood service; from early childhood service to school, then between schools and perhaps finally to tertiary education and/or training. In addition, the increase in the number of mothers returning to work has had an unprecedented impact on the frequency of transitions that children make in any given day as they move between an array of different arenas, such as home, early childhood service, school, childminder or after school setting, each with its own “specific social and cultural code” (Johansson, 2007: 33). The significant effect that transitions between contexts can have on children’s future development and socialisation has been extensively documented (e.g., Ghaye and Pascal, 1989; Ramey and Ramey, 1998). The need to ensure that such transitions are successful cannot be overestimated (Yeboah, 2002).

An aspect of transition that perhaps has been given the greatest prominence in Early Years literature is the transition that children make from a play-based setting to formal schooling (Johansson, 2007). With more and more children attending some form of pre-school programme before statutory schooling, there is an increasing focus on how such a transition can be managed both positively and effectively. Although not the initial transition for many young children, Dockett and Perry (1999) point out that “the way it is managed sets the stage not only for children’s success at school, but also their response to future transitions” (pg.1). Christensen (1998) goes one step further, referring to it as a turning point in a young child’s life. The adjustment to formal education is relatively easy for some children while others find it much more difficult (Margetts, 2007). The importance of ensuring a seamless transition for all young children as they move from a play-based to a more formal-oriented curriculum is a much debated issue throughout the world, but a context where this topic has particular relevance is Northern Ireland.

Since the Education Reform Order Northern Ireland (Great Britain 1989), Northern Ireland children have been obliged to commence formal schooling in the school year of their fourth birthday, (with no reception class). Up until September 2007 children

as young as four years and two months (the cut off point being the 1st July of any given year) were following the demands of a Northern Ireland Curriculum (DENI, 1996), which was described as focusing too heavily on academic achievement, detracting from the enjoyment of learning and lacking coherence for everyday life (Harland et al, 1999). Furthermore research by, for example Sheehy et al (2000); Walsh (2000); Walsh, Sproule, McGuinness, Trew, Rafferty and Sheehy (2006) has highlighted the inappropriate nature of this too early a formal start.

In response to Early Years research and European practice, the Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) started to revise the then existing Northern Ireland curriculum from early 1999, in an attempt to make it “more explicitly relevant and meaningful to young people, the society and the economy” (CCEA, 1999: 4). One of their key goals was to introduce a Foundation Stage into Northern Ireland primary schools, (which became statutory for all Year 1 classes from September 2007 and Year 2 classes from September 2008) to ensure that the Early Years of schooling became less formal in perspective, offering instead a more developmentally appropriate, play-based and child-led approach to teaching and learning.

“Children learn best when all areas of an integrated, carefully planned curriculum are implemented informally using methodologies that are interactive, practical and enjoyable. Children should have opportunities to experience much of their learning though well planned and challenging play” (CCEA, 2003: 7).

By introducing a Foundation Stage, comprising Years 1 and 2 of primary schooling in Northern Ireland, it could be argued that CCEA was endeavouring to ease the transition for young children as they move from pre-school to formal education by ensuring greater continuity between both experiences and contexts. This more play-based and child-led curriculum (the pilot of which is known as the Enriched Curriculum), has been evaluated by a team of researchers from the School of Psychology at Queen’s University Belfast and Stranmillis University College Belfast over the past eight years. Findings from this study, particularly with regard to classroom practice, confirm that a more practical and play-based approach is certainly in line with what Early Years experts consider to be a better experience for 4-5 year

old children and is easily distinguished from the classroom practices in evidence in more traditional classrooms (Sproule et al, 2005 and Walsh et al, 2006).

However, recent findings from the project suggest that all is less well as children progress to Key Stage 1 in that “some schools have not fully appreciated that the Enriched Curriculum is a developmentally based curriculum which recognises that pedagogy should be governed more by a readiness for learning a given concept than by age” (Sproule et al, 2006:43). From interviews with teachers there appears to be an underlying concern as to how and when the formal instruction of reading and mathematics should be introduced. Some teachers appear to have difficulty assessing when children should move to more structured guided reading and formal notation in mathematics. Furthermore, some Key Stage 1 teachers report children having difficulty in coping with the expectation of more formal work whereas other children were found to have no difficulty at all.

For this reason the Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) commissioned this study to improve Early Years teachers’ understanding of transitions from play-based to formal practice and to provide guidance as to how they can effectively support young children’s successful progression to formal learning.

The focus of this study is two-fold:

- 1) a literature review of existing evidence on the factors that influence the transition from play-based to formal learning with a view to understanding how the transition can be more effectively managed; and.
- 2) an empirical study comprising children’s and practitioners’ own views and perspectives of successful transitions from play-based to formal learning.

When reading this report, it is important to keep in mind the following issues:

1. the empirical study has been undertaken with children and practitioners from Northern Ireland Enriched Curriculum classes, rather than Foundation Stage classes;
2. all local evidence referred to in the literature review has been drawn from Enriched rather than Foundation Stage classes; and
3. when evidence from the Foundation Stage is referred to in the literature review it is principally associated with England or Wales.

2.0 PART A: REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

2.1. Introduction

Unlike their European counterparts, Northern Ireland children begin formal schooling in the school year after their fourth birthday. Therefore some children as young as four years and two months (the cut off being 1st July) are expected to make the transition from the play-based and informal approach of the pre-school setting to the more structured and formal approach of the primary school classroom. An array of literature suggests that this early start to formal schooling has few benefits for the young child (Sharp, 2002) and can result in negative experiences of demotivation, pressure and anxiety (Walsh, 2000, 2006).

Drawing on the work of Love & Yelton (1989), Margetts (2007) identified the period between five and six years as a stage of important development, where children tend to witness an increase in responsibility and independence. Children at this stage are in the process of developing self awareness, forming peer relationships, fostering simple symbolic concepts, mastering increasingly complex physical skills, making moral judgements, learning independent self-help skills, and in many cases accepting extended separation from parents. As Margetts stresses, if children are expected to commence formal schooling or indeed engage in formal practice before much of this neurological, psychological and behavioural development has taken place, the result can be detrimental to their progress academically, socially and emotionally.

Thus, in light of the research evidence and European practice, a Foundation Stage has been introduced into all primary schools throughout Northern Ireland, as part of the revised Northern Ireland Curriculum (Northern Ireland, 2007) where the pedagogy is to become more practical and play-based in orientation, building upon and extending pre-school practice. In this way it is anticipated that a more successful transition will be experienced for all children as they progress from pre-school into a more play-based Foundation Stage and, in turn, that children will be more ready to cope with the demands of formal teaching and learning when they move into Key Stage 1 at the age of six or seven.

The principal focus of this study, therefore, was to examine how an effective

transition from play-based to formal practice can be made. The first section of this report reviews local, national and international literature on the factors that are likely to influence the transition from play-based to formal settings with a view to understanding how the transition can be more effectively managed. However, before an examination of this literature can begin, the concept of ‘transition’ needs to be more fully explored.

2.2 An Understanding of Transition

2.2.1 Towards a definition

In recent years there has been widespread international interest in the topic of effective transitions in early childhood education. Writers from around the world have contributed to the literature base. These include Fabian (2000, 2003, 2007) and Dunlop (2003, 2007) in the UK; Broström (2003, 2007), Johansson, (2003, 2007) and Einarsdóttir (2003, 2007) in Scandinavia; Fthenakis (1998) and Griebel and Nielsen (2003) and Nielsen and Griebel, (2005, 2007) in Germany; Margetts, (2002, 2003, 2007) and Dockett and Perry (1999, 2001, 2002, 2004, 2007) in Australia, in Singapore, Clarke and Sharpe (2003) and Clarke (2007) and Peters (2000, 2003) and Merry (2007) in New Zealand.

Within this body of work, the concept of transition has been, as suggested by Kagan and Neuman (1998), depicted in many different ways. Several attempts have been made to explain what transitions really are. For example, Yeboah (2002) referred to the transition from early childhood to primary education as “*different phases in the education continuum, with distinct differences in policies, curriculum, teaching methodologies, environment and surroundings, role of parents and what is expected of the children*”(p 51). Moreover, Fabian (2007) defines a transition as a “*change of culture and status.....leaving the ‘comfort zone’ and encountering the unknown: a new culture, place, people, roles, rules and identity*” (pg. 7). Niesel and Griebel (2005) metaphorically describe transitions as “*gate keepers for institutional settings of education*” (pg. 7)” and how well equipped a child passes through the transition gate is of vital importance.

Some writers, such as Kagan (1992) and more recently Johansson (2007), have

endeavoured to classify transitions in terms of temporal dimensions, i.e., vertical and horizontal processes. Vertical transitions tend to be associated with the moves or changes between context/setting, e.g. pre-school and school but also between grades and various teachers. According to Johansson, these are clearly linked to children's increasing age and environmental changes. In contrast, horizontal transitions are everyday transfers between formal social networks such as school and after-school settings and between these formal networks and home (Johansson, 2007).

Whatever form the transitions take, Lam and Pollard (2006) allude to how they can be explained in terms of a change in context, i.e., a change in physical environment, a change in process, i.e., pedagogical approach and relationships and/or a change in identity, i.e., how children are perceived or perceive themselves. Fabian (2002) uses similar categories to explain the transition/discontinuity between home/early childhood setting and school. She highlights the physical discontinuities that are experienced where the physical environment changes, e.g., in size and location. Social discontinuities are also identified in terms of changes in children's identity, the social networks and the adults with whom they interact. Finally, she refers to philosophical discontinuities where the learning and teaching approach can change significantly.

However, as Bohan-Baker and Little (2004) emphasise, irrespective of the shape and form of the transition, it is not simply an event that happens to a child in isolation. Instead the transition from play-based to formal education is a course of action which is heavily influenced by "*the transition ecology – the inter-connectedness of relationships among child characteristics; and peer, family, school and neighbourhood contexts – and how these connections develop and change*" (Rimm-Kaufmann and Pianta, 2000: 501). Rimm-Kaufmann and Pianta describe this as "the Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition". In order to fully understand this model of transition, Rimm-Kaufmann and Pianta highlight existing models that have been used to examine the transition to formal schooling, all of which will be addressed in the next section of this report.

2.2.2 Models of transition

a) Child Effects Model

A child effects model is based on the child's own readiness or maturity as a determinant of the success of the transition. Based on this model of thinking it is the child's personal characteristics alone that predict how well he/she will adjust to formal schooling. In this model the role played by social networks is excluded.

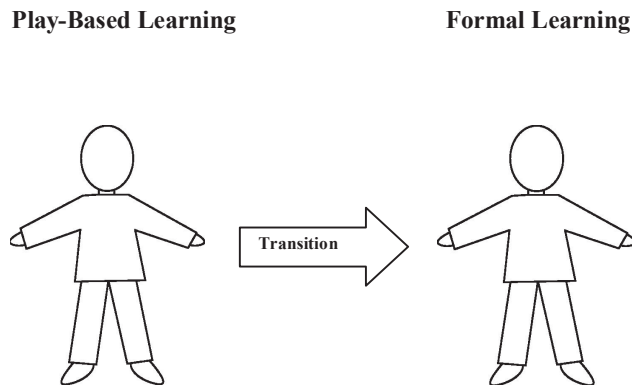


Figure 1: Child Effects Model

b) Model 2: Direct Effects Model

Unlike the child effects model, the direct effects model recognises the ecology of the unidirectional influence of contexts (e.g., school, home and peers) on the child. Although this model expands on the Child Effects model, its unidirectional approach fails to recognise the influence of the child on contexts.

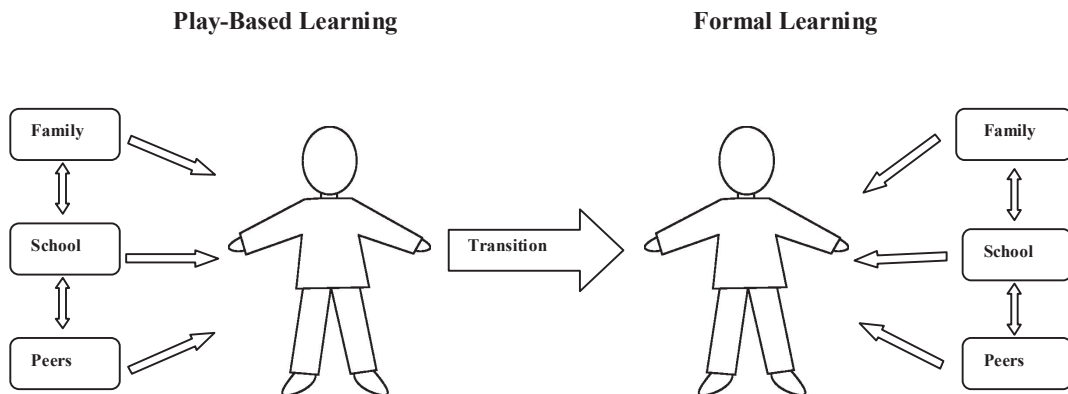


Figure 2: Direct Effects Model

c) Model 3: Indirect Effects Model

The indirect effects model examines the bi-directional effects between the child and contexts. The model signifies the importance of a synergistic interaction between the child factors, family and peer influences. As stated by Sameroff (1995) *“the child is affected by his or her context and the context, to some degree, is affected by characteristics of the child”* (cited in Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta 2000: 498). Although the indirect model provides a fuller picture in ecological terms, it can be criticised because of its static approach which fails to account for the dynamic development of relationships between child and contexts.

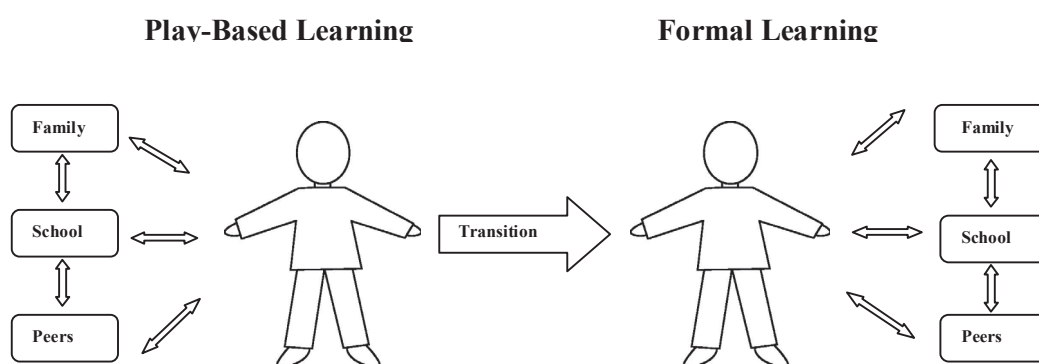


Figure 3: Indirect Effects Model

d) Model 4: Dynamic Effects Model – The Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition

The dynamic effects model proposed by Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta (2000) provides an holistic ecological approach which builds on the child, direct and indirect effects models. Its main focus is not on present effects, but on changing patterns in relationships between child and contexts which continually develop over time. Dockett and Perry (2007) purport *“Transition to school is about building up solid, meaningful and long-lasting relationships amongst all the participants”* (pg. 103). Rimm- Kaufmann and Pianta argue that knowledge only of the child, the direct and indirect models provides an incomplete picture of the transition to formal schooling as they present a static picture of the transition process. Instead, their model highlights how the child’s transition to formal schooling is affected by the ever changing patterns and interactions that he/she encounters before, during and after the transition takes place.

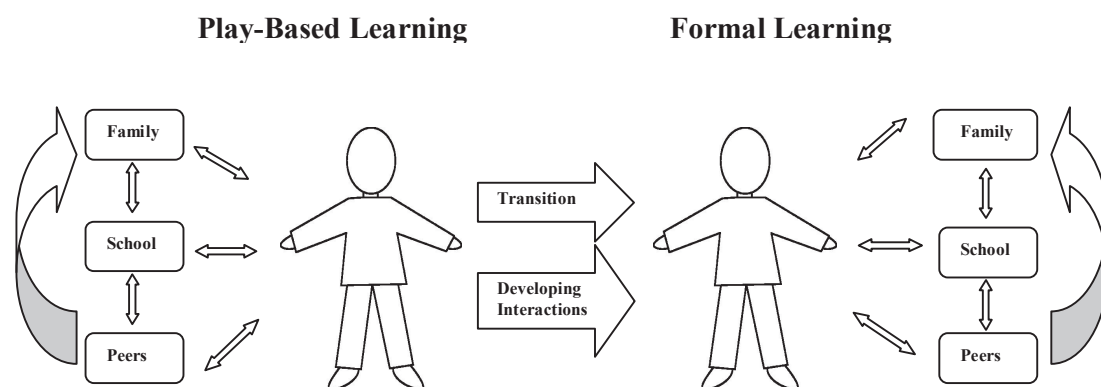


Figure 4: The Dynamic Effects Model

Figures 1 – 4 are sourced from Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000: *Four Models of Transition to Kindergarten Ecology*. The arrows between play-based and formal practice represent the change in time from one educational context to the next, i.e., the transition. Smaller arrows within each diagram represent relationships between the child and home, school, peer and neighbourhood contexts and their bi-directional nature in Figures 3 and 4 highlights the impact of the child on outside agencies as well as the reverse. The large arrows in the Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition depict two types of links: (a) the interactions between contexts that change from pre-school to kindergarten (for example, conversations between preschool, Enriched Curriculum and Key Stage 1 teachers), and (b) continuity between contexts that remain stable over time (for example, the same neighbourhood in which a child lives).

Based on this line of thinking, the effective management of the transition process from play-based to formal practice is perhaps more complex than initially anticipated. Such a process involves not only the child but his/her family and friends, the school context and indeed the community at large, all interacting and impacting on one another over a period of time.

However, what is of particular concern to this report is how the theory can be translated effectively into practice. The next section of the report will develop this thinking. Having reviewed the existing literature, the authors will attempt to provide practical guidance as to how the transition from play-based to formal practice can be

appropriately facilitated. In an effort to address the transition ecology and provide guidance for Early Years practitioners, it will begin by highlighting the factors associated with the child, family and friends, then the role of the school context, finishing with a short commentary on the role of the community at large.

2.3 Facilitating Effective Transition from Play-based to Formal Practice

2.3.1 The Child

a) Personal Characteristics

When children make any transition in their young lives, it is important to recognise that each child will bring unique personal characteristics and previous experiences that will impact on the overall success of the process. Referring specifically to the transition to formal schooling, Margetts (2003) states that “*children bring more to school than their backpacks*” (pg. 5). Growing evidence suggests that children’s transition to school is influenced greatly by personal and family characteristics, previous life experiences and cultural background (Ramey and Ramey, 1994; Margetts, 2003, 2007). Therefore the experience of transition will be individual for each and every child (Dockett, Perry, Howard & Meckley, 1999; Rutter and Rutter, 1992). Major change, as suggested by Dunlop (2000), may have a lasting influence on how children view themselves, how others value them, their sense of wellbeing, and their ability to learn. As a result, studies addressing transition to schooling must consider the individual characteristics of children, and the nature of the challenges that transition presents.

The Early Years literature has examined the impact of children's personal characteristics on the experience of transition. For example, Margetts (2003, 2007) measured the effects of transition, identifying several influential factors that challenged children’s adjustment to their new environment. Children at this time face the demands of new formal routines including development of independence, getting along with new peers, recognition and adherence to new routines and rules and having to remain alert for longer periods of time. Drawing on her findings, Margetts (2003, and 2007) identified a range of static characteristics, e.g., gender, age, order of birth, language spoken in the home and socio-economic status as being influential in the

success of the transition process. Boys, in comparison to girls, were found to have more difficulty adjusting to formal schooling in terms of social skills and behaviour and showed more signs of hyperactivity. Furthermore, her results suggested that children who did not speak English at home had fewer social skills, more problem behaviour and lower academic competence, all impacting on the success of the transition process. Older children were also rated as more academically competent, which in turn appeared to ensure an easier adjustment to formal schooling. An earlier study by Bredekamp & Copple (1997) also found that older children in a group tended to have greater ability to think about and solve problems, were usually more proficient in their understanding of multiple perspectives, and were better able to understand rules of behaviour.

Therefore, as Margetts (2007) states *“Understanding the variation in children’s development and personal, family and background experiences that impact on children’s adjustment to school is critical for developing policies and practices related to early schooling”* (pg. 108).

b) Emotional well-being and social competence

A body of literature suggests that children’s emotional well-being and social competence play a major role in how successfully they adjust to transitions in the Early Years of their lives (Margetts, 2003, 2007; Fabian, 2003; Dockett and Perry, 2001; Griebel and Niesel, 2003; Elliot, 1998 and Denham, 2006). As Woolfson (1999) states: *“Although many parents think that success in joining the infant class depends heavily on children’s ability to learn, evidence suggests that personal rather than intellectual characteristics have the biggest influence on her chance of having a good start to school”* (pg. 14

Fabian (2003) agrees, stating that *“the more confident a child feels and the higher their self-esteem, the more likely they are to deal with new situations, to experiment, explore, interact with others, and to stay committed to learning through transfer”* (pg. 106). On the other hand, lacking emotional well-being limits the ability to build relationships and become active participants in life and learning (Roffey & O’Reirdan, 2001; Porter, 2003). In line with this thinking, Goleman (1996) indicates how children need to feel secure and emotionally ready for school to meet the new

challenges with confidence. Broström (2003) adds to this thinking, emphasising the fundamental need for children to feel “suitable in school” (pg. 52), i.e., having a feeling of well-being and belonging to facilitate the school-start transition. Drawing on empirical evidence (e.g. Thompson, 1975 and Ladd and Price, 1987), Broström argues that children who feel suited, relaxed and well adjusted in school, experience long term school success. Merry (2007) continues that children who have been supported to explore and develop a strong sense of themselves are less likely to experience difficulties during transition. Knowing who you are, your strengths and limitations, and having a sense of trust and reliance developed through positive relationships, appear to increase the likelihood of a positive transition experience (Merry, 2007). Children who have high levels of well-being are described by Laevers et al (1997) as feeling “*like fish in water*” (p.15). Laevers et al argue that to achieve this all round state of well-being, children’s physical needs, their need for affection, warmth and tenderness, the need for safety, clarity and continuity, the need for recognition, the need to consider oneself as competent, and the need to give meaning to life, must be satisfied.

Another emotional capacity that has been identified by the Early Years literature base as integral to the transition to formal schooling is that of emotional resilience (Niesel and Griebel, 2005). Newman and Blackburn (2002) published a report identifying the resilience factors in the lives of children and young people in transition. In the report they state that “*Resilient children are better equipped to recover faster and more completely from traumatic events or episodes*” (p1). Furthermore, drawing on longitudinal empirical evidence (e.g., Egeland, Carlson and Stroufe, 1993; Werner and Smith, 1992), Niesel and Griebel (2005) highlight how “resilient children approach problems and difficult situations in an active way and they believe in the success of their doing. They use their talents effectively, have a strong internal locus of control and they know and use their resources, e.g., mobilise social support systems” (Niesel and Griebel, 2005: 2). They continue that these competencies enable young children to view stressful events in a positive and challenging way thus ensuring more positive and effective transitions. Several attributes of transition resilience have been found in the literature. Dunlop and Fabian (2002) identify social competence, problem solving skills, autonomy and a sense of purpose and future as being prevalent attributes. Bird and Gerlach (2005) extend this list by adding a sense

of being able to be yourself, a sense of self-worth, an ability to identify, ask for and move towards things you need, a capacity to tolerate uncertainty and respond creatively and with integrity to challenges and a capacity to respect the need for boundaries.

However, Griebel and Niesel, (2005) emphasise how resilience, like many emotional processes, e.g., self-esteem (Schaffer, 1996) are not stable. Such processes may be subject to change, depending on circumstances and phases of development. Therefore, it is not simply the responsibility of parents and pre-school practitioners to cater for children's personal, social and emotional well-being. Throughout the child's school career, emphasis must be placed on nurturing such emotional capacities, as Eade (2006) argues "*Unless children's emotional needs are met, all learning is impaired*" (pg. 63).

c) Learning Dispositions

A child's learning dispositions have also been identified as salient in a successful transition to formal schooling (Dockett and Perry, 1999, 2001). Learning dispositions have been described as the child's ability to know how to learn, to be able to engage, to concentrate and to persevere (Katz, 1992). A similar description has been given by Carr (2001) who defined learning dispositions as taking an interest, being involved, persisting with difficulty, communicating with others and taking responsibility. Referring to her findings from a New Zealand study which explored transition experiences of a range of children, their families and teachers, Peters (2000) indicated that focusing on children's learning dispositions as well as their skills in the new classroom may do much to facilitate children's transition to formal schooling. Having found that the most valued aspect of the transition to school process for many of the children was the pleasure of learning new things, she concluded that if learning dispositions are fostered at school then children may engage more positively with the content of the formal school curriculum.

A variety evidence (e.g., Deci and Ryan, 1985; Dweck, 1986; Dweck and Leggett, 1988; Gottfried, 1990 and Ames, 1992) has highlighted the importance of initiating in children a desire to want to learn, becoming what Dweck (1986) referred to as a "*mastery learner*" (i.e., one who is challenge-seeking, persists in the face of difficulty

and enjoys “*exerting effort in the pursuit of task mastery*”, pg. 1040) for overall school success. Claxton (2000) reiterates the importance of learning dispositions for later school success, referring to them as a “*learning toolkit*” (unpaginated). He argues that it is only when this learning toolkit is in place that successful life long learning will take place. As Stephenson and Parsons (2007) emphasise, school is the context in which children’s growth as a learner begins and it is only when dispositions for learning are continued to be strengthened across the entire school career that “*children will emerge as effective learners for life*” (pg 143). Therefore the need for positive learning dispositions to be enforced in the Early Years of schooling goes without saying, not only to ensure an effective transition from play-based to formal schooling, but also to provide an appropriate basis for lifelong learning.

SUMMARY OF THE CHILD

- The child brings his/her own background and personal experiences to each educational transition which must be taken into consideration by the teacher concerned;
- The child’s emotional well-being, social competence and learning dispositions play a major role in how successfully he/she adjusts to formal schooling.

2.3.2 Family and Friends

a) Families

Central to a successful transition to formal schooling is the support of parents and families (Wolbers, 1997). Mashburn and Pianta (2006) classified this family support network in three ways: maternal sensitivity, family culture and parental involvement in the school. Drawing on the findings of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) longitudinal study of determinants of developmental outcomes, Mashburn and Pianta indicate how mothers’ sensitive behaviour when interacting with their children during play was found to have the strongest association with children’s social and emotional outcomes. Such findings are supported by further empirical evidence, e.g., Pianta and McCoy, 1997 and Ramey et al. 1996. Mashburn and Pianta also point out that a sensitive care giving and supportive approach by

parents, ample learning materials and stimulation and well-established routines promote not only children's motivation to learn and self-regulatory abilities, but also their language, literacy and socio-emotional skills.

With regard to family culture, Mashburn and Pianta indicate that family values and norms to which children are socialised can impact on their readiness for school. They emphasise that if children's behaviours at home are in alignment to the school context, the cultural gap between home and school can be bridged more easily. As Margetts (2007) stresses, when children are able to use the language of their peers and teachers and can relate to the topics being addressed in school, they are more likely to feel competent in school. Therefore, as already addressed in section (2.3.1a), family background and experiences in terms of economic resources and levels of income can impact significantly on children's adjustment to school (Margetts, 2007). Stephen and Cope's (2003) findings support this thinking. Based on a study of children's experience in their first year of formal schooling, they highlight how middle class parents tended to support their children better through the transition process and were more willing to assume a proactive part in the home-school partnership. In addition, Stephenson and Parsons (2007) draw attention to the conflicting expectations that parents and practitioners may have and their effect on the transition process. Drawing on the findings of OFSTED (2004), they emphasise that parents tend to prioritise formal learning in the Early Years of education and, as a result perhaps, may not value the learning opportunities provided through the medium of play.

This leads onto Mashburn and Pianta's (2006) final family support mechanism – parents' involvement in the school context. A body of evidence highlights that successful transitions to school are best observed when parents, teachers and children work as equal partners (Peters, 2000; Bohan-Baker and Little, 2004; Sanders et al. 2005 and Niesel and Griebel, 2007). Yeboah (2002) stated that *"children who through their parents' assistance, are able to build confidence and adapt quickly to the school environment, maintain self esteem and self reliance"* (p 62). The relationship between parents and teachers is an integral part of the transition process (Margetts, 2002) and, as Glicksnam and Hills (1981) suggest, parents who are listened to by teachers are less likely to experience stress about the child's transition to school and are more able to assist their child in overcoming confusion, frustration and

adaptation to their new environment. On the other hand, parents who have limited access to professional educational sources, with little understanding of curricula and pedagogical approaches, cannot offer the same help and support to their children during the transition process (McNaughton, 2001). Referring to her quasi-experimental study of working with parents in Singapore, Clarke (2007) highlighted the knowledge, skills, self-confidence and ability of parents to express their needs and in turn facilitate improvements in their child's overall skill development as a result of the home-school intervention. As Mashburn and Pianta (2006) stress, through involvement in school, parents gain clearer insights into expectations, procedures and demands which children face in school, monitor the child's progress and develop a more integrated learning experience for the child between home and school. Bohan-Baker and Little (2004) support these findings, reinforcing that teachers play a central role in influencing the attitudes and involvement of families. They conclude that this partnership is vital for providing continuity as children move between systems of care and education.

b) Peers

Several studies have identified that children's ability to form meaningful relationships, not only aids successful transition, but their future schooling (McClelland, Morrison and Holmes, 2000). In the USA, Ladd (2003) found that children who have grasped friendship making skills and cooperative behaviours, before commencing formal schooling, have an increased chance of developing relationships at school which may facilitate success in later schooling. Similarly, in Australia Margetts (2003) indicates that the presence of a familiar playmate is a highly significant factor associated with children's adjustment. Children who have this playmate have more social skills, less problem behaviour and greater academic competence. She suggests therefore that friendships should be prioritised by teachers in facilitating children's adjustment to schooling. In New Zealand, Dalli (2003) concluded, that despite the young age of her subjects (i.e. 2-3 years), peer interactions were a powerful mechanism through which the new children learnt about life in the Early Years setting.

Peters (2003) also explored the complex nature of the transition to school, by looking at 23 children's experiences of friendship and the way in which this impacted on their

early experiences of school. She found that, although school transition is complex for the child and is influenced by several factors, the absence of a friend was found to be problematic for many children, concluding that the presence of friendships appeared to go a long way towards establishing a positive experience of school. Transition work carried out by Dockett and Perry (2001) reported the nature of relationships between and among children as having a “*significant impact on children’s sense of belonging and acceptance within a school community*” (p4). Fabian (2002), in a study exploring the social and emotional changes that children face at the start of formal schooling and the ways in which they are helped with developing coping strategies to deal with these changes, found that those children who started school with a friend were happier than those who were separated from their friends or who did not have a close friend.

The evidence from the literature therefore shows, significantly, that children who have a peer support network are more sociable, competent, happier and able to cope with transition than those children without such friendships.

SUMMARY OF FAMILY AND PEER NETWORK

- Family support is essential to ensure a successful transition on the part of the child to formal schooling;
- Such support has been highlighted in terms of maternal sensitivity towards the child; the family culture being in line with that of the school; and a proactive home-school partnership in evidence, i.e., parents are not only interested but involved in the schooling of their child; and
- The importance of both friends and friendship-making skills can facilitate a positive transition to formal schooling.

2.3.3 School

a) Teacher Relationships

Another important relationship in the transition to formal schooling is that of the teacher-child (e.g., Howes and Smith, 1995; Birch and Ladd, 1997 and Pollard and Filer, 1999). Howes and Smith (1995) studied the effectiveness of teacher-child relationships in the primary grades and concluded that children with more positive relationships in the primary grades and concluded that children with more positive relationships with their teachers are more socially adept and emotionally secure. Birch

and Ladd (1997) assessed teacher relationships with children, correlating the results against children's scores on standard attainment tests and social attitude tests. Their findings suggest that positive relationships between teacher and child help children to adjust to the demands of formal schooling. A study of English children conducted by Pollard and Filer (1999) further supports this thinking. Drawing on their findings, they highlight the importance of positive teacher-child relationships in influencing peer relations, which as discussed earlier have been found to be a strong factor in successful transition, and the child's overall learning and development.

The importance of developing a secure attachment between the teacher and the child is therefore paramount. As Howes et al (2000) highlight "*if children feel emotionally secure with the teacher they can use her as a secure base for exploring the learning opportunities of the classroom*" pg. 114). Drawing on their longitudinal study of 357 children, Howes et al indicate that relationship quality with significant adults is consistent over time. Children with secure attachment to their caregiver were found to be more socially competent, have more positive relationships with later teachers and were more empathetic and responsive with their peers. They suggest, therefore, that when children enter formal schooling they come with a working model of teacher-child relationships which will impact on how they relate to their new teacher.

For the child, transferring attachment is a crucial element in the transition to formal schooling. The success of using attachment as a transitional aspect will therefore depend on the opportunities and trust that both the child and the new adult have from the outset of this new relationship. Kidder (1990) stressed that the development of a caring relationship with a teacher can further promote a sense of self-worth. Children who are deprived of the opportunity to develop a secure attachment often fail to develop the initiative and social skills which would facilitate further positive transitions.

Beyond facilitating the transition process, Mashburn and Pianta (2006) emphasise that positive relationships between teacher and child during the Early Years of schooling have positive effects in children's long term school outcomes. Drawing on empirical evidence of Hamre and Pianta (2001), they indicate that children who have close relationships with their Early Years teachers achieve higher social and academic

outcomes in the early grades, with benefits that last into later school years.

b) Promoting a Positive Home-School Liaison

The part the teacher and indeed the school as a whole plays in promoting a positive home-school liaison has also been accentuated as an integral issue for ensuring a successful transition to formal schooling (Cleave, Jowett and Bate, 1982; Parr, McNaughton, Timberley and Robinson, 1993; OFSTED, 2004).

A recent study entitled 'Getting Ready for School', undertaken by Clarke (2007), provides evidence of the above. She used a quasi-experimental study, comprising a pre- and post-test design to examine the effects of two parent involvement programmes with the aim to empower the parents by increasing their confidence and knowledge of their child's development and the education system as a whole and to enhance the children's cognitive and language skills as preparation for starting formal school. The study was carried out with 213 parents and children from six childcare settings in Singapore. Experimental group 1 consisted of 10 guided play sessions with children, parents and teachers. The sessions included circle time planning time; doing time; review time; story time and parents' sharing time. Parents in the second experimental group attended six to seven workshop sessions in the presence of teachers but without children. The topics covered childrearing practices, preparing children for starting school, the school curriculum and pedagogical approach. Sessions on effective management of time, homework and behaviour were also included at the parents' request. There was also a control group where children received the normal pre-school activities but parents received no additional involvement sessions beyond those normally practised by the pre-school centres.

The findings revealed significant benefits for both parents and children in both experimental groups as opposed to the control group. Minimal differences were found between the two experimental groups, with both considered equally effective as compared to the control group. It was interesting to find, however, that the benefits gained at the end of pre-school in the two experimental groups were not sustained throughout the first year of primary schooling, particularly in the children's academic achievements. During the follow-up in Year 1, however, parents expressed concern about the lack of communication between primary school and home, with parents feeling much less included than they had been in pre-school. Clarke (2007) deduces

from these findings the importance of ensuring continuity in parent support throughout the Early Years of primary schooling.

Stephenson and Parsons (2007) agree with these findings, indicating that the transition from Foundation Stage to Key Stage 1 in England may not be characterised by the same degree of parental involvement as from home to school. (The Foundation Stage in England comprises children's pre-school and reception year, with children beginning Year 1 of Key Stage 1 at the age of five). Based on their study of the transition from the Foundation Stage to Key Stage 1, Sanders et al (2005) found that English parents felt ill-informed about this transition. They wanted to know what would be expected in Key Stage 1 so that they could help their children in this transition. One of their key recommendations therefore was that staff should communicate with parents and children about this important transition, providing guidance for parents as to how they can support their children's learning in from reception into Year 1. Dockett and Perry (2004, 2007) also reveal how the communication between home and school declines as children move up the primary school, where there is an expectation that children will assume much of the responsibility for transmitting information about what is happening at school and what is required for parents. In the evaluation of the Enriched Curriculum, Sproule et al (2005) report how this is also the case in several schools in Northern Ireland. It was found that parents in some schools were very disappointed with the level of information supplied to them by schools, particularly as their children progressed beyond Year 1. As children move up the school, they meet several discontinuities such as changes in pedagogical approach, teaching styles and attitudes, which parents need to be informed about because, as Stephenson and Parsons argue (2007), if parents are excluded from knowledge of the changes their children are encountering, they may not be able to appropriately support their children's learning.

c) Preparing for transition

Dockett and Perry (2001) highlight the importance of the transition process being well planned. Drawing on the findings of the 'Starting School Research Project' in Australia, they argue that one of the key elements of an effective transition programme is detailed planning and clearly defined objectives which have been developed in collaboration with all stakeholders involved in the transition. They

provide examples of data that can be used to inform transition programmes ,e.g. , children's comments and drawings; parent surveys and comments; indications of children's well-being at school such as attendance patterns, interactions and familiarity and comfort in the environment; teachers' reactions and observations. In planning effective transition programmes, Fabian (2007) reinforces the importance of transitional activities that create links between and involve all stakeholders including children, parents, families, teachers, early childhood services, schools and the local community. She continues that these bridging activities should value and support continuity of children's previous experiences, relationships, learning and social expectations and encourage their success. Margetts (2007) develops this thinking, indicating that there is a consensus that transition programmes should be based on a philosophy that children adjust better to school when parents are well informed and teachers have information about children's development and previous experiences and a degree of continuity is ensured between school experiences.

In a Danish investigation of types of activities that can be employed to prepare for a successful transition to schooling, Broström (2003) identifies some of the activities that have been considered as a 'good idea' by school teachers, kindergarten class teachers, kindergarten teachers and leisure time teachers . These include:

- The school invites the child to visit the class before school starts;
- The kindergarten teachers and children visit the class before school starts;
- The kindergarten teachers and children visit the leisure time centre (after school facility);
- Kindergarten teachers and class teachers have conferences before school starts about children's lives and development;
- Organisation of new classes is done with regard to children's friendship;
- Parents and child get letter before school starts;
- Pedagogues and teachers make up a co-ordinated curriculum between kindergarten, kindergarten class and leisure time centre.

(Broström, 2003: 53).

Other induction activities have been highlighted by Fabian (2000), including school/class visits, talks with parents, parents remaining with their child until settled

and a staggered entry to school. Dockett and Perry (2001) also advocate the use of friends in the induction process of children starting school. They reveal how ‘buddy’ programmes are being used by some schools, where children in the upper years of primary school are paired with children starting school. It is anticipated that the buddies spend a lot of time with each other during the first few weeks of school, in the playground and integrated classroom experiences. They also draw attention to how teachers have responded to children’s focus on friends by planning group time activities to allow children to get to know each other and to make friends. Margetts (2007) supports this thinking, emphasising that the importance of friendships and familiar relationships should be recognised in allocating children to classes, e.g., pairing children with friends or placing children from the same pre-school in the same primary school class, and in encouraging the development of friendships for those that may commence school without a playmate.

Communication between teachers has also been recognised as essential in the transition process to ensure that appropriate information about individual children is shared between pre-school and school staff (Margetts, 1999). Margetts (1999) highlights the importance of the sharing of information about individual children and collaboration in planning for transition across both contexts and visiting each other’s contexts to familiarise themselves with the other’s curriculum and pedagogical approach. Drawing on the work of Renwick (1984) and Edgar (1986), Margetts (1999) also recommends mutual respect between staff of both contexts, i.e., pre-school and school.

A number of Early Years experts, e.g., Brooker and Broadbent (2007) and Stephenson and Parsons (2007), indicate that these preparatory transition activities are not continued throughout the school. Although supportive strategies are employed as children move from home to pre-school and pre-school to school, few of these conditions are found when children in England move from the Foundation Stage to Key Stage 1, where they are expected to embrace the full range of the National Curriculum. Drawing on earlier findings (Parsons and Stephenson, 2002), Stephenson and Parsons (2007) indicate how preparation for this later transition is minimal. Although children may spend an afternoon in the new classroom, little time is spent on specifically preparing children for what is to come in terms of curricular

experiences and pedagogical approaches.

Based on an in-depth case study of four children's life experiences in two kindergartens and three kindergarten classes in Denmark, Broström (2003) emphasises that transition activities are insufficient on their own to ensure an effective transition in the Early Years of schooling. He proposes the need for a teacher to follow the children on their transition journey. If children find it difficult to transfer skills and knowledge from one setting to another, he suggests that a well-known adult should function as a mediator. In addition, he recommends the use of tools, objects and signs (resources and activities) providing a mediating function between school contexts. Finally, he advocates the need to create a kind of shared identity between kindergarten and kindergarten class (beginning of formal schooling in Denmark). By the teachers from the two cultures (i.e., pre-school and formal schooling) using similar pedagogical techniques and strategies, a more successful transition might be ensured. But he also suggests that the children themselves should be involved in reflecting on the different transitions they have and are experiencing, in an effort to develop their own learning motivation.

Dunlop (2003) adds to this thinking. She argues that children need to be active agents in their own transitions but that this depends fully on whether the new pre-school or school cultures enable this to happen. She highlights three basic principles upon which child agency lies:

- Starting with the child, where educators listen carefully to people who already know the child can share with them, to work hard to build a successful relationship with the child and to create a learning environment which supports children's awareness of their own learning;
- The recognition that new learning experiences will be at their most effective if they are linked to what children already know and to the mental frameworks they already have;
- Promoting a 'learning how to learn' approach, supporting children to maintain the sense of identity that they have been developing in the pre-school and support its development.

As a body of literature (e.g. Ramey and Ramey, 1998; Stephen and Cope, 2003 and Dockett and Perry, 2007) suggests, in order for successful transitions to be guaranteed consideration of how the new school or class might accommodate to the needs and interests of all children, rather than how the children can be shaped to fit the institution, must take place. In this way, simply preparing children and their families in isolation for transition, although to be praised, is inadequate in itself, without the school placing emphasis on enabling children to play an active part in the whole transition process.

d) Curriculum and Pedagogical Approach

The curriculum adhered to, and the teaching methods employed, in the Early Years of schooling can also affect the quality of the transition to formal learning (Yeboah, 2002; Broström, 2003, 2007 and Stephenson; and Parsons, 2007). As already highlighted in this report each child brings his or her own personal experiences and learning toolkit to the new school/classroom which needs to be responded to individually by the teacher concerned (Margetts, 2007). Griebel and Niesel (2003, 2007) support this thinking, arguing that the formal school curriculum must embrace and appreciate the competencies, skills and values that the young child has acquired earlier in the play-based context. Broström (2003) also highlights the way in which the primary school teacher can take into consideration the child's perspectives, needs and interests as a key aspect of a smooth and successful transition to formal schooling. In this way it could be argued that a developmentally appropriate curriculum is requisite throughout schooling to ensure that a successful transition takes place.

Based on an international review of Early Years literature, Stephen (2006) identifies Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) as characterised by:

- a balance between children's self-initiated learning and practitioner guidance;
- opportunities for children to make meaningful choices between activities offered;
- scope to explore through active involvement;
- a mix of small group, whole group and independent activities;
- play as a primary (but not the exclusive) medium for learning;

- adults who demonstrate, question, model, suggest alternatives and prompt reflection; and
- systematic observation of children's learning and behaviour.

In addition, Lombardi (1992) stressed that DAP responds to young children's natural curiosity, reaffirms their sense of self, promotes positive dispositions towards learning, and contributes to the growth of increasingly complex skills in the use of language, problem solving, and cooperation.

In his defence of a developmentally appropriate approach for the teaching of literacy, Fisher (2000) argues that:

“DAP does not limit what children learn by adopting a maturistic view of development. However, it does recognise that children develop literacy behaviour as well as other behaviours along a continuum and that different stages of development require different approaches. This does not mean returning to a Piagetian model which limits each stage to particular behaviours, but one that allows the experienced professional to exert professional judgement in her choice of teaching strategies” (pg. 67).

An array of evidence would support play as the developmentally appropriate medium by which young children learn and develop (Bertram and Pascal, 2002). Outcome studies conducted by Schweinhart and Weikart (1997) in the USA, Sylva and Nabuco (1996) in Portugal and Hadeed and Sylva (1996) in Bahrain have all concluded that early childhood programmes, in which teachers encourage children to initiate and activate their own learning activities, are more beneficial than didactic teacher-directed programmes.

Reviews of Early Years research, such as those conducted by Sharp (2002), provide further evidence of the merits of a more practical and play-based curriculum in the Early Years. Based on a review of international research and policy, Sharp concluded that young children seem to do best when they have opportunities to socialize, make their own choices and take responsibility for their own learning. Emphasis on spoken

language and understanding of basic concepts is recommended, as is listening to stories, but not ‘formal’ academic teaching. More local evidence by Walsh et al (2006) in Northern Ireland confirms that a more play-based and practical pedagogical approach provides a higher quality learning experience for young children. In fact Stephenson and Parsons (2007) argue that it is this kind of curricular and pedagogical approach, focusing on the development of learning dispositions and emotional stability, that is required in the Foundation Stage of schooling to ensure that children will make the transition to formal schooling more easily.

However, they point out that many Early Years practitioners are not adhering to these principles and are resorting to formal teaching approaches too soon. Drawing on a number of empirical studies, a review of Early Years pedagogy (BERA, 2003) found that play-based pedagogy, particularly in the early stages of primary school, can be problematic, serving principally as a social function, with little evidence of cognitive challenge. Practitioners in the Early Years of primary schooling tended to lack the confidence, knowledge and training to teach aspects of literacy and numeracy through play. Wood (2004) supports this thinking, arguing that in many cases a non-interventionist approach is adopted by Early Years teachers and play in practice is limited in ‘frequency, duration and quality’ (Wood, 2004: 21). More locally Walsh and Gardner (2006) came to similar conclusions. Although it would appear that the sample of Northern Ireland Year 1 teachers surveyed accept play as being of benefit to the development of the ‘whole’ child, many appeared quite reluctant or perhaps unsure of how effective enhancement of literacy and numeracy skills can be developed through a play-based curriculum without the use of direct instruction.

Against this backdrop of empirical evidence there appears to be an underlying problem where teachers see work and play as being two separate entities and find it difficult to know how and when the transition between play (seen principally to serve a social function) and formal learning (actual instruction of subject knowledge) should take place.

Broström (2007) provides some help with this issue. He argues that the transition process from play-based to formal practice requires the development of a learning motive in young children. In an effort to facilitate this, he proposes the need for a

‘transitory activity system’ (pg. 61) known as frame/expansive play. In frame play teachers and children plan together and teachers are heavily involved in the play activity. It could be argued that frame play intercedes between play and formal learning, providing a form of mediation between work and play. He argues that the following seven pivotal points are essential for frame/expansive play:

- reading aloud a short story of high quality literature;
- based on the story, teacher and children carry through a structured conversation, known as literature dialogue;
- after the dialogue they make drawings to illustrate their understandings of the text;
- from this point, the children in groups are asked to turn their literature experiences into play. Here the teacher has mainly an observing role and uses the approach ‘teacher in role’;
- sometimes they will be asked to present their play to the rest of their peers and teachers;
- after presentation of the play, the teachers and each play group will share in a ‘learning dialogue’; and
- during all phases, the teacher and the children have ‘philosophical dialogues’, reflecting on their thoughts and intentions during the drawings and play activities. (Broström, 2007: 70).

In Broström’s opinion, the transition to formal practice is not only about building bridges between settings, but also developing a new psychological structure in the child’s mind – the child going through a mental transition from play motivation to learning motivation. Through integrating some aspects of instruction into play, the child begins to build up this mental picture of the importance of formal learning.

Walsh et al (2007) supports this school of thought. Drawing on intensive observation of eight Enriched Curriculum classes (classified in the evaluation of the Early Years Enriched Curriculum study in Northern Ireland as having satisfactory to excellent practice in terms of the quality of the learning experience on offer), they concluded that high quality practice was associated with what they define as ‘playful structure’. They describe playful structure in terms of an interconnectedness between structured play and work, where play is not simply seen as a settling in period to enable children

to develop socially and emotionally and then real work is to begin; nor is play envisaged simply as a few free choice child-initiated activities, e.g., sand, water, role play and junk art. Rather, in the excellent settings, a degree of playfulness permeated throughout the entire day, not only in terms of the activities on offer but also in the way the environment was presented and, most importantly, the teacher's role in the classroom. Underpinning this more playful approach was a thoroughly planned structured programme. The teacher was conscious of where she wants to take the children and how she was going to get them there - referred to by Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva (2004) as sound pedagogical framing, i.e. planning, resources and establishment of routines. Such findings would support those of the REPEY study (Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva, 2004) which also emphasises the need for a balance between well planned teacher-initiated tasks and child-initiated but potentially instructive activities in Early Years practice. Bennett, Wood and Rogers (1997) agree, suggesting that this dual approach (teacher-directed and child-initiated play) will help practitioners develop a greater degree of synchronicity between playing, learning and teaching.

Nevertheless, achieving such a balance in the Foundation Stage does not suggest that the curriculum and pedagogical approaches in Key Stage 1 should remain unchanged and that the Key Stage 1 educators simply can expect all children to be ready for the full routines of formal practice. The basic principles of good transition practices will still apply i.e. building on the competencies that the children bring to the new classroom. As Glauert, Heal and Cook (2007) state in their advice to teachers on teaching the 'World Around Us' in the Early Years, there is no need for abrupt changes in pedagogical approach as children get older. As with all learning, the important thing is that the learner can make sense of new experiences by relating them to what they already know. They argue that many of the pedagogical approaches used in Foundation have also a place at Key Stage 1. "A longer period, in a context that allows children to strengthen their dispositions for learning, will better equip children with the tools needed to show resilience in the face of change to a more formal curriculum" (Stephenson and Parsons, 2007: 146). Empirical evidence supports these arguments. Sanders et al (2005) in their study of the effectiveness of the transition between the Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1 in England found that too much time was spent at the beginning of Key Stage 1 on formal recording and children sitting still and listening. They advocated that Key Stage 1 teachers should be encouraged to

increase opportunities for active, independent learning and learning through play. In a similar study, OFSTED (2004) highlight the pressure that many English Year 1 teachers are under in terms of the end of Key Stage 1 assessment tests which in turn can lead to an abrupt transition to more formal work in Year 1 (i.e. at the beginning of Key Stage 1 in England). In their recommendations, they emphasise the importance of the learning experiences in Year 1 building upon the practical approach and structured play of the Reception Year.

e) The Learning Environment

If children are to make a successful transition to school, the physical environment of the new setting/classroom needs also to be considered. Cleave, Jowett and Bate, (1982) identify three features of the environment that are critical at the time of transition to formal schooling: *“the scale of the child’s setting, the range of his territory, and the limitations on his/her movements within it”* (p 39). Margetts (1997) highlights further changes to do with the environment that children can face as they enter a new setting or classroom. These include - the condition and size of the buildings, the classroom equipment, the location of the toilets, classrooms and play areas relative to each other, the number and ages of the children in the class, staff: child ratios, the size and organisation of the classroom.

In terms of the physical features, Barrett (1986) suggests that if children have prior knowledge of building, people and organisational patterns they are able to anticipate some control over their new experience.

Ramey and Ramey (1994) go one step further identifying fundamental principles that any high quality learning environment needs to adhere to. These include:

- the child recognises he/she has an effect on the environment;
- the environment is responsive to the needs, preferences and development stage of each individual;
- the environment is sufficiently interesting to sustain children’s interest;
- the environment is trustworthy and comprehensible from the child’s point of view.

Ramey and Ramey emphasise that classroom environments must promote happiness. They stress that when environments are too stressful, too chaotic and disorganised, or when they are overly regimented, the quality of the learning experience will be damaged.

The playground has been shown to be one of the contentious areas in the transition to formal school (Ghaye and Pascal, 1988). In a study of outdoor settings, Fabian (2005) shows how the transition in outdoor learning environments between Foundation and Key Stage 1 can be eased. Strategies that she found to be successful include:

- A gate had been erected between the main playground and the Foundation Stage outdoor area. This was opened at playtime for children to go between the two areas. They could stand and watch at the gate or play in their own area;
- Children were paired with familiar playmates for playtime or were met at the gate by their older siblings;
- Friendship bench offered support to those children who had no one to play with. Friendship helpers had badges to identify them and basic mentor training;
- Games were available to use outdoors;
- Equipment was timetabled for each class;
- A designated area was set aside for ball games;
- Playground markings included pathways, number squares, a compass and the alphabet;
- An assault course was timetabled for each class;
- Trained assistants supported pupils in developing play activities;
- Quiet and secret areas were included such as a sensory area with wind chimes and herbs and a hazel tunnel; and
- There was a calm end to playtime when two children walked around the playground holding up boards that asked the children to return to their classrooms.

In addition to making physical changes to the playground itself, Smith (2003) emphasises the need to prepare children socially and emotionally to embrace the

transition between pre-school and formal school playgrounds. She carried out a study of 13 pre-school children aged four years one month to four years four months. The intervention programme focussed on a range of topics such as:

- Being left out;
- What makes a friend;
- Fighting and quarrelling;
- Being friends;
- Sharing;
- Stealing;
- Being lonely; and
- Telling a secret.

The findings reveal that the intervention programme promoted a sense of belonging in the children where they nurtured one another, acknowledged and recognised feelings, formed friendships, developing their overall resilience to enable them to cope with differing transitions.

SUMMARY OF THE SCHOOL

To ensure a positive transition:

- A secure bond between teacher and children is necessary;
- The school needs to make a concerted effort to show interest in the children's family life and involve their parents in their child's overall learning and before, during and after transitions;
- Such involvement should not be a preserve of the Early Years but should continue throughout schooling;
- Preparatory activities should be put in place to ensure familiarity with the new experience on the part of children and parents;
- The child should be encouraged to be actively involved in the transition process;
- The curriculum throughout Foundation/Early Years of primary schooling and Key Stage 1 must be developmentally appropriate;
- A gradual introduction of formal practice should take place when children appear to be ready and even at the beginning of Key Stage 1 should not just happen automatically;
- The Curriculum in the Early Years of Primary schooling should focus on a pedagogical model which mediates between play and work, embracing the principles of 'playful structure'; and
- The learning environment both indoors and outdoors needs consideration in terms of physical continuity and learning ethos.

2.3.4 The Community

A body of writers would suggest, however, that families and schools are constrained by how they manage the transition from play-based to formal practice as a result of policy decisions and Government intervention (Ramey and Ramey, 1994 and Yeboah, 2002). Although there are no specific details for Northern Ireland, Bennett (2006), referring to his Starting Strong II findings, indicates that the public expenditure on Early Childhood Education and Care Services (0-6) in the United Kingdom is much less than Scandinavian and many European countries. Furthermore, he draws attention to the high level of child poverty that is experienced in the United Kingdom (15.4%) as compared with Denmark (2.4%). Out of all 20 countries involved in the OECD review, only Portugal, Ireland, Italy, USA and Mexico had higher levels of child poverty than the United Kingdom. Drawing on the findings of Save the Children (2005), Walsh (2007) postulates that in Northern Ireland 37% of children are living in poverty and 32,000 are living in severe poverty and she continues that despite significant investment on the part of the government for many years, there is still insufficient progress being made to improve the lives and opportunities of the most marginalised and disadvantaged children (OFMDFM, 2006). Walsh (2007) also draws attention to the influx of monies being invested in these Northern Ireland children as part of the Ten Year Strategy entitled *Our Children and Young People* (OFMDFM, 2006), however she indicates that its impact is some way off. If, as highlighted by Margetts (2007) earlier in this report, children's socio economic status can have a dramatic impact on the success of children's transition to formal schooling, these figures are alarming and need to be addressed immediately.

Beyond the confines of the local government, communities at large need to become "*vested partners in the educational activities provided for young children and families*" (Ramey and Ramey, 1994: 3). Walsh (2000) in her study of practice for 4-5 year old children in Northern Ireland as compared to Denmark, referred to the somewhat traditional perspective of schooling that is apparent in Northern Ireland. A large minority of the sample of parents questioned in Northern Ireland defined a high quality programme for their 4-5 year old child in purely academic terms, which was in complete contrast to the sample of Danish parents who all appeared to value play highly. Similar findings were revealed with regard to the teachers themselves, where

the majority of Year 1 teachers were reluctant to attribute more value to play in the Year 1 curriculum (4-5 year old children) than to the teaching of the 3Rs (Reading, wRiting and aRithmetic). The Danish pædagogs on the other hand were much more disposed to the value of play in the learning programme. Earlier, David (1992) emphasised this cultural difference between British and Belgian parents. Having interviewed a selection of parents of pre-schoolers in both Belgium and Britain, it was found that Belgian parents sent their children to pre-school so that they could become more independent and socially adept. British parents, on the other hand, prioritised the time their children would spend on reading and writing activities in preparation for school. Drawing on the work of Moss and Petrie (2002), Alexander (2004) and OECD (2006), Clark and Waller (2007) also draw attention to this division between England and other English-speaking countries and much of the rest of Europe, concerning both the concept of Early Years policy and practice.

If we in Northern Ireland want to embrace the recommended practices detailed in this report to ensure a more positive transition from play-based to formal practice for our youngest children, it would appear that we need to begin to change the local mindset of our community. Such a change process will not take place overnight (Fullan, 2001, 2003). Referring specifically to Year 1 teachers in Northern Ireland, Walsh and Gardner (2006) argue “*curriculum and classroom practice innovators face the ‘hearts and minds’ task of providing information, support and training to enable teachers to introduce change into their personal pedagogies and so integrate it more solidly as they begin to see the benefits for themselves*” (pg. 138). It could be argued that such information, support and training be extended to parents to ensure that they too fully appreciate the value of early years education for their young children and are fully aware of the role they play in the education process. Perhaps, as the community begins to recognise the importance of getting it right in the Early Years, the management of transitions from play-based to formal practice and, indeed, transitions in general will be much smoother and less taxing for all concerned.

SUMMARY OF THE COMMUNITY

To ensure an effective transition:

- Substantial money and advisory support should be invested in Early Years care and education in general;
- The local mindset needs to begin to appreciate that childhood is important in itself and not just a preparation for adulthood.

3.0 PART B: THE EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

3.1 The Main Messages from the Children

This section discusses the research conducted in Northern Ireland on children's experiences of the transition from play-based to formal practice in terms of pre-school to Year 1 and from Year 2 (now known as the Foundation Stage) to Year 3 (now the beginning of Key Stage 1). Clarke and Sharpe (2003) argue that despite the amount of emphasis that has been placed in the last 20 to 30 years on easing children's transition to formal schooling, the views of the main stakeholders, i.e., the children's viewpoint has been neglected. The aim of this section of the report therefore is to present the views and perspectives of children about to make the transition into Year 1 and Year 3 (known as the transitioning children) and those who have already made the transition into Year 1 and Year 3 (known as the transitioned).

Seventy two children participated in the study, i.e., twelve children from each of six schools across Northern Ireland, all of which had been involved in the pilot of the Enriched Curriculum. Each of the chosen schools possessed an attached nursery unit. In this way some of the transitional problems associated with a physical change of setting may have been lessened for these children which may not be the case for other children coming from different pre-school settings e.g. playgroups, nursery schools etc which are not attached to the primary school. It is necessary therefore to keep this in mind, when reading the findings of this aspect of the study.

The children were selected by month of birth, i.e., those in the class whose birthdays came closest to the 15th January of any given year.

Table 1 details the distribution of boys and girls across the six schools and classes.

SCHOOL	NURSERY		YEAR 1		YEAR 2		YEAR 3		TOTAL
	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	
A	2	1	2	1	1	2	2	1	12
B	2	1	1	2	2	1	1	2	12
C	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2	12
D	2	1	2	1	2	1	1	2	12
E	2	1	2	1	2	1	1	2	12
F	1	2	1	2	1	2	2	1	12

To avoid confusion with Year 1 in England which refers to children entering Key Stage 1, it is important to note that Year 1 in this section of the report refers specifically to children in Northern Ireland who were in their first year of primary schooling, following the Enriched Curriculum pilot intervention.

The interviews were conducted during the period of April and May 2007. In this way the transitioning were close to entering their next school phase, whether it be Year 1 or Year 3 and the transitioned children had almost experienced a full year of either Year 1 or Year 3 practice.

All of the children came from primary schools which were involved in the Enriched Curriculum pilot and whose Early Years practice had been rated by the Quality Learning Instrument (Walsh and Gardner, 2005), as high or excellent. Therefore all the children had experienced or were going to experience a play-based curriculum in the Early Years of primary schooling.

The researchers were conscious of the young age of their interviewees and for this reason included the use of a bear to whom the children spoke. This method was used in other projects such as Cunningham et al (2005) and was considered beneficial. The children were interviewed in groups of three as recommended by Mayall (2000) on the grounds that children will feel more relaxed, support each others' responses and be more truthful. The interviews took place in a quiet area within the children's own

classroom. The main topics addressed included views and aspirations, curriculum and teachers.

3.1.1 The 'Transitioning' Children: Nursery

Views and Aspirations

The children were asked four questions relating to their views and aspirations about starting Year 1. All the nursery children interviewed appeared excited and enthusiastic about starting school where the comment "I just can't wait" was expressed on several occasions. When asked to qualify their response, four principle themes emerged which are discussed below:

- Being perceived as 'grown up'

There was a general consensus amongst the nursery children that "*in P1* you will be big*". Several children seemed very excited about being perceived as a big boy/girl in Year 1, where interesting work would be carried out.

- Playing with 'big' toys

Being able to play in Year 1 was also something of great importance for the nursery children. However quite a number of the children used the word 'big' in connection with Year 1 play. It was as if they viewed Year 1 as a place where both people and toys were physically bigger or more difficult that only big boys or girls could play with them.

Some of the comments expressed included:

"I can't wait to be in P1 cause they have real big toys up there".

"Cos you are big in P1 you can drive big nails in".

"In P1 you still get to play but it is not baby play you know. You have to be big to play there".

** - Children and some teachers in Northern Ireland still in many cases refer to their class in terms of 'P' or primary.*

- Rules and boundaries

The children in general appeared to have quite a traditional perspective on discipline

in the Year 1 classroom. Some comments included:

"You are not allowed to shout up there".

"You have to put your hand up".

"You can't run and you must line up".

It seemed as if these children were being prepared for the more formal aspect of schooling either by family and friends or the nursery staff.

- Work

Perhaps linked to the emphasis placed on being big, several of the children alluded to the importance of work in Year 1. For example:

"You do big hard sums up there".

"If you do your work well you get sweets on a Friday".

"You learn lots of new things up there".

Despite this emphasis placed on work, the children did not appear anxious about it and seemed to be waiting patiently for the new challenge.

- Friends

Many of the children were excited about going into Year 1 because their friends would be going too. On a few occasions the opportunity to make new friendships was also referred to: *"Gary from Sunday school is also going to my big school and I will sit beside him"*.

When specifically asked if there was anything that they felt nervous about or would make them sad about going to Year 1, most of the children responded negatively. However being hurt emotionally or physically particularly in the playground appeared to be a key issue:

"Outside in P1 is a bit scary".

"There are naughty boys in the playground".

"You could get hurt".

The key factors identified by the children that they believed would help them with the settling in process included being older and wiser; friends and teachers. The following quotations express this thinking more fully:

“My friends will all be in P1 too and we will have much fun”.

“It will soon be my birthday and when you’re 5 you will be big enough”.

“The teacher is real nice up there”.

Curriculum Issues

The children were asked about what activities they thought they would be doing in Year 1 and what they would like to be doing. Their responses included: reading, writing stories, counting and play. Some of the children appeared to be of the opinion that there would be little difference between the activities at nursery and Year 1.

“It will be good fun up there”.

“You will get to bring books home”.

“You will learn to read”.

“You will get to play sometimes”.

The Teacher

The children were also asked about what they thought their new teacher would be like. Some of the children seemed to have little knowledge about their new teachers but the statements about what they hoped she would be like focused principally on physical appearance:

“Nice and wearing a pretty dress”

“have nice hair”

“smile and be friendly”

“not shout a lot”.

A few of the children were more specific in their responses, giving the impression that they had already met their new teacher, e.g., *“she is very tall with spiky hair”* or *“she wears nice jewellery”*.

Wishing Bear

When asked to express a wish for what they hoped Year 1 would be like, most of the children requested a wish list of toys, e.g., bouncy balls, toy ponies, marbles, castles, rockets, Spiderman costumes. A few of the children wished for a friendly teacher and one little boy just hoped there would be *“plenty of windows”*.

3.1.2 The Transitioning Children: Year 2

Views and Aspirations

The Year 2 children were asked similar questions to those of the nursery children about going into Year 3 (i.e., moving from the Enriched Curriculum into Key Stage 1).

All but one of the children replied that they were excited about going into Year 3. When asked to qualify their responses, two principal themes emerged - feeling more grown up and the physical environment.

- Feeling grown up

Like several of the nursery children, the majority of the Year 2 children expressed their excitement about going into Year 3 in terms of “*being more grown up*”.

“In P3 you get to do joined up writing”.

“I can’t wait for the big hard questions”.

“You don’t have to do baby things anymore in P3 like having to colour-in all day.”

“You get going out to the proper playground now”.

“You have to stay in school longer cause you are bigger”.

“The teacher asks you to do real jobs for her”.

- The Physical Environment

There seemed to be a perception on the part of several of the children that the environment would be better equipped and more exciting, for example,

“They have lots of computers in P3”.

“You get to play with the bee bots”.

“The classroom is much bigger”.

“You get sitting at big tables”.

“There is one of those computer boards there”.

There appeared to be a greater sense of unease expressed by the Year 2 children as compared to those in nursery about their new transition. Issues that made the Year 2 children feel nervous surrounded three key themes – hard work, friends and teachers.

- Written work

It was evident that the children in Year 2 were anxious about the amount of written work that they would be expected to do in Year 3, as well as homework and tests.

“In P3 you have to write, write, write and I my hand might get sore”.

“You will have to write lots and lots and you don’t get to play”.

“You get a test every Friday and if you don’t finish it you don’t get going out at break time”.

- Friends

Some of the children mentioned that it would sadden them if their friends would not be beside them:

“I love sitting next to J and maybe in P3 the teacher will not let us sit beside each other”.

“I wouldn’t want my friends to go away. I love playing with them”.

“If I sit at a different table next year, then J and S will not be my friends”.

“I will be lonely in P3 if I have no friends”.

It appeared that these children had developed sound friendships by the end of Year 2 and they were concerned about losing them.

- Teachers

Having an insensitive and strict teacher was a concern for some children. The discontinuity of moving from a teacher described by one child as *“lovely and helpful”*, to one who might be *“bossy and cross”* was an issue that some of the children were anxious about. The following quotations help to clarify this thinking:

“In P3 the teacher will not allow you to talk or play”.

“The teacher in P3 always shouts. My big brother always complained about that”.

“Maybe if I get an answer wrong in P3, the teacher might not help me”.

“My friend K told me that when you move up the stairs the teachers don’t smile any more”.

An interesting comment was expressed by one Year 2 girl: *“If you got the chance to be in your new classroom and stay there with the new teacher for a while, you might not be so scared”.*

Curriculum Issues

Like the Nursery children, most of the Year 2 children seemed to be looking forward to going to Year 3. When asked about what they would be doing there, a variety of responses were given which tended to focus on the formal aspect of reading, writing and arithmetic, e.g., “*harder spellings*”, “*longer books to read*”, “*writing exciting stories*” and doing pages of sums with little place for play: “*No play, not even a shop*”. Despite these comments, which could perhaps appear to have a somewhat negative connotation, the majority of the children seemed ready to embrace the challenge. As one boy said: “*My mum says you can’t play for ever. In P3 you just have to work hard to get a good job. But I hope it is exciting*”.

A few of the children referred to the fact that they would get the opportunity in Year 3 to use computers and maths machines and as another boy stated “*you still get PE*”.

The Teacher

The majority of the Year 2 children hoped the Year 3 teacher would be “*friendly*”, “*caring*”, “*not bossy*”, “*jokey*” and “*kind*”. By this stage in their development, unlike the nursery children, the Year 2 children appeared less concerned by the teacher’s physical appearance and more by her personal characteristics. An interesting comment was made by one little boy, who hoped that his teacher would be a “*man teacher who is kinder to boys and is funny and young*”.

Wishing Bear

In general, the children’s wishes for Year 3 tended to focus on practical activities such as play, watching television, making things, doing PE and “*doing experiments – they’re fun*”. As one girl stated: “*I wish P3 will be fun, fun, fun. I want to learn lots of new things but I hope it is not boring*”. Another added: “*Let’s hope the teacher is not too bossy either and not too old*”.

3.1.3 The Transitioned Children: Year 1

Views and Aspirations

The children were asked four questions on their views and aspirations about being in Year 1 and how the experience differed from nursery. Their views about what they

had liked about being in Year 1 were categorised into three principal themes:

- **Variety of Experiences**

The majority of the children expressed having enjoyed the array of learning experiences that had been available to them in Year 1. These included, according to the children, drawing with charcoal, making kites, baking buns, painting around themselves, having PE in the big hall and using the computers. The practical aspect of literacy and numeracy appealed to several of the children, e.g., *“I love it on Fridays when you get to play maths games”*; *“I like listening to the big books”*; *“Sometimes you get to play games with words and that’s fun”* and *“Word bingo is the best. I’m real good at it”*.

- **Play**

The children’s responses suggested that children enjoyed engaging in play both during class and at break times. The school playground can be a social arena for most children; however for some it can be a place of isolation. Without over generalising the results, it would be fair to say that the children interviewed in Year 1 all appeared to be having a good experience of the school playground. Comments included:

“Outside is great cause you get to play”.

“You get to run around in the playground”.

“Play is great outside but it is too short”.

- **Friendships**

Peer relations were again identified as an integral part of their experience in Year 1 as summed up by a little girl from setting A: *“I really love playing with A and T. They are my friends. They make P1 special”*.

Changes in Experience

According to the children, Year 1 differed from their nursery experience in two distinct ways: curriculum experiences and the physical environment.

- **Curriculum Experiences**

Many of the Year 1 children referred to the differences between Year 1 and nursery in

terms of literacy and numeracy activities. For example:

"You do Maths in P1".

"You have reading groups in P1. You don't read in nursery".

"You do real writing in P1 and Jolly Phonics. I can write now you know".

"In nursery you play, play, play. In P1 you do big work".

"Nursery was better fun. The sand and water stayed out all day".

"P1 is great cause you do big work here".

- **Physical Environment**

Most of the Year 1 children interviewed highlighted a change in physical environment between Year 1 and nursery, where Year 1 was described more in school terms.

Comments included:

"There are not as many toys in P1".

"There is no hospital in P1".

"You have to sit at tables".

"The playground is smaller".

"There is no climbing frame".

"Nursery class is bigger and there is a sand pit".

In general there appeared to be a sense of loss expressed by the Year 1 children of physical objects that they had enjoyed at nursery. Loss in terms of snack and lunchtime in the nursery settings was also referred to by a few children, e.g.

"You don't have dinner in the classroom in P1. You have to go to a big canteen and it can be very noisy and scary there".

"There is no toast and pancakes in P1".

Impression of Year 1

Most of the children appeared to be enjoying Year 1 just as much as they did nursery:

"I love P1. I wouldn't want to go back to nursery".

"You get to read up here. Nursery is only for babies".

"You get to do harder play".

"You get PE in the big hall".

Only one little boy seemed to hanker after his days in nursery stating: *"...more playing in nursery and the teacher does not shout".*

The fact that negative comments were few in number would suggest that the Year 1 children interviewed for the purposes of this study had in the main coped well with the transition from nursery into Year 1.

When asked about what had made them sad in P1, responses included:

“You have to stay a long time”.

“The teacher shouts if you talk at task time”.

“Big boys in the playground shout at us”.

“The dinner hall is noisy and scary”.

Settling In

As for identifying those people or things that had helped them settle into Year 1, the majority of responses referred to the teacher and their friends.

“Mrs B is real nice. She smiles all the time”.

“The teachers help you with your work”.

“When I am sad, my friends make me laugh again”.

In addition, parents also were mentioned by a few children, as were other adults including the classroom assistants and the dinner ladies.

“Whenever someone is cheeky to me I tell my mum and dad and then it is okay”.

“Mrs H the dinner lady tells me that she watches out for me. She helps me to cut up my dinner.”

3.1.4 The Transitioned Children: Year 3

Views and Aspirations

Like the Year 1 children, Year 3s were also asked about their views and aspirations about being in Year 3 and how it differed from their experience in Year 2. The main themes arising from what they had particularly enjoyed about Year 3 included learning experiences and the physical environment.

- Learning Experiences

The children appeared on the whole to enjoy the harder work that they were experiencing in Year 3. They now were getting longer and harder home works and the

responsibility of maintaining a homework diary. At this stage of their education, the children appeared ready for the challenge of “*harder reading and maths*”; however they still appeared to enjoy it when such experiences were made playful, e.g., “*the maths machine*”, “*task boxes*” and “*writing silly poems*”.

- Physical Environment

The majority of children seemed to find the physical change in environment from Year 2 to Year 3 to be positive. Several of the children commented that the Year 3 classroom was not situated next to Year 1 and Year 2 and this seemed to please them, giving them the impression of being older and wiser. They indicated that because they were older, “*we have a door leading onto the playground*” or “*our classroom is upstairs now*”.

Impression of Year 3

When asked if they were happy in Year 3, most of the children responded positively, displaying a readiness to some extent for the formal learning they were experiencing. Comments included:

“Yes I love it. The work is better. You do experiments”.

“Yes I am older and colour neater and don’t do baby things”.

“P3 is great. You have to really think now”.

Anxiety in Year 3 was associated with having no one to play with or being left out in the playground. Too much written work was also commented upon as was the teacher shouting too much and being cross.

Settling In

When asked about what had helped them settle into Year 3, all children responded in terms of friendships:

“Having friends to make you feel welcome”.

“If my friends had not been coming too, I would have found it impossible”.

Changes in Experience

As for the curricular experiences in Year 3, the children, in the main, reported having a very active school curriculum. They described their experiences principally in terms

of literacy tasks, reading, creative writing, mental maths, tables, computers, art, drama, science, the World Around Us and French weeks. The majority of the children appeared to have made the shift in their thinking from a play-based curriculum to subject knowledge and areas of learning. However the Year 3 children in some of the schools still reported having a frequent playtime, which they still enjoyed immensely. Activities articulated by the Year 3 children as being different to Year 2 included drama and watching TV and a few of the children did request having more playtimes. However it would appear from the Year 3 responses in general, that their Year 3 experience was most enjoyable and that they were learning greatly. This is summed up in the following comment:

“I love P3. You learn real important stuff here. It is still fun and it is better”.

SUMMARY OF THE CHILDREN’S RESPONSES

The transitioning children:

- Were excited about the new experience they were about to encounter;
- Were looking forward to being perceived as more grown up;
- Valued play and practical activities;
- Wanted to be challenged;
- Did not dislike what they perceived as work as long as it did not involve too much written work.

The transitioned children:

- Appeared to be enjoying the new experience;
- Valued friendships
- Welcomed ‘playful’ and more challenging learning experiences;
- Were wary of the playground, the dinner hall and stricter discipline;
- Disapproved of too much writing.

3.2 The Main Messages from the Practitioners

3.2.1 Introduction

This section of the report details the findings from a round table seminar held at Stranmillis University College in June 2007 with a group of Early Years practitioners (n=21) All, except three nursery teachers, had been involved in the Enriched Curriculum pilot. The following table illustrates the background of the practitioners in terms of the class they are currently teaching.

Table 2: Number of teachers according to class

Class	Number of Teachers
Nursery	3
Year 1	8
Year 2	6
Year 3	4

After the introduction where practitioners were briefed about the purpose of the seminar, they were divided up into sub-groups (three groups of 5 and one group of 6) to promote further discussion. All groups came together for the purpose of the plenary session.

The aims of the round table seminar were:

- 1) To examine practitioners' views and opinions about the transition that young children make from the Enriched Curriculum (play-based) to Key Stage 1 (formal practice) in Northern Ireland; and
- 2) To consider recommendations of the practitioners on how such a transition can be managed effectively in terms of curriculum content and pedagogical approach, learning environment and home-school liaison.

The structure of this section of the report is based on the questions posed during the discussion and feedback sessions. The findings from the round table seminar are presented under the following headings:

- Views of the transition from Enriched Curriculum to Key Stage 1;
- How this transition is currently managed;
- The importance of the Enriched Curriculum in easing this transition;
- Gender differences in transition;
- Factors to ensure this transition is successful; and
- Additional training and support required.

3.2.2. Findings from the Round Table Seminar

a) Views of the transition from Enriched Curriculum to Key Stage 1

All of the educationalists appeared to be of the opinion that this transition was of great importance, not only to young children's future progress but also to the way in which they would deal with future transitions throughout education and life in general. They were all fully agreed that promoting children's self-esteem and confidence was a pre-requisite for successful adjustment to formal schooling. They also indicated the need to foster in both pre-school and Enriched Curriculum, a positive image of school where young children were interested in learning and wanted to continue doing so. Reference was also made to promoting emotional resilience in the Early Years, where children could, to some extent, cope with any situation with which they were faced. However, at the same time, they emphasised the need for continuity between the Enriched Curriculum and Key Stage 1 curricula, where young children should not be expected to embrace formal learning immediately on entry into Year 3.

As one teacher stated:

"If activity-based learning is on a continuum between Years 2 and 3, then the transition will be smoother. If this is not the case and children are expected to conform to more formal practice in the first few days of Year 3, such an experience will be detrimental to young children's adjustment and overall performance".

There was also consensus amongst the practitioners that it was essential that Enriched Curriculum teachers do not allow themselves to become pressured by Key Stage 1 teachers and as a result resort back to formal instruction. Such a fear is summed up in the following quotation:

"At last we have a great opportunity to make the Early Years of schooling a wonderful experience for our youngest children, where those important social and emotional skills are fostered. However Northern Ireland is Northern Ireland and I really fear that the pressure from teachers of older children and parents will result in the onslaught of formality the day young children come through the Year 1 door".

Another teacher said:

“It is the responsibility of the inspectorate to ensure that this does not happen. They hold the key to quality assurance. It is about time that those in higher places began to practise what they preach. There is no point recommending play-based practice in glossy documents, it must become the reality in all Foundation Stage classes to allow our children any chance of success in future society”.

A further teacher added:

“I wouldn’t restrict such an experience to the Early Years of Primary School. In my opinion developmentally appropriate practice and practical learning should be infused throughout a child’s primary school curriculum”.

b) How the transition from Enriched Curriculum to Key Stage 1 is currently managed

The practitioners referred to different measures that were currently employed to prepare children and help them to cope with going into a new class. These included:

- Parenting courses, educating parents about the differing curricular and pedagogical approaches as children moved up the school;
- Children spending one morning in their new class with their new teacher;
- A common play time/PE class once a week between, e.g., Year 1 and Year 2 or Year 2 and Year 3 to allow children to get to know each other and also to get to know different teachers;
- Assembly which allows children to get to know different teachers;
- Early Years classrooms all placed close together;
- A developmentally appropriate curriculum throughout the Early Years of schooling which meets with the needs and interests of the children.

c) The importance of the Enriched Curriculum in easing the transition into formal practice in Key Stage 1

All of the practitioners were of the opinion that the Enriched Curriculum was paramount in ensuring not only a positive transition into Key Stage 1 but in fact throughout schooling. Their views about the Enriched Curriculum centred around three key themes: motivation, social skills and curriculum content.

- Motivation

It was agreed that the Enriched Curriculum helped children to develop an interest in learning and a desire to keep on learning new things. The teachers were of the opinion that during play children are intrinsically motivated as a result of the playful experiences and, if these experiences are valued by both children and teachers alike, this in turn will lead to positive attitudes towards learning in general being developed in young children. As one teacher stated:

“Playing is the medium by which young children learn best. Why would we want to squash young children’s enthusiasm towards leaning by making them complete low level worksheets”?

Another added:

“This is where Northern Ireland has been going wrong. Instead of encouraging motivation towards learning in the Early Years, we have been knocking children’s confidence from the outset. If a child realises that he can’t do something by age four, would you not switch off too?”

In this way there appeared to be an understanding amongst the teachers that too early a formal start damaged young children’s learning dispositions. Instead there appeared to be a degree of optimism expressed about the Enriched Curriculum, where mistakes could be envisaged as learning opportunities and as a result children would be much more willing to have a go and try out new things, instead of simply striving to get the answer that the teachers wants.

- Social/Emotional

All of the practitioners appeared to be of the opinion that children’s social and emotional skills would be greatly enhanced as a result of the Enriched Curriculum. Opportunities to work collaboratively rather than competitively were referred to as well as a learning ethos which encouraged all children to reach their full potential.

The following quotations help to clarify this more fully:

“Allowing children to work and play together can only lead to success. We learn

better when we share ideas with one another so why this would not apply to children, I can't understand".

"Learning from a young age that I can do rather than I can't, will surely make a big difference".

"I have been implementing a play-based curriculum for years in Year 1 and I can guarantee you that each and every child leaving my classroom has a very positive image of him/herself and they are ready to embrace formal learning".

- Curriculum

The teachers were in agreement that the Enriched Curriculum was much more developmentally appropriate, ensuring greater continuity between pre-school and preparing children better for formal practice in Key Stage 1. As one teacher stressed:

"The Enriched Curriculum encourages a 'having a go' culture which inspires a desire to keep on learning new things".

There were concerns however that the curriculum in Key Stage 1 would need to embrace practice in the Enriched Curriculum to ensure that the transition would be seamless rather than dramatic. That is not to say, as one teacher purported, *"Play should go on for ever. There is a time and place for the formal teaching of reading and mathematics but only when children are ready"*. *"The Enriched Curriculum is all about individuals"* said another and *"on this premise future learning should be built"*.

d) Gender Differences in Transition

Several factors were proposed that caused gender differences in the transition from play-based to formal practice. These included:

- Parental expectations
- Personality of the child
- Type of learner
- Physical development
- Type of curriculum that preceded the experience

Generally speaking the teachers claimed that girls, rather than boys, were more

mature and independent and as a result adjusted more easily to formal learning. It was suggested that boys are more physical and more active and therefore require a curriculum which meets these needs. As one teacher claimed “*Expecting boys to sit in a seat all day is ludicrous and almost abusive. Boys are physical learners and therefore they need the opportunity to be so*”. In this way there was a consensus amongst the groups that the Enriched Curriculum would certainly benefit young boys’ potential. Nevertheless, despite the fact that young girls tend to enjoy more sedentary activities, the practitioners felt that they too would benefit from a more developmentally appropriate curriculum, which would allow such experiences to build on their needs and interests and therefore result in more profitable learning.

e) Factors Associated with a Successful Transition from the Enriched Curriculum to Key Stage 1

The main factors reported surrounded four key areas: children, teaching strategies, parental attitudes and curriculum and learning ethos.

- The Child

The practitioners stressed the need for children to be accepted as individuals and their needs and interests to be taken into consideration during any transition process. They reiterated the need for children to be socially and emotionally adept to be able to embrace the challenges of formal learning and possess a positive disposition to learning which they felt the Enriched Curriculum did successfully.

- The Teaching Strategies

Many practical suggestions were given regarding the teaching strategies. It was stressed that the Enriched Curriculum teacher must not allow herself to feel pressured to encourage children to complete worksheets simply for evidence purposes. Instead, several teachers recommended the use of photographs and observations for this purpose. Likewise, the teachers were firmly of the opinion that Enriched Curriculum and Key Stage 1 teachers’ expectations should remain high and that simply abandoning formal learning until a child was ready did mean lowering standards. Furthermore, it was important that transition reports about individual children should place an emphasis on personal, social and emotional development. It was

recommended that such reports be followed up by a meeting of both teachers involved and that the new teacher should not wait to get to know the children until the end of the year but that collaborative activities should take place between the Enriched Curriculum and Key Stage 1.

There was an underlying concern that all teachers should have a firm understanding of how young children learn and develop, as well as how to translate a developmentally appropriate curriculum effectively into practice. As one teacher said: *“You could wait until Primary 7 and some children would still not have shown signs of being able to read. It is about preparing children appropriately to make the transition”*.

This opinion was supported by several of the practitioners, where there was a strong concern that literacy and numeracy cannot be simply left to chance in Year 1 and Year 2. In particular the Year 3 teachers indicated that those children who had been fully prepared and supported in Year 1 and Year 2 to embrace the formal aspects of reading and writing, did so much more easily. As one Year 3 teacher stressed: *“Not only can you overdo the teaching of literacy and numeracy in the Early Years of primary schooling. You can also under do it. There are certain steps that need to be taken in literacy and numeracy before formal teaching can begin”*.

- Parents

It was recognised by the teachers that children do not make the transition in isolation and that it is important that parents are fully involved in this process, familiar with the changes that such a transition will require and supporting the school in their efforts to ensure as seamless a transition as possible. The following quotation sheds some light on this issue:

“We can’t ignore parents. They are the child’s first and main educators. They need to be fully aware of what is happening in school”.

- Curriculum and Learning Ethos

The teachers recommended that the Key Stage 1 curriculum should build on what has been taking place in the Enriched Curriculum and then move the children gradually forward. Such continuity was also recommended in terms of the learning ethos. Both the Enriched Curriculum and Key Stage 1 teachers need, in their opinion, to show

warmth, support and encouragement towards young children and interest in their learning.

f) Additional Training and Support

The teachers were fully of the opinion that additional training and financial support were required to ensure a successful transition for children from play-based to formal practice. They recommended that all Enriched Curriculum or indeed Foundation Stage teachers in the future should have experience in a nursery/pre-school setting and that all Key Stage 1 and 2 teachers should spend some time in the Early Years of primary schooling. With regard to additional support, the need for classroom assistants throughout the Enriched Curriculum and Key Stage 1 (in particular Year 3) was emphasised. Furthermore, several of the teachers felt that the Enriched Curriculum had to be valued by the whole school and not just in the Early Years to ensure success for all. Whole school staff meetings, including nursery staff if attached to the school, was also stressed, as was the opportunity to share good practice by means of visiting schools that had been involved in the Enriched Curriculum. Several of the teachers also accentuated the importance of talking to children and parents about how transitions in general could be managed more effectively.

SUMMARY OF PRACTITIONERS' VIEWS

- The transition from the Enriched Curriculum to Key Stage 1 is a vitally important transition for young children and one which needs support from parents and teachers;
- Current strategies used to manage effective transitions tend to be in the form of preparatory activities to ensure familiarity on the part of children and parents;
- It is advised that such strategies be maintained throughout schooling and not only reserved for the Early Years;
- The Enriched Curriculum was welcomed as a means of ensuring a more positive transition into Key Stage 1, in terms of its developmental appropriate nature, play-based approach and emphasis on children's social emotional development and learning dispositions;
- The Enriched Curriculum was considered valuable for both girls and boys;
- The key factor to ensuring a successful transition from Enriched Curriculum to Key Stage 1 was based on a curriculum and pedagogical approach which embraced the needs and interest of children throughout primary schooling;
- Further training and support was called for.

CONCLUSION

The literature review was guided by the Dynamic Effects Model which pointed to the complexity of factors and relationships that effect children's transition from play-based to formal practice, i.e., children, parents, friends, schools and the community at large.

Both the literature review and the empirical evidence have emphasised the importance of the child in the transition process. Each child brings with him/her previous experiences (personal baggage) to the new transition that cannot be ignored and if so can affect the way in which he/she adjusts to the new situation. Furthermore, the child's emotional wellbeing, social competence and attitude towards learning, have been identified as being integral to individual children making a successful transition into formal schooling.

Parental support, according to the evidence within this report, is also paramount to effective transition making in terms of maternal sensitivity, family culture accepting of school culture and family interest and involvement in their child's school and education as a whole. In a similar vein, friends too, can facilitate a positive transition, in the way in which children can support each other through the new experience.

In addition, positive and warm relationships between teachers and children are also essential as is an active school-home liaison, where teachers' value and support links with the home. Furthermore, the evidence within this report suggests that Early Years teachers throughout the Early Years of primary schooling and Key Stage 1 must embrace a Developmentally Appropriate Curriculum, where children's individual needs and interests are fully considered in an appropriate but challenging way. In particular, it would seem that a Foundation Stage Curriculum should act as a mediator between play and work, where children's emotional and social skills as well as their learning dispositions are prioritised in preparation for the formal work that is to come. This is not to say that formal work has no place in the Early Years of primary schooling, but it should be presented in a playful yet structured manner.

However, it has been recognised within this report that a change of mindset within the

whole community in Northern Ireland is required, where childhood is no longer simply perceived as a preparation for adulthood, but valuable and important in itself.

New Directions

Overviewing the literature on children's transitions, two new themes seem to be emerging: 1) the reconceptualisation of readiness and 2) embracing discontinuity as an importance aspect of transition.

The Reconceptualisation of Readiness

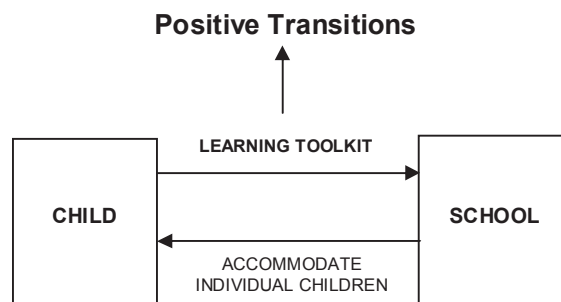
The body of literature within this report (e.g. Margetts, 2003, 2007) and the empirical evidence have drawn attention to a "learning toolkit" (Claxton, 2000 unpaginated) that young children require before they can embrace formal practice and the impact that this can have on their future success. There appears to be a change in focus within the literature base as to what this toolkit should contain. Based on their study of Australian children's, parents' and teachers' views of readiness, Dockett and Perry (2002) concluded that teachers and parents appear more concerned that children want to go to school and are happy at school, rather than an emphasis on an array of skills and knowledge that they are expected to know in advance of their school start. The empirical evidence from the round table seminar supports such thinking, where the emphasis is placed on the importance of promoting children's social and emotional development as well as their learning dispositions at pre-school and in Years 1 and 2 of primary schooling. They quoted the words of one teacher to support their argument: "*I can teach them to read and write, so they don't need to know that before they start, I want kids who are happy and want to be here*". Running through the entire literature base reviewed in this report and throughout the empirical evidence, has been an emphasis on children's emotional and social skills and a positive disposition towards learning as being pre-requisites for formal learning.

Such thinking is summed up in the words of one Enriched Curriculum teacher:

"I firmly believe that the Early Years of schooling is about developing young

children's emotional resilience, social competence and positive attitudes towards learning. That is not to say that the academic aspect of learning should be undermined, but in my opinion it should not be prioritised at this early stage of a children's educational journey. If, by Primary 3, children are confident, competent learners who want to keep on learning, I'm quite sure no Primary 3 teacher should or would be complaining".

However, in addition to the child being ready for school, there also appears to be a shift in thinking towards the school or class being ready for the child. A body of literature (e.g. Dockett and Perry, 2001, 2007) has emphasised the importance of the school or class context changing to meet with the requirements of the individual needs of children. The empirical evidence from the child interviews supports this thinking. Despite the fact that the majority of children look forward to new experiences and challenges in their new phase of education, aspects of the new experience need to accommodate to the needs and interests of the children, e.g., allowing friendship groupings to be maintained, a degree of continuity in curriculum content and pedagogical approaches. Similarly, the practitioners in the round table seminar highlighted the importance of valuing what children have been doing in their earlier experience before the transition and to build upon it. It could be argued therefore that an effective transition from play-based to formal practice is not just a question of maturation on the part of the children concerned, but also accommodation in terms of classroom practice, where the needs and interests of the new children are embraced and built upon. Figure 5 illustrates this more clearly:



Griebel and Niesel (2007) go one step further, arguing that it is a process of co-

construction between home, pre-school and school context that ensures a successful transition for all involved. They argue that an integration of people and their perspectives must take place, involving communication, co-operation, and participation between all stakeholders involved in the transition process. No stakeholder can remain untouched by the transition process but must shape and reshape their opinions, views and practices in a way to allow for a successful transition to be experienced by all.

Continuity versus Discontinuity

When a child experiences two contexts that are similar or compatible, a sense of continuity occurs. The child learns behaviours from the first setting which will be seen as acceptable and fitting in the second. In contrast, when there is discontinuity across two different or incompatible contexts, the child may display behaviours from the first setting that are no longer acceptable or incompatible with the second (Lam and Pollard, 2006).

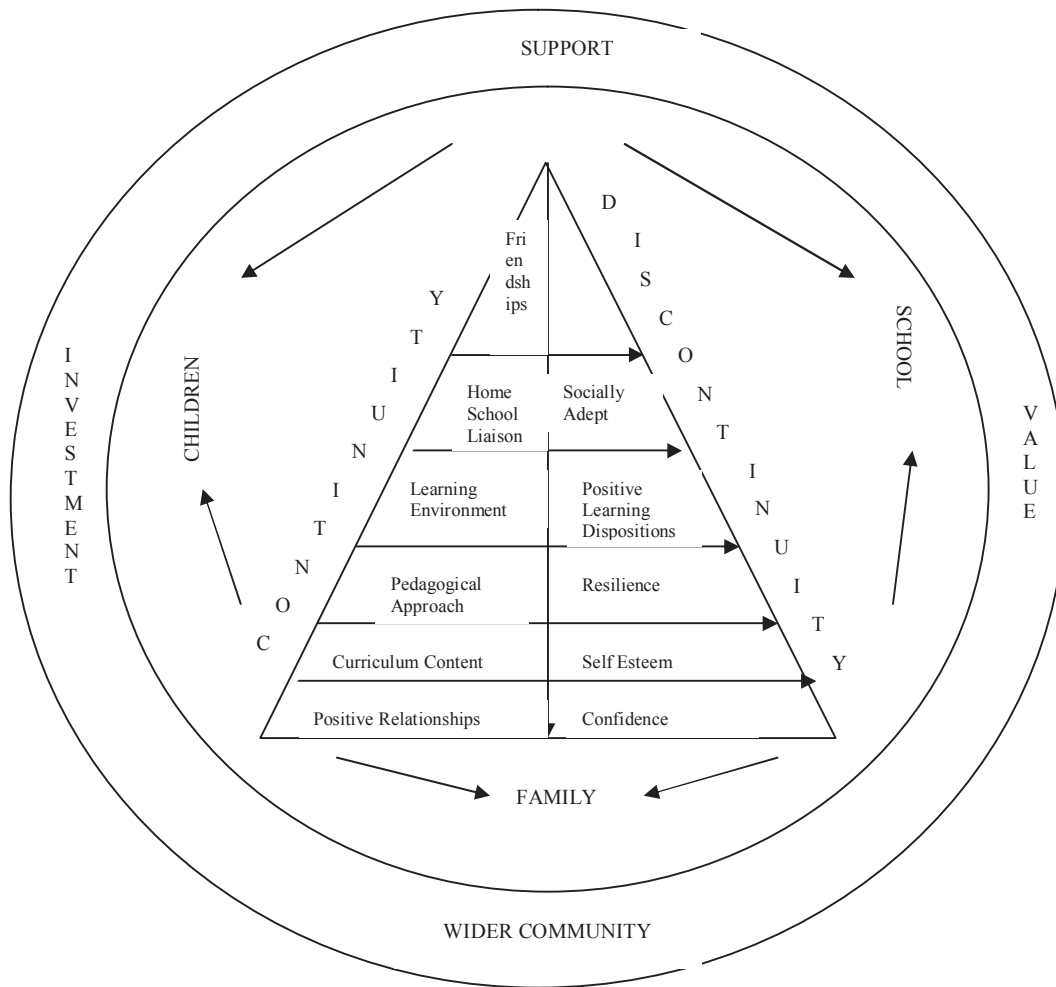
Although there is still an emphasis on the importance of continuity for successful transitions, there is also a growing recognition that some discontinuity cannot be avoided and needs to be embraced. As Ghaye and Pascal (1988) suggest, “*the nature of the support a child receives in dealing with discontinuity may be more important than maintaining continuity*” (p2). Page (2000) further suggests that allowing children to experience discontinuity is seen as part of the continuum of life and learning. Niesel and Griebel (2000) supported these views questioning the effectiveness of solely seeking for continuity in transition and concluded that it is “*not a philosophy of fostering continuity that seems necessary, but coping with discontinuities*”(p9).

So there is a growing acceptance that discontinuity is an inevitable part of the transition process, that children are active agents in their own transitions and need to be prepared for and involved in the process of what is to come. Promoting emotional resilience, skills in social interactions and positive learning dispositions in young children has been recognised as part of an important personal toolkit which will enable children to deal with any discontinuity they experience in their lives. Therefore, as Dunlop (2007) highlights, transitions need no longer be perceived in

negative terms. She argues that transitions research can progress from simply problematising transitions, to demonstrating that successful transitions are a positive tool for change” (pg. 165).

Consequently, rather than emphasising continuity or discontinuity, an appropriate balance between the two is required to ensure a successful transition from play-based to formal learning. We cannot simply expect children to move from one context to another without any preparation and support in terms of sensitive and caring relationships between families, teachers and friends; effective communication between home and school; routine preparatory tasks to make children, parents and teachers familiar, to some extent, with what is to come; similarities in curricular content and pedagogical approach, as well as learning ethos and physical environment. The children’s interviews would support this thinking. Some of the children’s angst about their new classrooms may have been alleviated if appropriate steps were taken to ensure an aspect of continuity between old and new experiences, relationships and contexts.

Nevertheless, evidence from the children’s interviews also revealed that younger children are much more robust than we think and that they enjoy appropriate challenges, resulting from uncertainty and change. If young children do not meet with any form of discontinuity in the Early Years of their lives, the opportunity to develop a “toolkit” to cope with the uncertainties and challenges that lie ahead in adulthood, will not be realised. It is therefore a balance between appropriate continuity and discontinuity that appears to be the answer. Figure 6 presents this thinking more clearly:



RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the evidence presented within this report (i.e. the literature review and the empirical evidence) it is recommended that:

- Teachers fully understand that children are not ‘blank slates’ when they arrive in their classroom but that each and everyone brings his/her own unique personal experiences e.g. individual characteristics, personal experiences, home environment, neighbourhood and level of ‘preparedness’. These experiences will have been both positive and negative for the children and must be fully embraced and considered in the new setting. .
- Teachers must realise that children’s family and children’s friends can play an important part in the transition process and should be empowered and supported fully to do so, not only in the Early Years of primary schooling, but also in Key Stage 1 through e.g. sound communication between children’s home and school and consideration of previous friendship groupings;
- New teachers must be fully informed about the individual needs and capabilities of the new children they are receiving by means of e.g. the pupil profile, communication between staff;
- Teachers need to be more aware/sensitive to the effects of their verbal and non verbal behaviour (e.g., smiling, encouraging words, praise) during transitional phases;
- The Early Years of schooling should be recognised as a very important stage in young children’s learning and development, where children’s emotional and social competences as well as their learning dispositions are encouraged to develop, in order to be able to embrace the challenges that may arise in their future education. Expecting these skills only to be focused upon in pre-school, appears to be insufficient. In fact the need to continue to address such skills even throughout Key Stage 1 has also been highlighted;
- It is important for all teachers in the Early Years of primary schooling as well as Key Stage 1 to revisit the meaning of what play-based practice is. Year 1 and Year 2 teachers, in particular need to become skilful in building upon the play-based experience children have received at pre-school and mediating play

and task based activities through the basic principles of playful structure, i.e., have a clear underpinning knowledge of where they are going with individual children and what is needed but present the activities in as playful and stimulating a way as possible;

- Key Stage 1 teachers must be prepared to embrace the needs and interests of the new cohort of children they are receiving and build on these. They cannot simply expect all children to be fully ready for formal practice; and.
- The children's views on the direction of change in their learning were very revealing. Schools would benefit from finding ways to more systematically listen to the children's voices.

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