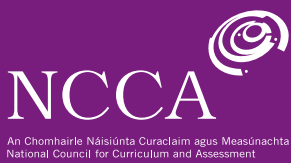


Transition from Preschool to Primary School

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Research conducted on behalf of the
National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

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Glossary of terms, acronyms and shorthand references

Term	Definition	Acronym/ shorthand used in the report
<i>Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework</i>	<i>Aistear</i> (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009) is the curriculum framework for all children from birth to six years in Ireland. It provides information for adults to help them plan for and provide enjoyable and challenging learning experiences. <i>Aistear</i> describes the types of learning that are important for children in their early years, and offers ideas and suggestions as to how this learning might be nurtured. It also provides guidelines on supporting children's learning through partnerships with parents, interactions, play, and assessment.	<i>Aistear</i>
Aistear Tutor Initiative	The Aistear Tutor Initiative is a partnership between the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and the Association of Teachers' Education Centres in Ireland (ATECI). Since April 2010, Education Centres and their local Aistear Tutors have, through workshops and summer courses, supported over 10,000 teachers and principals in developing practice in infant classrooms using <i>Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework</i> .	
Better Start National Early Years Quality Development Service	Better Start is a national initiative established by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) to bring an integrated approach to developing quality in early years education and care for children aged from birth to six years in Ireland.	Better Start
City and County Childcare Committee/s	30 City and County Childcare Committees (CCCs) across Ireland act as local agents for the DCYA in the administration of aspects of national early education and childcare programmes.	CCC CCCs
Continuing Professional Development	Continuing Professional Development (CPD) refers to learning and development experiences that practitioners and teachers undertake to develop their skills, knowledge and experience beyond their initial training. It includes formal coursework, conferences and informal learning opportunities situated in practice.	CPD
Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) is the action plan for educational inclusion, launched in May 2005 and is the policy instrument of the Department of Education and Skills to address educational disadvantage. It prioritises the educational needs of children and young people (3-18 years) from disadvantaged communities.	DEIS

Department of Children and Youth Affairs	The Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) focuses on harmonising policy issues that affect children in areas such as early childhood care and education, youth justice, child welfare and protection, children and young people's participation, research on children and young people, youth work and cross-cutting initiatives for children.	DCYA
Department of Education and Skills	The Department of Education and Skills (DES) has responsibility for education and training. The mission of the Department is to facilitate individuals through learning, to achieve their full potential and contribute to Ireland's social, cultural and economic development.	DES
Early Childhood Care and Education	In Ireland Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) refers to the care and education of all children from birth to six years which is the compulsory school starting age.	ECCE
Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme	<i>The Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Scheme</i> (DCYA, 2010, 2016) is a national initiative introduced by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs in 2010 to provide early childhood care and education for children prior to enrolment in primary school. It is designed to give children access to a state-funded 'free' preschool place over 38 weeks, for 3 hours per day, 5 days per week for one academic year. The State pays a capitation fee to participating ECCE settings that provide a preschool service free of charge to children within the qualifying age range. From September 2016, a second year is available to children at three entry points from their third birthday.	ECCE Scheme
Early Childhood Care and Education settings	The term ECCE settings refers broadly to settings providing care and education for children from birth to six years in Ireland. Many settings are outside the formal education system and ECCE is provided by a diverse range of private, community and voluntary providers including crèches, preschools, naíonraí (Irish-medium preschools), playgroups and daycare settings. Childminders and children's own homes can also be included in the term. The 40 Early Start centres and the Rutland Street project (pre-primary initiatives in designated areas of urban disadvantage for children who are at risk of educational disadvantage) are also included. Primary schools that cater for children under six years of age are also normally included in the term. However, for the purposes of this report, the former group (not junior and senior infants) are referred to as ECCE settings.	ECCE settings

Early Start Programme	The Early Start Programme is a pre-primary project established by the Department of Education and Skills in 1994 in 40 primary schools in designated areas of urban disadvantage in Ireland. The one-year intervention scheme in the year before they start primary school aims to meet the needs of children (aged between 3 years 2 months and 4 years 7 months in September) who are at risk of not reaching their potential within the educational system. The project involves an educational programme to enhance overall development and in particular to help children experiencing social and economic disadvantage prepare for school.	Early Start
Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)	The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) outlines standards for learning, development and care of children from birth to five years old in England. All schools and Ofsted-registered early years providers—including childminders, preschools, nurseries and school reception classes—must follow the EYFS.	EYFS
Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) Profile	<p>The EYFS Profile (England) summarises and describes the child’s attainment at the end of the EYFS in relation to each of the 17 early learning goal descriptors and provides a short narrative describing the child’s three characteristics of effective learning.</p> <p>The EYFS Profile is shared with parents and passed on to the child’s Year One teacher. The aim is to inform parents about their child’s development and the characteristics of their learning; to support a smooth transition to key stage 1; and to help year 1 teachers plan an effective, responsive and appropriate curriculum that will meet the needs of all pupils.</p>	EYFS Profile
Individual Education Plan	An Individual Education Plan (IEP) is a written document prepared for a child with special educational needs. It is written by the teacher in partnership with parents and specifies the learning goals that are to be achieved over a set period of time. It also includes the teaching strategies, resources and supports necessary to achieve those goals.	IEP
Junior and senior infant classes	The junior infant class is the first year of primary school education in Ireland. Senior infant class is the second year.	
Learning disposition/s	A learning disposition describes the child’s tendency to respond to learning situations in consistent ways and includes the strategies and motivations impacting on the child’s state of mind with regard to learning. Positive learning dispositions include things like independence, persistence, resilience. Negative learning dispositions include things like learned helplessness.	

Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020	Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life is the national strategy launched by the Department of Education and Skills in 2011 to improve literacy and numeracy standards among children and young people. This strategy seeks to address significant concerns about how well children and young people in Ireland are developing the literacy and numeracy skills that they will need to participate fully in the education system, to live satisfying and rewarding lives, and to participate as active and informed citizens in Irish society.	The Literacy and Numeracy Strategy
National Council for Curriculum and Assessment	The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) advises the Minister for Education and Skills on curriculum and assessment for early childhood education, and for primary and post-primary schools. The twenty-five members of the statutory Council, appointed by the Minister for a three-year term, represent teachers, school managers, the early childhood sector, the Department of Education and Skills, parents, business, trades unions and other educational interests.	NCCA
National Council for Special Education	The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) was set up to improve the delivery of education services to persons with special educational needs arising from disabilities, and with particular emphasis on children. The Council was first established as an independent statutory body by order of the Minister for Education and Science in December 2003.	NCSE
National Early Years Access Initiative	The National Early Years Access Initiative (NEYAI) was a collaborative partnership between The Atlantic Philanthropies, the Mount Street Club Trustees, the Department for Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), Early Years Education Policy Unit (DES) and Pobal. It was a four-year initiative [2011-2014] designed to improve access to and practice within early years settings through interagency collaborations.	NEYAI
Pedagogy	Pedagogy as defined in <i>Aistear</i> (NCCA, 2009) refers to all of the practitioner's actions or work in supporting children's learning and development. It infers a negotiated, respectful and reflective learning experience for all involved.	

Pobal	Pobal is a not-for-profit company that manages programmes (including a number of early childhood initiatives) on behalf of the Irish Government and the European Union. It works to support communities and local agencies to achieve social inclusion, reconciliation and equality by managing funding and providing resources for suitable programmes. Pobal's activities and priorities are shaped by the context and policies laid out in several reports, including the <i>Programme for Government – Government for National Recovery 2011-2016</i> .
Portfolio	A portfolio is a way of compiling information about children's learning and development. Objects made/drawn by the child, photographs, stories, notes, records of care are included. The portfolio contains information on how the child thinks, questions, synthesises, and creates. This collection tells the story of the child's learning journey – his/her efforts, progress and achievement over time.
Preschool	<p>Preschool usually refers to an ECCE programme focused on children's learning and development in the years prior to the start of primary school. Children are most commonly enrolled in preschool between the ages of three and five, where they combine learning through play in a programme run by professionally trained adults. Preschools can include state-funded settings, privately run facilities, and community settings. One of the aims of preschool education is to equip children with the skills and dispositions for successful learning and for life.</p> <p>A variety of terms such as ECCE, kindergarten, pre-primary, preschool and pre-school are used across jurisdictions to refer to the care and education of children under the age of six years. In referring to individual jurisdictions in this report, where possible, the terminology of that jurisdiction is used even though this means some inconsistencies across the document.</p> <p>In a small number of cases, a variety of terminology is used within a jurisdiction. Ireland is an example of this with terms like full and part-time daycare, pre-primary, pre-school, preschool, playgroup and naíonraí (Irish-medium preschools) being used. In this report for ease of reading, the term preschool is used as a generic term to refer to all of those providing preschool places under the ECCE scheme (state-funded 'free' preschool year).</p>

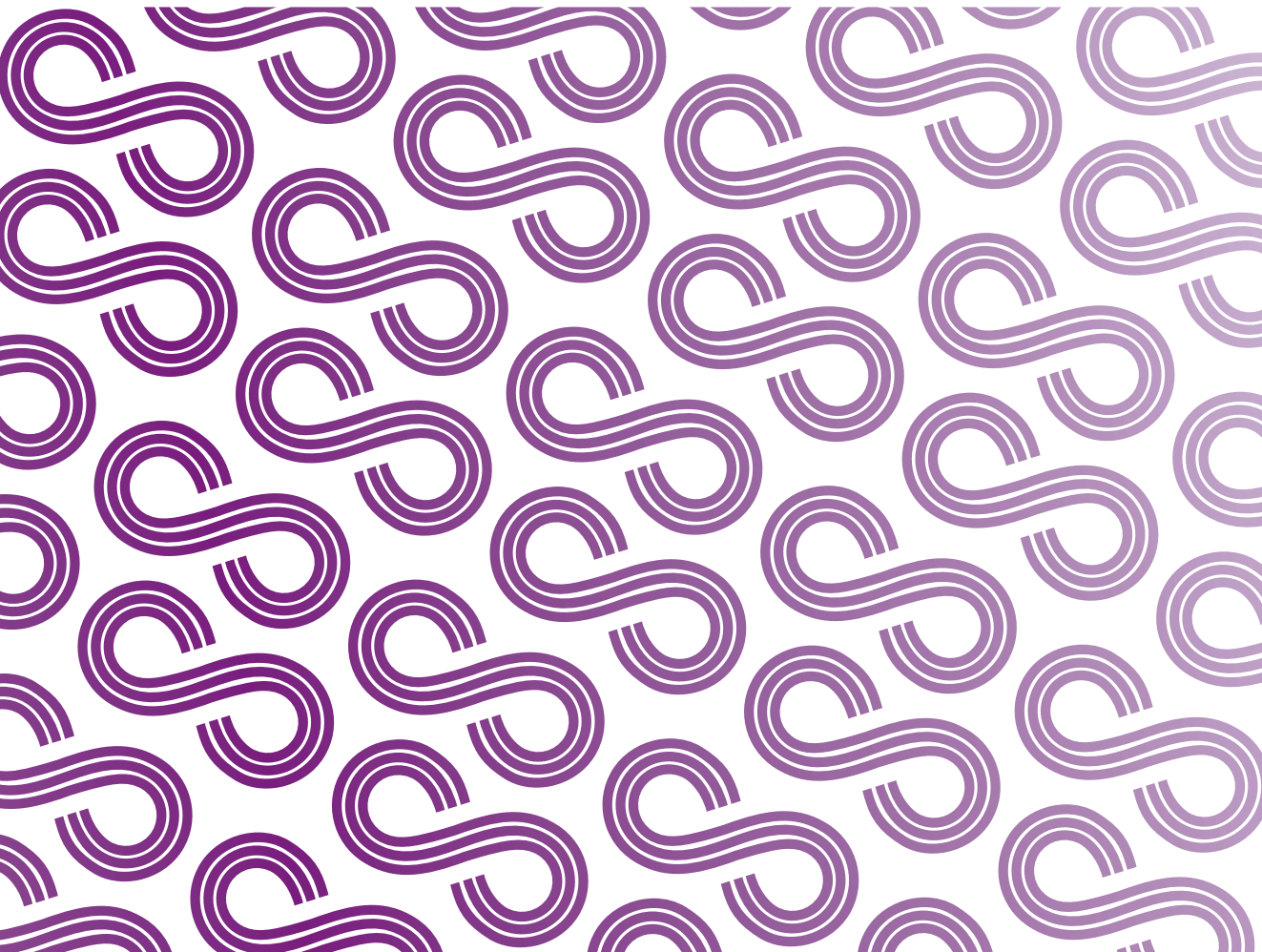
School readiness	School readiness involves an interactionist approach. This involves children's readiness for school, families' and communities' readiness for school, and also includes the school's readiness for children, stressing the bi-directionality between the child and the school.	
<i>Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education</i>	<i>Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education</i> , (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education, 2006) is a policy document designed to define, assess and support the improvement of quality across all aspects of practice in ECCE settings in Ireland for children aged birth to six years.	<i>Síolta</i>
Special Educational Needs	The 2004 Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (EPSEN) defines special educational needs (SEN) as a restriction in the capacity of the child to participate in and benefit from education on account of an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or learning disability, or any other condition which results in a person learning differently from a person without that condition.	SEN

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Executive summary



Introduction

The transition from preschool¹ to primary school is recognised nationally and internationally as a very important time in children's lives. This transition is a priority area of work in the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment's Strategic Plan, 2015-2018. A coordinated information-sharing process between the preschool and primary school is an important way of supporting children making this transition. As part of *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020* the NCCA was assigned responsibility for developing reporting templates and to make these available online to

Improve arrangements for the transfer of information about the progress and achievement of students between all schools and state-funded ECCE settings by requiring all settings and schools to provide written reports in standard format to schools and settings to which students transfer (reports to be provided following admission of student to the new school/ setting) (Department of Education and Skills, 2011, p.82).

The Department of Education and Skills, and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs are to make the transfer of this information a requirement (DES, 2011, p.82).

As preparation for this work, the NCCA commissioned the following:

- A review of literature nationally and internationally (this report).
- An audit of policies relating to the transition from preschool to primary school in 13 jurisdictions. The audit looks at data transfer and the transition process. The jurisdictions identified for investigation were Australia (Victoria and Queensland); Canada (Ontario); England; Finland; France; Netherlands; New Zealand; Northern Ireland; Scotland; Singapore; Sweden; US (Massachusetts); and Wales. For comparison, it was decided to include information on the Irish context also, bringing the total to 14 (O'Kane and Murphy, 2016a).
- An audit of transfer documentation developed in Ireland to support the transition from preschool to primary school. The audit focuses on ten transfer documents that have been developed in a collaborative way and compares and analyses these (O'Kane and Murphy, 2016b).

The review focused on the following key questions:

- What does research tell us about the importance of **national policies** to support children's transition from preschool to primary school?
- What does research tell us about the importance of **tools, resources and practices** used in the transfer of information from preschool to primary school?

¹ See glossary for definitions of ECCE and preschool in Ireland. For the purposes of this report, we refer to the year or two years prior to attending primary school as preschool.

- What does research identify as the **key dispositions, skills, knowledge** and other aspects of learning and development that are most critical in terms of supporting children at this transition point?
- What does research say about the role of **curriculum, pedagogy and play** in supporting children's transition to primary school?
- What can we learn from research about **relationships, roles and responsibilities** during the transition period?

The main findings of the review confirm that a positive experience during this important transition is a predictor of children's future success in terms of social, emotional and educational outcomes. Furthermore, the review notes that in addition to the transfer of relevant information, the roles of all stakeholders in the process must be considered in order to support children making the transition from preschool to primary school. From the child through to parents and family, preschool practitioners and primary school teachers, the emphasis currently is on supporting the stakeholders to communicate and collaborate. Other key points are summarised below under thematic headings.



National policies that focus on the transition to primary school

There is little evidence to show that the transition from preschool to primary school is recognised at national policy level in the jurisdictions included in the review. However, the review concludes:

- developments in Australia and New Zealand lead the way in work on transitions.
- the case for greater levels of communication and coordination between the various stakeholders continues to be argued for, internationally and nationally.

- although there is a vast amount of research arguing the need to communicate and transfer information between preschools and primary schools, there is less formal guidance on exactly what should be transferred, and on how or when this should happen.
- both internationally and nationally, local transition-to-school policies and an array of transfer documents exist and are used at a local level in an uncoordinated way, with little or no evidence of joined-up transition strategies.

Templates, tools and practices used for the transfer of information

Regarding templates and tools used to transfer information between preschools and primary schools, documentation may differ in style and format. However, some aspects are generally agreed upon.

- Documentation needs to be user-friendly for both sectors, and written in clear and concise language.
- Documentation should be positive in approach and focus on the achievements of the child rather than work from a deficit model.
- Areas where children need extra support should be identified and shared.
- It is important to involve parents in the transfer of information and in compiling it.
- The voice of the child should be included in a meaningful way.
- A greater level of understanding than is currently available about how primary schools use information transferred by preschools is needed.

Key skills, knowledge and dispositions that support children during the transition to primary school

In terms of the key dispositions, skills and knowledge that best support children as they make the transition to primary school, a good degree of consistency was identified. The focus is on social and emotional skills, communication and language skills, positive learning dispositions like independence and curiosity, and self-help skills, with less focus being placed on academic skills.

- The concept of 'readiness' that dominated transitions research in the past has been replaced with a broader interactionist approach that considers readiness as a bi-directional concept focusing both on the child, family, community on the one hand and on the characteristics of the school on the other.

- The current perspective is that it is the interaction between these various influences that makes the most significant impact on the child's transition to the primary school.
- Children need to be 'school-ready' in the broadest sense and 'ready schools' are equally important.
- Children experiencing social and economic disadvantage, children with English as an additional language (EAL) and children with special educational needs (SEN) require particular supports at the time of transition to primary school.

The role of play, curriculum, and pedagogy in the transitions process

While research reviewed highlights the importance of greater alignment between curriculum and practice across preschools and primary schools, there continues to be a discontinuity at the time, particularly, in terms of pedagogical practice.

- The research argues the case for interactive, play-based learning for younger children in both preschools and the early years of primary school.
- Tensions between play-based and more formal approaches have the potential to impact negatively on children's transition experiences.
- *Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* (CECDE, 2006) and *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009) support quality experiences and learning throughout early childhood in Ireland, including infant classes in primary schools. In terms of policy on the transition from preschool to primary school in Ireland, the frameworks have important implications. However, a clear national implementation plan to help practitioners and teachers to use them to extend and enhance children's experiences has yet to be put in place.
- Could *Aistear* be the curriculum framework for the first year, or two years, in primary school? In New Zealand, the Advisory Group on Early Learning (2015) recommended the establishment of reception/transition classes for 5-year-olds using *Te Whāriki* (which is similar to *Aistear*) rather than the New Zealand Curriculum to plan, assess and evaluate in the first year of school with an implementation timeframe beginning in 2016 (Recommendation 14). Could/should Ireland do the same with *Aistear* as we look towards the development of a new primary curriculum framework?

Roles, responsibilities and relationships

Supporting transitions is a shared responsibility. The need for families, preschools and primary schools to work together to support children making the transition from preschool to primary school is emphasised in research.

- Cross-sectoral co-operation should result in the development of stronger relationships between the two educational settings, not only smoothing educational transitions for children, but also contributing to improved long-term outcomes for them.
- However, it appears that collaboration and communication between preschools and primary schools is still not happening in any systematic or comprehensive manner.
- It is noted that issues of professional identity in the wider Early Childhood Care and Education sector in Ireland may be contributing to a lack of cross-sectoral communication and collaboration.
- Joint continuing professional development (CPD) experiences for professionals from the two educational sectors could enable greater alignment in pedagogical strategies.
- Parents play an important role in their children's transition to primary school and should be seen as collaborators in the process where respectful dialogue is all-important.



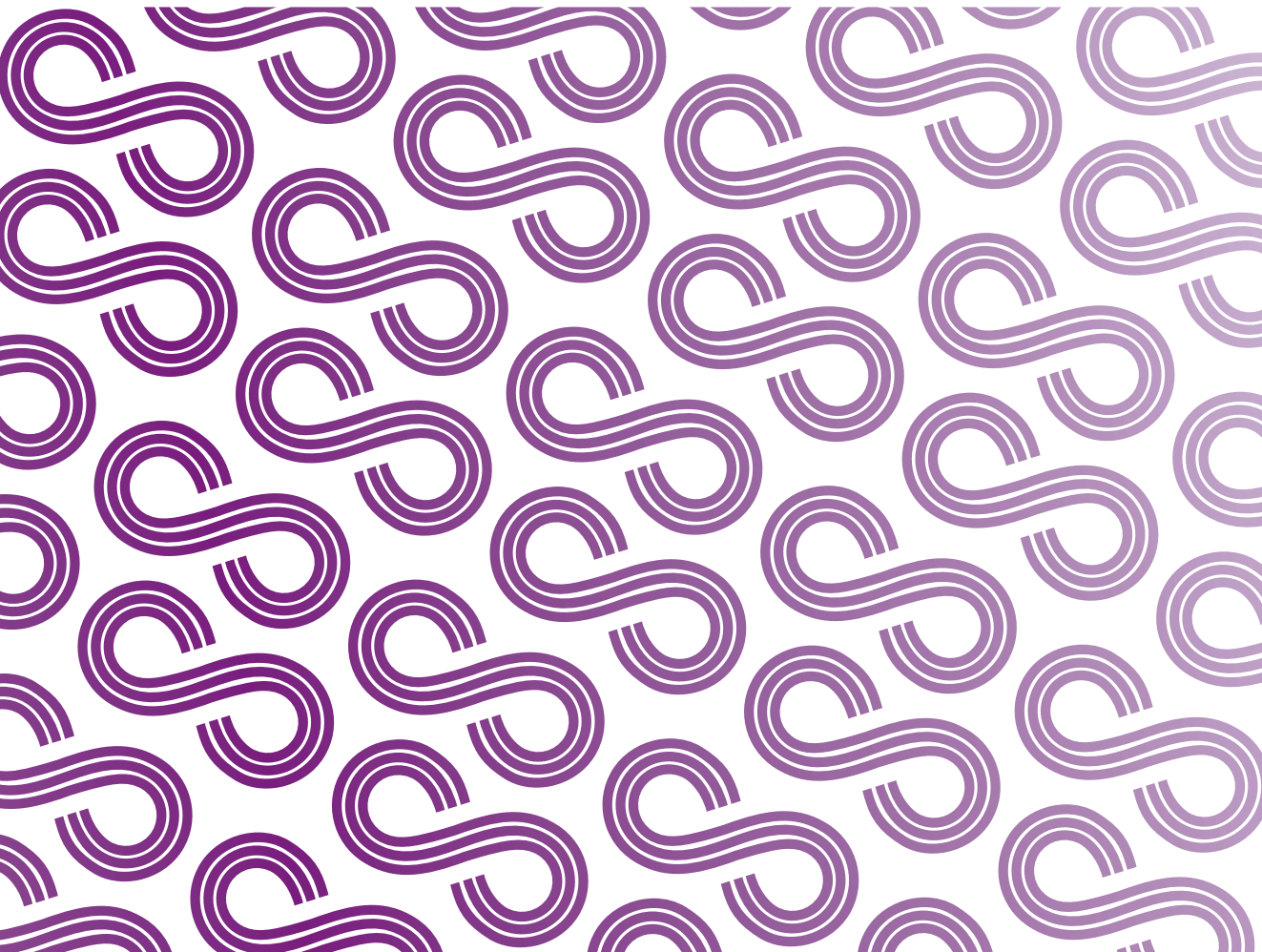
Conclusion

Despite its critical importance this educational transition is not recognised at national policy level anywhere. Instead, supports happen informally and at local level as children make the transition to primary school. However, Australia and New Zealand are leading the way in the area of transition.

The transition from preschool to primary school is very important for children and the literature notes that the transfer of information using templates or portfolios is a key part of this complex process. As well as supporting continuity in the child's learning and development it can also facilitate supportive relationships and dialogue between preschools and primary schools. Additional important factors mentioned are partnership with families, and increased alignment of curriculum and pedagogy between the sectors. Children experiencing social and economic disadvantage, children with English as an additional language (EAL) and children with special educational needs (SEN) require particular supports at the time of transition to primary school.

There is a general consensus that a successful transition for children must be considered in the context of relationships between the various stakeholders. A key message from the research is the changing understanding of what being 'school-ready' really means and the need for primary schools too to become 'ready' for the children transferring from preschool. The research reviewed extends our understanding of some of the issues surrounding this transition internationally and nationally, and gives insight into the multiple factors which influence it. This Research Report along with *Transition from Preschool to Primary School: Audit of Policy in 14 Jurisdictions* (O'Kane and Murphy, 2016a) and *Transition from Preschool to Primary School: Audit of Transfer Documentation in Ireland* (O'Kane and Murphy, 2016b) provide a strong foundation on which the NCCA can build when developing reporting templates for transferring information on children's learning and development as they make the important transition from preschool to primary school in Ireland. It also provides valuable information for the NCCA as work begins on developing a new primary curriculum framework.

Introduction



Introduction

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) has identified the area of transition from early childhood care and education (ECCE)/Preschool Education² to primary school as one of the priorities in its Strategic Plan, 2015-2018. A key aspect in support of children making this transition is a coordinated information sharing process between these two educational settings. As part of *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020* (Department of Education and Skills, 2011) the NCCA was assigned responsibility for developing reporting templates suitable for the Irish context for this cohort of children. This work is intended to help

Improve arrangements for the transfer of information about the progress and achievement of students between all schools and state-funded ECCE settings by requiring all settings and schools to provide written reports in standard format to schools and settings to which students transfer (reports to be provided following admission of student to the new school/setting) (Department of Education and Skills, 2011, p.82).



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² See glossary for definitions of ECCE and preschool in Ireland. For the purposes of this report, we refer to the year or two years prior to attending primary school as preschool.

- an audit of policies relating to the transition from preschool to primary school in 13 jurisdictions. The audit looked at data transfer and the transition process. The jurisdictions identified for investigation were: Australia (Victoria and Queensland); Canada (Ontario); England; Finland; France; Netherlands; New Zealand; Northern Ireland; Scotland; Singapore, Sweden; USA (Massachusetts); and Wales. For comparison, it was decided to include information on the Irish context also, bringing the total to 14 (O’Kane and Murphy, 2016a).
- an audit of work in Ireland on transition documentation. This focused on ten transfer documents that have been developed in a collaborative way in Ireland. The audit compares and analyses these (O’Kane and Murphy, 2016b).

This research report focuses on areas within the literature that are most relevant to the development of transfer documentation and the process by which children transfer from preschool to primary school. Internationally, literature in this area is wide-ranging so selection was based on relevance. It was decided to focus on jurisdictions which are highly regarded in their study of the transition to primary school, including Australia and New Zealand, and to investigate the most recent literature available in Ireland. Literature was identified through searches of relevant databases and websites and by reviews of cited studies in identified literature (reference harvesting). The report begins with a consideration of some of the theoretical perspectives relevant to this area and then outlines the key questions that will be addressed.

Theoretical background



Children in Ireland experience a broad range of educational transitions including moving from home to an ECCE setting, moving within or between a range of ECCE settings, and the transition from preschool to primary school. Many researchers highlight the importance of these transitions in the lives of young children. Ackesjö (2013) argues that at times of transition children must interpret and negotiate both the old and the new arena as they construct their identity in the new setting. An important aspect of transition for young children is developing a sense of belonging in the new setting. The demands placed on children during these early educational transitions can present both challenges and opportunities, and the degree of success experienced can impact on children in many ways.

A successful transition can have long-term positive outcomes for children both in their educational success and in terms of social and emotional development (Margetts, 2009; Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People's Services (C4EO), 2010).

The first major educational transition experienced by young children is the one from home to the ECCE setting. In terms of this transition, successful management is essential for the child adapting to the setting and having a setting that *is able, like a loving parent, to enfold each and every child* (Graham, 2012, p.3). The theme of *Identity and Belonging* within *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*³ (NCCA, 2009) reminds us of the importance of children feeling that they belong in their setting, developing secure relationships and connections, where links with family and community are acknowledged and nurtured.



Within ECCE settings, children experience many micro-transitions. Room-to-room transitions are inevitable as children are usually grouped by age. This means that children make a series of moves,

³ *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* will be referred to as *Aistear* in the remainder of this document.

sometimes on their own and at different points during the year. These transitions may be temporarily stressful for children, bringing with them demands which can manifest both as challenges and opportunities (O'Farrelly and Hennessy, 2013). Internationally, it has been noted that the timing of these transitions is influenced by children's attainment of developmental milestones, age, and available space in new rooms (Cryer, Hurwitz and Wolery, 2000; Garpelin, Kallberg, Ekström and Sandberg, 2010; O'Farrelly and Hennessy, 2013). Although a variety of practical transition practices such as visits to the new room are used to support children, practices linked to the promotion of emotional well-being are less common (Cryer, Hurwitz and Wolery, 2000; Cryer, Wagner-Moore, Burchinal, Yazejian, Hurwitz and Wolery, 2005).

The transition from preschool to the primary school is recognised as being one of the most important educational transitions that young children experience. It involves negotiating and adjusting to a number of changes including the physical environment, learning expectations, rules and routines, social status and identity, and relationships for children and families (Hirst, Jervis, Visagie, Sojo and Cavanagh, 2011). It is important to remember that transition is a process that happens over time, from when children are beginning to get ready to start school until the time when they have adjusted to school life, as opposed to a single point in time such as the day or week they start school. The Educational Transitions and Change (ETC) Research Group (2011) characterises this transition as a time of opportunity, aspiration, expectation and entitlement. Numerous studies show that a positive experience in this important transition is a predictor of future success in terms of social, emotional and educational outcomes (Dockett and Perry, 2007; Dunlop and Fabian, 2007; Peters, 2010; Sayers, West, Lorains, Laidlaw, Moore and Robinson, 2012). In order to support children making the transition to primary school, the role of the various stakeholders must be considered. The research highlights the need to support all stakeholders: the child, the parent and family, the preschool practitioners, and the primary school teachers.

Internationally, transition has been studied using several theoretical concepts. However, O'Kane (2007) recommends two theoretical perspectives as being particularly relevant to study in this area. These are the bio-ecological systems model (Bronfenbrenner 1979, 1992) and socio-cultural theory (Vygotsky 1962, 1978) and these remain to the forefront in research today.

Bio-ecological systems theory

The bio-ecological systems theory encompasses concentric micro-, meso-, exo- and macro- systems with the child as the centre (Bronfenbrenner 1979, 1992; Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). It sees the child as one part of a process of interaction influencing his/her development. Within this system, the impact of the home, preschool and school contexts operate at the micro-level. The child is impacted upon too by agencies operating at the meso-level, the relational network with others. The organisational context is set by wider external environments at exo-system (for example, the national curriculum) and macro-system (for example, cultural beliefs) levels, which also impact on children and their families during these transitions. The child's ecology is composed of a layer of

multi-connected systems all of which have some degree of effect on the child and his/her development. Relationships within these nested layers are bi-directional so adults affect children's behaviour, but children are active participants in the process too. Positive connections and relationships between these ecological layers should result in greater support for the child as they make this transition. This theory has particular relevance for children as they make the transition from preschool to primary school. The ecological systems model of development sees the child as one part of a process of interaction influencing his/her development, as Bronfenbrenner states

the characteristics of the person at a given time in his or her life are a joint function of the characteristics of the person and of the environment over the course of that person's life up to that time (1992, p.190).

Socio-cultural theory

Socio-cultural theory proposes that children are active agents in their own learning and that the same biological or environmental factors can produce very different effects depending on social or cultural considerations. So the ability of the individual to construct meaning from their social and educational interactions will impact on their experience of this transition. Vygotsky (1978) suggests that the child internalises social interactions through which they learn and develop. In this way, learning is viewed as a collective activity and tools, language, and social rules within any given community of learners may differ. This will have direct impact on children as they move between the different cultures of preschool and primary school. Viewed from this perspective, transition is a process of co-construction achieved through interaction between all the stakeholders – child, family, the two educational contexts, and the wider community. The cultural differences between the preschool and primary school, in socio-cultural terms, have an impact on the transition between the settings and are of great importance in terms of achieving continuity between the two. As Kienig and Margetts (2013) advise:

Socio-cultural theory provides a framework for understanding how belief systems, cultural values and relationships shape the ways that transition to school and children's development and learning are conceptualised and experienced at the individual and macro-system levels, both directly and indirectly...the communication and involvement of all participants is critical in establishing agreed understandings and promoting positive outcomes for all involved (p.149).

With these two theories in mind: socio-cultural and bio-ecological, the following key questions are considered in the course of this literature review.

- What does research tell us about the importance of **national policies** to support children's transition from preschool to primary school?

- What does research tell us about the importance of **templates, tools and resources** used in the transfer of information from preschool to primary school?
- What does research identify as the **key dispositions, skills, knowledge** and other aspects of learning and development that are most critical in terms of supporting children at this transition point?
- What does research say about the role **curriculum, pedagogy and play** have in supporting children's transition to primary school?
- What can we learn from research about **relationships, roles and responsibilities** during the transition period?



A variety of terms such as ECCE, kindergarten, pre-primary, preschool and pre-school are used across jurisdictions to refer to the care and education of children under the age of six years. In referring to individual jurisdictions in this report, where possible, the terminology of that jurisdiction is used even though this means some inconsistencies across the document.

In a small number of cases, a variety of terminology is used within a jurisdiction. Ireland is an example of this with a myriad of terms like full and part-time day care, pre-school, preschool, playgroup and naíonraí (Irish-medium preschools) being used. In this report, for ease of reading the term preschool is used as a generic term to refer to all those providing preschool places under the ECCE scheme (places in the state-funded 'free' preschool year).



National policy
documents on the
transition from preschool
to primary school



Internationally, researchers continue to argue the case for greater levels of communication and coordination between the various stakeholders involved in the transition from preschool to primary school (Educational Transitions and Chance (ETC) Research Group, 2011; Fabian, 2013; Hopps, 2013, 2014; Rantavuori and Karila, 2015). While this is being recognised locally in many places more needs to be done at policy level to ensure greater coherence in transition practice (Woodhead and Oates, 2007; O’Kane 2007; Peters, 2010; Dunlop, 2013, 2014; Fabian, 2013; Hayes, 2014). A national policy on educational transitions or a specific transitions policy from preschool to primary school would contribute to this coherence and help to develop more joined-up transition strategies nationally. Internationally, Keinig and Margetts (2013) argue that in order to better support the transition to primary school, greater attention to long-term policy strategy is required. Both Einarsdottir (2013) and Dunlop (2013) argue the case for future policy documentation to keep a focus on continuity in children’s education, and build on the knowledge, experience and skills of children.



Calls have also been made in many jurisdictions at government level for greater coordination and communication between preschools and primary schools, for example, in Scotland via *the Early Years Framework* (Scottish Government 2008, 2008a) and in New Zealand via Recommendation 16 of the *Report of the Advisory Group on Early Learning* (Ministry of Education, 2015). Also in New Zealand all ECCE settings are required to develop a transition-to-school policy. In the Australian context, the need for professionals in both sectors to work closely together at times of transition has been included in the Council of Australian Government’s national *Early Childhood Development Strategy* (2009), and was specifically addressed in the *Continuity of Learning* resource produced in 2014 by the Australian Government’s Department of Education (Dockett and Perry, 2014a). All of the above make clear the positive consequences of such cross-sectoral communication. In Denmark this has been taken one step further with the introduction of a ‘guidebook’ for municipalities

focusing on the transition to primary school (Ministry of Children and Education, 2012). However, it is acknowledged that Danish municipalities are more likely to follow transition strategies led by the 'guidebook' but developed individually at a local level, in order to achieve progression and continuity between the two sectors (Jensen, Hansen and Brostrom, 2013).

The need for professionals to work closely together at times of transition has been included in many early childhood reform documents which make clear the positive consequences of such cross-sectoral communication. Hopps and Dockett (2011) advise that the importance of exchange of information between professionals at the time of transition has been recommended across the board by researchers, policy-makers and education professionals. Petriwskyi (2013) reports that reforms are occurring within the educational sector in Australia which will help support transitions for children. These include combining preschool settings and the school system within one government department with the aim of coordinating service delivery. She notes that orientation programmes to support children making the transition to primary school in Australia are developing a wider focus, with a trend towards greater communication with parents and preschool practitioners to discuss the child's transition. Therefore, a shift in emphasis is occurring with a new prominence given to shared responsibility for transitions (Hopps and Dockett, 2011; Petriwskyi, 2013).

Local transition partnerships

Apart from what is outlined above, there is little evidence internationally or in Ireland of this transition being recognised at national policy level. In many jurisdictions including Ireland, work around transitions happens at a local level. This might be expected in the Irish context as some have argued that policy development within the ECCE sector in Ireland has been reactive rather than proactive (Hayes, 2014) but this is true for other jurisdictions also. Moss (2014) argues with regard to the context in the United Kingdom (UK) that policy development within the sector is piecemeal and fragmented. However, Dunlop (2014) notes that, over the course of her 23 years researching children's transitions in the UK, this area is becoming more widely recognised in policy terms and now appears as a theme within many policy documents. So although there is a lack of national policy with a sole focus on transitions, it is encompassed within other policy documentation. In general, the absence of clearly articulated national policy might go some way to explain why practice with regard to transition, and in particular, to the transfer of information is fragmented in the Irish context, as is the case in many other jurisdictions.

Examination of the relationships between preschools and primary schools notes that these relationships still happen at a local level, informally, and are dependent on both teacher priorities and proximity of settings, despite recommendations having been made for a more coordinated approach (Wright, 2013; Ministry of Education, New Zealand, 2015). Closer working partnerships would ensure greater continuity of learning for children (ETC Research Group, 2011; Wright, 2013). *Planned and coordinated transitions are essential for young children and there is a need to avoid fragmented and un-coordinated policies which translate into fragmented and un-coordinated*

delivery of services for children (Scottish Government, 2008a, p.6). Dockett and Perry (2014b) examine both Australian and international research about this transition and argue that it is now being recognised internationally by policy makers as a critical element of children's future school engagement. It is also argued that further research on transitions should be done into how policy is informing practice, and how practice is influencing policy decisions (Jindal-Snape and Hannah, 2013).

In the Irish context, although there is no national policy on transition, the two practice frameworks, *Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education*⁴ (Centre for Early Childhood Education and Development [CECDE], 2006) and *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009) both impact on practice with regard to this transition. *Síolta* Standard 13: Transitions, notes that

ensuring continuity of experiences for children requires policies, procedures and practice that promote sensitive management of transitions, consistency in relationships, liaison within and between settings, the keeping and transfer of relevant information (with parental consent), and the close involvement of parents, and where appropriate, relevant professionals (CECDE, 2006, p.85).

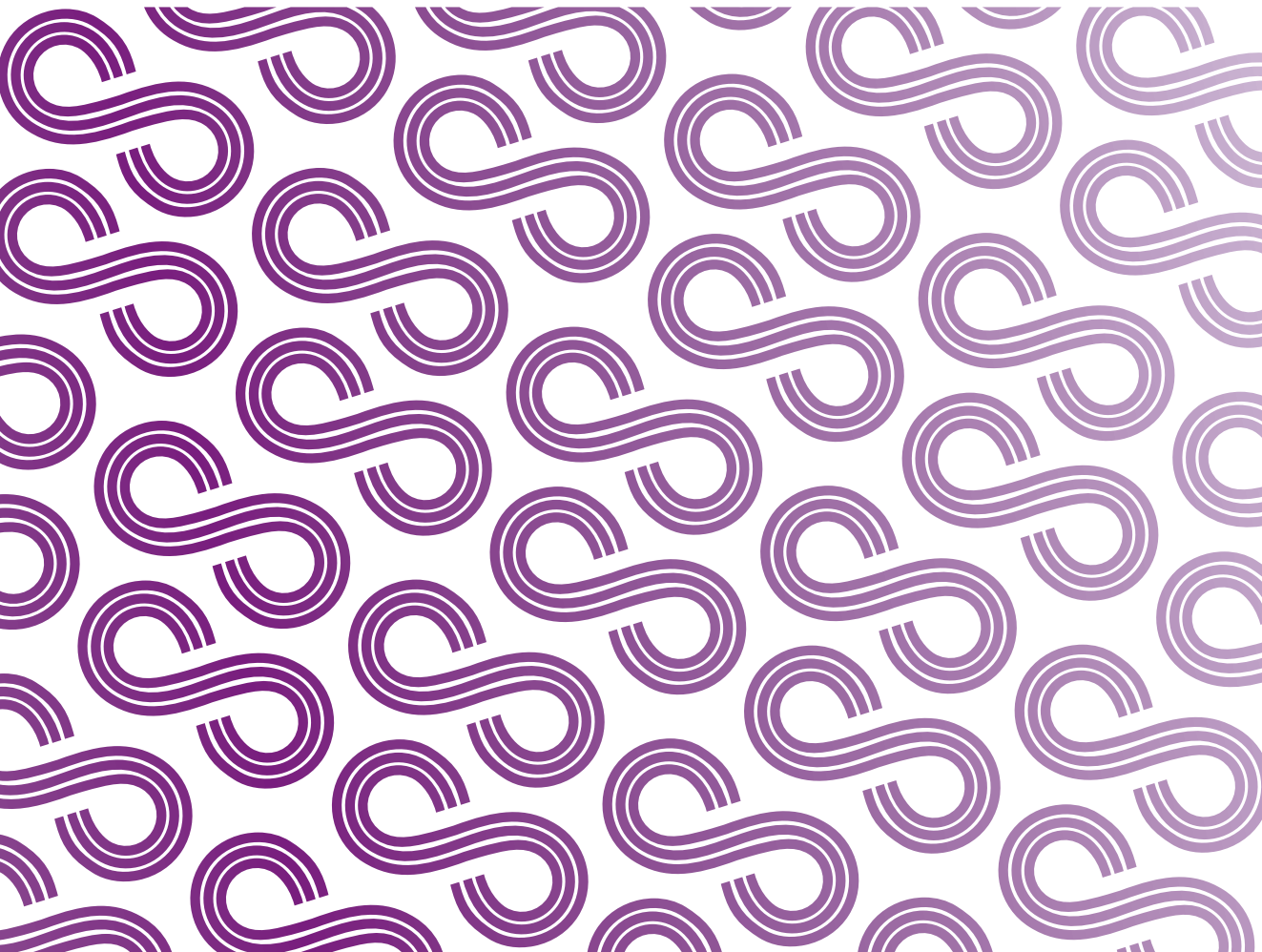
While *Síolta* provides national standards for quality focusing on the contexts in which children learn, *Aistear* focuses on curriculum and on learning opportunities. *Aistear* can be used in all ECCE settings to enhance children's experiences and to support progression in learning from birth through to infant classes in primary school. The *Aistear* curriculum framework highlights the importance of transitions in its *Well-being and Exploring and Thinking* themes. In 2015 the *Aistear Síolta Practice Guide* (NCCA) was developed as an online resource to help ECCE settings in Ireland use the two frameworks together to improve children's experiences. One section of the guide called *Supporting Transitions* has a particular focus on the transition to primary school and highlights the need to transfer relevant information from the preschool to the primary school.

The importance of such transfer of information is highlighted in the many local projects focusing on transition that have been established in Ireland. Several of these have taken place in areas of disadvantage. For more information, see O'Kane and Murphy (2016b). In conclusion, communication between preschools and primary schools continues to be identified by many researchers internationally as both an important tool to support children during this time of transition and a useful method to improve continuity in terms of curriculum and pedagogy (Dockett and Perry, 2007; Ashton, Woodrow, Johnston, Wangmann, Singh and James, 2008; Binstadt, 2010; Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD), Victoria, n.d.a.). Yet in the main this continues to occur at local level, often in a fragmented and un-coordinated way.

⁴ *Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* will be referred to as *Síolta* in the remainder of this document.



Templates, tools
and practices for the
transfer of information
to primary school



A review of international research notes that the importance of transition practices to support a smooth transition for children is well-recognised, with a general consensus that families, preschools and primary schools communicating and collaborating has a positive impact on children's adjustment to school (Docket and Perry, 2014a). Research reports many benefits for children when schools and preschools work together to support transitions. For example, in the United States, greater levels of adjustment, positive social competencies and fewer problem behaviours have been found in children whose preschool practitioners have good levels of communication with the primary school teachers in the school the children moved to (LoCasale-Crouch, Mashburn, Downer and Pianta, 2008). A Finnish study also finds that children in schools with the best developed preschool to primary supports, make the smoothest transitions. They report that continuity of curricula between the settings and the transfer of written information from the preschool to the primary school, are the most effective predictors of a successful transition (Ahtola, Silinskas, Poikonen, Kontoniemi, Niema, and Nurmi, 2011). In the Irish context, the Dublin South West Inner City National Early Years Access Initiative (NEYAI) Consortium (2014) reports similar findings with practitioners reporting benefits in terms of stronger links between preschools and primary schools, and the sharing of information resulting in smoother transitions for children. This project notes a strengthened understanding of practice between settings through sharing of information and visits. Such smooth transitions are identified by children adapting well to the challenges of the new context, and result in children imbued with self-belief in both academic and social terms.



Internationally, a number of transition practices have been identified as being effective, including developing closer cross-sectoral relationships, (Arnold, Bartlett, Gowani and Shallwani, 2008; Wright, 2009; Peters, 2010), and increased parental and child involvement (Brooker, 2005, 2008; Evans, George, White, Sharp, Morris and Marshall, 2010). One practice which is a common feature of transition programmes is the transfer of documentation from the preschool to the primary school (Evans et al, 2010). The transfer of such information about the skills and learning dispositions of the

child supports the school in this regard. However, although there is a vast amount of research arguing the need to communicate and transfer information between the two educational settings, there is less formal guidance on exactly what should be transferred and how (ETC Research Group, 2011). Both internationally and in the Irish context, a vast array of transfer documents including templates exist and are used at local level. The audit of *Transition from Preschool to Primary School: Audit of Transfer Documentation in Ireland* (O’Kane and Murphy, 2016b) contains examples of some of the transfer templates currently in use in Ireland with regard to transfer of information from the preschool setting to the primary school. The audit describes the development and transfer process for a sample of transfer documents developed through cross-sector collaboration. These were developed to help address the issue of lack of communication and coordination between preschools and primary schools. The transfer documents were designed to capture the rich knowledge base developed within preschools, and facilitate its efficient transfer to the primary school the child was about to attend. Rather than working from a deficit model, these documents and templates use a positive approach by focusing on the achievements of the child (O’Kane and Hayes, 2010; Mhic Mhathúna, 2011; Dublin South West Inner City NEYAI, 2014; Donegal County Childcare Committee, 2014; 2014a). Evaluations of some of these studies report a clear value in the use of such templates to support children making the transition to primary school (O’Kane and Hayes, 2010; Berney, 2014; Cork City Partnership, 2014).

Particularly interesting examples of transfer templates have been produced in some Australian states including Victoria and Queensland and these are dealt with in more detail in *Transition from Preschool to Primary School: Audit of Policy in 14 Jurisdictions* (O’Kane and Murphy 2016a). The *Transition Learning and Development Statement* used in Victoria was developed following an extensive process of consultation and evaluation. It is of particular interest for the Irish context as it links quite closely to *Aistear* with its inclusion of five learning and development outcomes on Identity, Community, Well-being, Learning and Communication (DEECD, 2012). The *Statement* is a strengths-based summary of learning and includes inputs from parents and children as well as early years practitioners. Since 2009, all early childhood services in Victoria that offer a funded kindergarten programme are required to provide a Transition Statement for each child transferring to primary school. Other early years settings are encouraged to provide this statement also, and where no statement is available, schools are encouraged to work with families to complete part one of the statement [this section outlines the family context]. The fully completed statement summarises the strengths of the child; identifies their interests and individual approaches to learning; and indicates how the child can be supported to continue learning as viewed by both family and early childhood educator.

In New Zealand all ECCE settings are required to have a transition-to-school policy in place for their individual setting (Marry, 2007). The emphasis in developing transition policies and programmes is on relationships, on supporting children and families at times of transition, and reflecting on practice through the lens of the themes of the *Te Whāriki* framework (Ministry of Education, 2009). Their recent public consultation shows that transition policies and processes vary widely. The

consultation report also notes that for children starting primary school, *Te Whāriki is the most appropriate curriculum framework to inform their early schooling, not the New Zealand Curriculum* (2015, p.13). The group, therefore, recommends the establishment of reception/transition classes in primary schools based on *Te Whāriki* as well as enhancing supports for teachers and practitioners to develop sound transition policies and practices. In terms of good practice on the transfer of information, they note that

Good practice included services providing parents with a summative assessment report about their child's learning and encouraging them to provide a copy to their child's teacher at school. These were detailed narratives of children's learning, based on Te Whāriki. They included comments on children's dispositions, and literacy and mathematical knowledge and skills. Often these reports included information about any additional support that might be required for a successful transition (2015, pp.16-17).

Another aspect of the transition process in New Zealand is the use of children's portfolios to transfer information about their learning and development during the move to primary school (Wright, 2009; Peters et al. 2009). These portfolios, which are discussed in more detail in the next section, include observations and assessments by the early years practitioners as well as examples of the children's work.

This focus on portfolios is in sharp contrast with the trend in England and Wales towards a statutory formal assessment process once the child has entered the primary school system. In England, the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) Profile (Standards and Testing Agency, 2016) describes each child's development and learning achievements at the end of the academic year in which they turn five. The EYFS Profile outlines attainment in relation to 17 early learning goal descriptors. The practitioner also includes a short narrative describing three characteristics of effective learning for the child. The EYFS Profile is shared with parents and passed on to the child's Year One teacher. The aim is to inform parents about their child's development and the characteristics of their learning; to support a smooth transition to key stage 1; and to help year 1 teachers plan an effective, responsive and appropriate curriculum that will meet the needs of all pupils. In Wales, the Foundation Phase Profile (FPP) has been developed as a national assessment of all children to establish a baseline within the first six weeks of entry to school (Welsh Government, 2015). It was intended that EYFS Profile results would also be collected by local authorities and by the Department for Education in order to monitor national and local trends in children's learning outcomes. However, there has been much controversy with respect to the use of baseline assessments in both jurisdictions and this has led to the withdrawal of the proposals (Department for Education, (UK) 2016). The emphasis at policy level in England and Wales has been more on assessment and accountability than on easing transitions for children. It is important to point out also that there are many transition initiatives at local level in England and Wales which focus on easing transitions for children and families.

The value of engaging in transitions practices has been argued by many including Arnold *et al*, 2008; Evans *et al.*, 2010; ETC Research Group, 2011. In terms of professional responsibility, it is

clear that greater levels of alignment and coordination between preschool settings and primary settings will produce more positive child outcomes (Wright, 2009; Bablett, Barrat-Pugh, Kilgallon and Maloney, 2011; Ahtola, Poikonen, Kontoniemi, Niemi and Nurmi, 2012; Petriwskyi, 2013). The overall argument is that a planned approach to building relationships is necessary (Einarsdottir, 2013; Fabian, 2013). It is clear that greater continuity of experiences between the sectors would better support children making educational transitions. Templates which transfer information between settings not only support connections for children but also facilitate supportive relationships between the two sectors, which are critical in terms of this continuity. As noted below, it is important to consider the practical application of these transfer documents.

Research on use of transfer documentation

Although many researchers, policy makers and practitioners recommend the exchange of information between settings as children make the transition to primary school, follow-on research is important in understanding the complexities of the transfer situation. Recent research in Australia, using questionnaires and focus group discussions, examines the realities of preschool to primary school communication (Hopps, 2013; Hopps 2014a, 2014b; Hopps and Dockett, 2011; 2012, Hopps, Fenton and Dockett, 2016). It is interesting to note that the research by Hopps and her colleagues is the first formal examination of the practical experiences of preschool to primary school communication in Australia. This research concludes that having a written statement transferred between the two educational settings was useful and that consequently most outcomes for relationships between preschool setting and school participants were reported to be positive. However, the research contests the notion that preschool setting to primary school communication automatically results in the development of positive relationships. Some of the communications noted in the research resulted in practitioners feeling disappointed and frustrated, and a breakdown of trust between settings was experienced (Hopps, 2014a). Another issue noted in the study was that preschool setting participants reported not knowing whether the aims of their communication had been achieved. Some advised that they were not aware of how the information transferred to the school context was used or how it was regarded by schools (Hopps 2014a; 2014b). It is noted that this may impact on their willingness to continue to communicate across settings. A greater understanding is required about how primary schools use information transferred to them by the preschool sector.

During an investigation into preschool and school educators' references to strengths-based practices in transfer documentation, a further issue was identified by Hopps et al. (2016). Results of that study indicate that educators interpreted strengths-based practice as the sharing of positive information about children. The authors argue that this approach presents a limited view of strengths-based practice, and suggest instead that 'organisational practice' offers the potential to communicate about children's strengths as well as the challenges children may face, as they start school. A similar issue with regard to interpretation of strengths-based practice was reported in the

Irish context, in the Second Interim Project Report of the NEYA Happy Talk Project. In the evaluation, preschool practitioners reported that when they were completing the Transitions Flower [a template for transferring information from the preschool to the primary school] they were *concerned about recording anything that could be perceived as negative by the parents* (Cork City Partnership Ltd, 2012, p.28). Some staff commented that they did not feel skilled enough to fill out the template properly. These concerns were echoed by the junior infant teachers who highlighted a concern that the Transitions Flowers were presenting an exaggerated picture of children's ability. The final project report (Cork City Partnership, 2014) noted that training was provided following the interim evaluation, which better equipped staff to report on children's strengths and challenges.

Other issues identified in the Australian research (Hopps, 2014b) concern the language/terminology used by the two groups, and the need for agreement on the meaning of language/terminology in the transfer document. Both of these issues are also noted in the Irish context (O'Kane and Hayes, 2010). Wolfe (2015) notes that language and terminology matters *both for clarity and because of connotations and discourses in which terms are embedded* (p.12). He argues that although getting language correct is not a guarantee of policy success, it is important to debate and agree on a common language, particularly when discussing early educational alignment. Overall, Hopps (2014a) argues that a greater understanding is required about how primary schools use information transferred to them by preschools, particularly information about children's prior knowledge and capabilities. She suggests that

the practice of [ECCE setting]–school communication be valued by educators and policy-makers for its potential for affecting educator relationships as much as it is currently considered as a way of exchanging information between settings (2014, p.416).

The voice of the child in transfer documentation


Evans *et al.* (2010) argue that transition practices must have a holistic focus on the child. Many researchers argue the need for the voice of the child to be heard at times of transition (Dockett and Perry, 2004; 2007; Dunlop, 2007; 2013; Einarsdottir, 2013; Margetts, 2013). With regard to the transfer of information, it is important that information is not only written from the perspective of the preschool practitioner, but also that information from the perspective of parents and of children themselves is considered. Child portfolios have been identified as being useful in this regard. These are files containing the learning stories of individual children that can be used to highlight the child as a capable and competent learner. Learning stories completed during the child's time at preschool, along with artwork and so on, are added to the portfolio which the child then takes with them into the primary school classroom (Carr, 2000; 2001; Carr, Peters, Davis, Bartlett, Bashford, Berry and Wilson-Tukaki, 2008, Peters *et al.* 2009). Their value as a tool with which to transfer information is clear (Peters, 2010).

Peters, Hartley, Rogers, Smith and Carr (2009) have investigated the use of early childhood portfolios as a tool for enhancing learning during the transition to school in a New Zealand kindergarten setting.

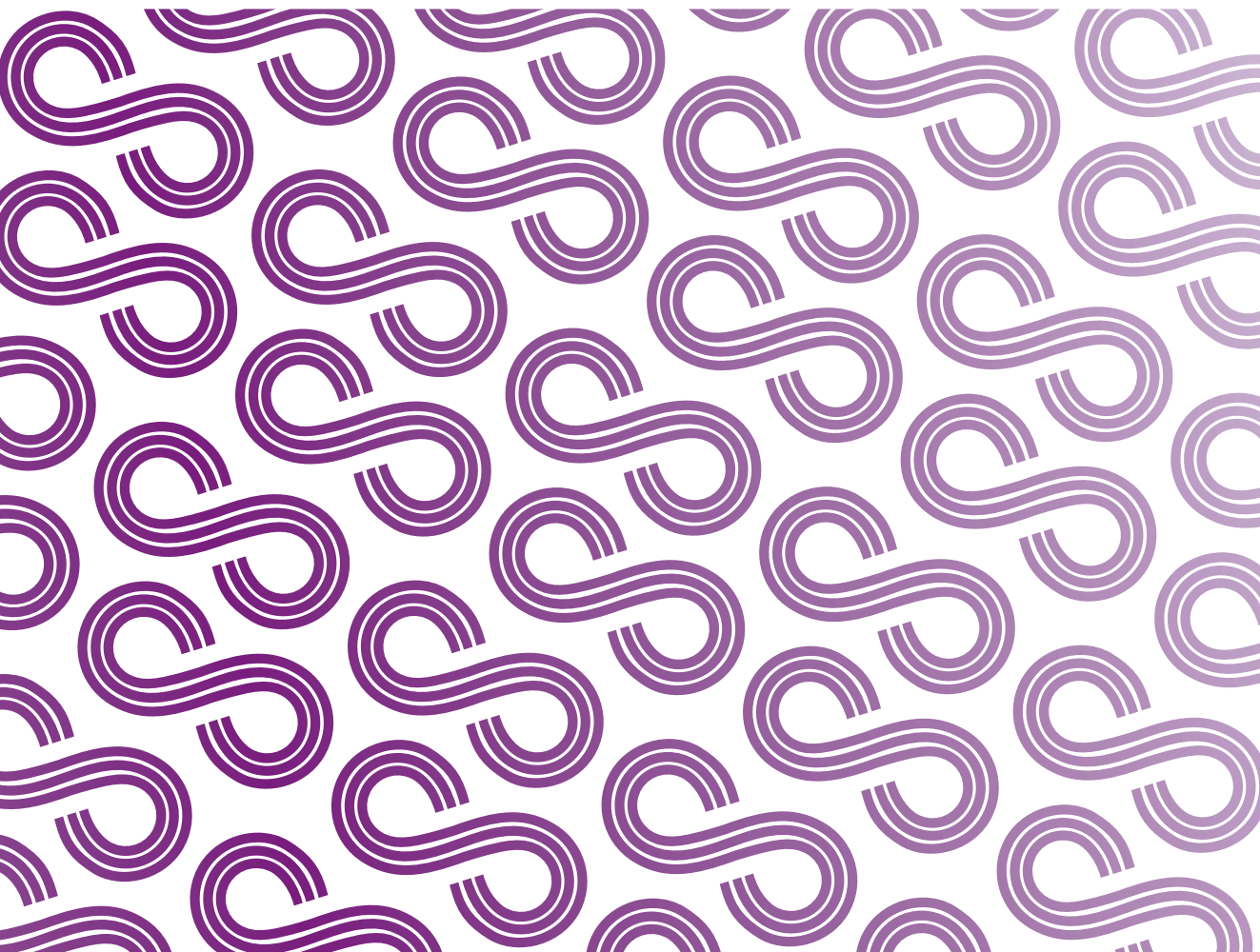
Portfolios were identified as a belonging and empowerment tool; a means for school teachers to access children's funds of knowledge; playing a role in constructing a positive self-image about learning; and as valuable literacy artefacts (p.4).

Children take the portfolios with them when leaving the ECCE centre and they have responsibility for taking them on to the school setting. Peters *et al.* (2009) report that such portfolios are useful initially in building relationships between the children and the new teacher, and are found to be helpful in supporting the child in crossing the border from one setting to another. They report that the documents provide a base for power for the child, who controls the portfolio and is in charge in interactions in the new classroom involving their own portfolio. As Peters *et al.* state, *they present a multi-dimensional perspective of the child as learner* (2009, p.6). The research reports that the portfolios enable the teachers to learn about the children's past learning experiences, and serve to improve home-school links, while they also serve as a tool to enable the children to learn about each other. It was argued that *the power of portfolios as a tool for fostering belonging and empowerment was evident* (Peters *et al.*, 2009, p.8). Clearly, these portfolios can enable the voice of the child to be recognised in the new educational context in a meaningful way.

There are limitations to the use of these portfolios and they are important to note. The authors note that some families were reluctant to let their child's portfolio go to school in case such a precious document was damaged. Hartley, Rogers, Smith and Lovatt (2014) have looked at developing a transition portfolio that would be shorter, easier for teachers to use, and which would contain more specific information to help the teacher build a relationship with the child. The idea of digital portfolios is being explored as a solution to this issue, as these may reassure families if they know there is a 'back up' copy. Another issue identified is that the value placed on portfolios by teachers varies and this impacts on their use. So, the use of the portfolios is dependent on the individual school teacher's response. Nonetheless, the authors report that effective use of portfolios works well in terms of both direct and indirect benefits for children's learning (Peters *et al.*, 2009).



Key skills, knowledge
and dispositions that
support children



In line with good educational policy and in keeping the rights of the child in mind (UNCRC, 1992) when viewing educational transitions, the child should be the centre of the various environmental systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1992). A key part of this is how educational settings acknowledge the funds of knowledge that children bring to the transition (Peters, 2010). Wood (2013) describes funds of knowledge as including what children already know and understand. We live in a diverse world where children are coming to the preschool /primary school bringing knowledge, understanding and experiences from their home, their communities, and from their exposure to television, internet and other media. They have many different experiences and so practitioners and teachers must ensure they understand children's cultural repertoires and what they bring to the ECCE setting/school so that these can be used as the building blocks for supporting their transition and extending their learning and development. In this regard, it is important to consider the key skills, knowledge and dispositions identified in the research literature as being most critical in supporting children during the transition to primary school.

International research on skill sets and dispositions

Social and emotional skills and the friendships they help foster are cited as improving children's long-term educational outcomes (Brooker, 2008; Jackson and Cartmel, 2010; Hatcher, Nuner and Paulsel, 2012; Kienig, 2013) and their future long-term wellness (Jones, Greenberg and Crowley, 2015). Recent longitudinal research has found a relationship between kindergarten social competence and future wellness: children who worked co-operatively and related well to their peers, who handled their emotions well and were better at problem-solving, were more likely to be successful in later life (Jones, Greenberg and Crowley, 2015). These findings present a strong message about the long-term importance of these social and emotional skills. It is argued that the high-quality of ECCE in Sweden is due to the equal value placed on social and cognitive learning (Pramling and Pramling-Samuelsson, 2011). Language and communication skills are also noted as being fundamental to successful transitions (Hansen 2010a, 2010b; Jensen, Hansen and Brostrom, 2013). Other jurisdictions focus on skill sets and dispositions similar to those set out in *Aistear*. For example, in Victoria, Australia, *Transition: A Positive Start to School* was introduced in 2009 (Victoria State Government, Education and Training, 2009) and focused on skills and dispositions under the headings of identity; community; well-being; learning and communication. *KidsMatter Early Childhood*, an Australian mental health and well-being initiative funded by the Australian Government, advises parents that when starting school children experience changes to their physical environment (playground, classroom, school buildings), rules and procedures (more structure, rules for different places and experiences), relationships (new and larger numbers of adults and children, difference age groups) and learning (more formal learning experiences). They provide guidance for parents on helping the child to manage change and build on their social and emotional, independence and learning skills. The main skill sets that they encourage parents to focus on are:

- social and emotional skills including relationship building, friendship skills, sharing and turn-taking, managing their behaviour, and communication skills
- independence skills including self-help skills, responsibility, decision-making skills, and developing an understanding of social rules
- learning skills including developing focus, listening skills, following instructions and developing a hands-on approach to learning (Hirst Jervis, Visagie, Sojo and Cavanagh, 2011).

Although a strong emphasis is noted on the skills highlighted above, in some cases an emphasis on more academic skills is also apparent in the research. In terms of 'school-related skills' behaviours such as co-operation with the school routines, working in large groups, taking direction from a teacher, and staying on specific assigned tasks have been noted as being important to preschool practitioners and primary teachers in one United States study (Hatcher, Nuner and Paulsel, 2012). In the same study, skills such as letter recognition, sound/letter association, recognising names, and the ability to write one's own name have been cited as being important in terms of communication (Hatcher *et al.*, 2012). A recent UK report (The State of Education Survey, 2016) surveyed over 2,000 school leaders and governors around the UK and found that in the primary school system more than a third of those surveyed reported that almost 50 per cent of the children arriving into their schools were not school ready. The main issues cited were lack of social skills (79%), delayed speech (78%) and lack of self-help skills and resilience (69%). These skill sets correspond closely to the skills noted internationally as being important for children of this age, and to the skill sets identified in the Irish context in the next section of the report. However, 58 per cent of the interviewees also said pupils were arriving with lower than would be expected 'reading skills'; 56 per cent highlighted 'writing standards'; and 55 per cent were disappointed by 'numeracy'. This is surprising when read in the context of the research cited above where these more academic-type skills are considered less important (and indeed less appropriate) for children of the 4- to 5-year-old age cohort.



Irish research on skill sets and dispositions

In Ireland findings are similar to those found internationally with a focus on social and emotional skills. Several research projects have been undertaken to investigate the skills and dispositions important at the time of transition to primary school. O’Kane (2007) notes that the skills, knowledge and dispositions identified by preschool practitioners and primary teachers as being of importance for the transition were: self-esteem, social skills, independence, language and communication skills, and concentration. The work of O’Kane and Hayes (2010); the Preparing for Life team (UCD Geary Institute, 2012) and the Dublin South West Inner City National Early Years Access Initiative (NEYAI) (2014) re-confirm the importance of these skills, knowledge and dispositions.

The importance of these skills is reiterated more recently in the work of Donegal County Childcare Committee (2014) when developing the *‘Moving On’ ECCE Setting to Primary School Transition Statement*. This work links many of the skill sets mentioned above to the four themes of *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009). So the area of *Well-being* includes dispositions such as confidence, resilience and independence. *Identity and Belonging* encompasses areas such as individual and group identity, understanding rules and boundaries and working co-operatively. *Communicating* involves the child being able to confidently express him/herself in a variety of ways. *Exploring and Thinking* involves the child being able to explore, investigate, negotiate, question, problem-solve, and cope with frustrations and challenge.

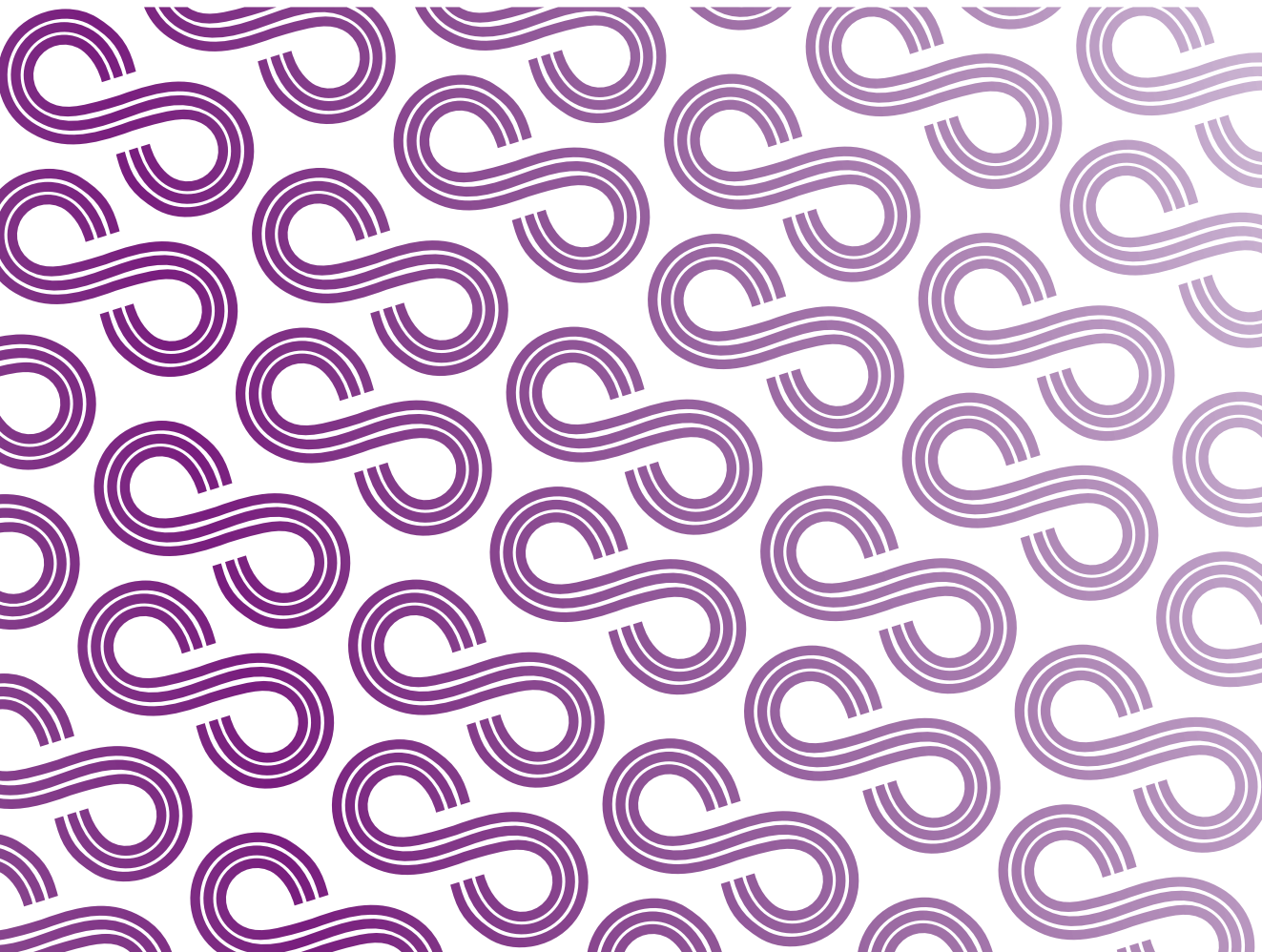
Research in the Irish context comparing the views of parents, practitioners and primary school teachers on school readiness confirms much of the above (Ring, Mhic Mhathúna, Moloney, Hayes, Breatnach, Stafford, Carswell, Keegan, Kelleher, McCafferty, O’Keeffe, Leavy, Madden and Ozonyia, 2016). A number of school-readiness indicators emerge from the study. These indicators relate to dispositions, self-help skills, social and emotional skills, classroom behaviour, language and pre-academic skills. This cross-sectoral study notes that all respondents regarded children’s social and emotional skills as being important. Primary school respondents ranked such skills as children’s ability to work independently, to share and to negotiate, higher than practitioner respondents. Children’s dispositions to be creative, to persevere at a task and to be enthusiastic were viewed as moderately important by both sectors. A trend was identified among practitioners to value dispositions such as enthusiasm, curiosity and perseverance as proposed within *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009) more highly than primary school teachers. The authors note that *while these dispositions are not confined to Early Years settings, they are perhaps more visible in the relatively free interactions within these contexts* (Ring et al., 2016, p.148). Factors such as the ability to listen and concentrate as well as being able to count, recite the alphabet, know letters, shapes and colours, and behave in a polite and socially expected manner, were rated highly by practitioner respondents who viewed pre-academic skills as more important than their primary school counterparts.

Both nationally and internationally, it must be noted that there is a good degree of consistency in the skills and dispositions identified in the literature as being important for children making the transition to primary school. There is a focus on social and emotional skills, communication and

language skills, independence and self-help skills. Although there is less focus on academic skills, some of the examples cited above are worrying in terms of an emphasis on academic skills and may give the wrong message about what is good practice for children of this age and stage of development.



The concept of
school readiness
– ready children and
ready schools



School readiness

Einarsdottir (2013) warns against a focus on school readiness as this suggests school is *an unchangeable unit to which the children have to adjust and to which the ECCE setting must deliver children who are ready* (p.76). As well as considering supporting the child with the skills, knowledge and dispositions necessary to negotiate transitions, it is also important to consider the individual contexts in which transitions take place. As Walsh *et al.* argue,

Establishing continuity in classroom activities is as important as helping children directly address transition: mediating practices should be designed which bridge the gap between those found in the old classroom and those found in the new one (2010, p.21).

Undeniably, some degree of discontinuity is inevitable at times of transition. In fact, this disequilibrium results in cognitive conflict and so may be a basis for learning (O’Kane, 2015). Children themselves have reported that they expect changes as they make the move to primary school (Brooker, 2008; O’Kane and Hayes, 2010). Support must be provided to enable children to negotiate these changes. Children are more likely to succeed if connections and some level of continuity and alignment exist between preschools and primary schools. The concept of ‘readiness’ that dominated transitions research in the past has been replaced by a broader interactionist approach considering readiness as a bi-directional concept focusing both on the child and on the characteristics of the educational setting (Meisels, 2007; Ahtola *et al.*, 2011; Dockett and Perry, 2009; 2014b). In this way, school readiness is seen as *a complex set of interactions between individuals and their families, schools and communities* (Dockett and Perry, 2009, p.25).

The current perspective is that it is the interaction between these various influences that determines the extent to which each child will start school ready to grow and develop further. These views are supported by many researchers who argue that this concept should be viewed from a more ecological perspective (LoCasale-Crouch, Mashburn, Downer and Pianta, 2008; Sayers *et al.*, 2012; Dunlop, 2013). However, recent research conducted by a team from Mary Immaculate College Limerick and the Dublin Institute of Technology examining concepts of school readiness (Ring *et al.*, 2016) argues for greater awareness of this interactionist approach in the Irish context. Their findings note that even though it is widely accepted internationally that the concept of school-readiness is complex and multi-faceted, the predominant view to emerge in the Irish study located school-readiness within a maturationist–environmentalist continuum. This suggests that it is the child’s responsibility to demonstrate school-readiness. The authors noted that the importance of the adult–child relationship and the role of the child’s environment and those within it must be better recognised when considering the concept of school readiness in Ireland.

When designing interventions to support school readiness, it is also important to incorporate strategies that build and strengthen relationships between children and those adults responsible for their care and education, such as parents, carers and teachers (Centre for Community Child Health,

2008; Mashburn and Pianta, 2006). Such an approach would safeguard against a narrow focus on readiness, particularly a focus on the skills and dispositions of children only. Instead a broader view of readiness would ensure that supporting children in the development of these skill sets is recognised as but one aspect of the wider context.

School readiness and children experiencing disadvantage

Researchers have examined a range of social and demographic factors that can influence children's early adjustment to school. These factors include a child's age, early childhood education and care experiences, social and emotional competence, primary language spoken at home, parental employment and parenting practices (Barnett and Taylor, 2009; Dockett and Perry, 2009; Hausken and Rathbun, 2002; Izzo, Weissberg, Kaspro, and Fendrich, 1999; Margetts, 2007; Monkeviciene, Mishara and Dufour, 2006; Brooker, 2008). Gender is also important and boys tend to have more adjustment difficulties than girls (Hausken and Rathbun, 2002; Monkeviciene *et al.*, 2006).



International research has noted that children from low socio-economic status families are more likely to experience difficult transitions (Kemp, 2003; Janus and Duku, 2007; Lapointe, Ford and Zumbo, 2007, Centre for Equity and Innovation in Early Childhood, 2008; Coghlan, Bergeron, White Sharp, Morris and Rutt, 2009; Department for Children, Schools and Families, UK, 2009, Peters, 2010). In Australia, Jackson and Cartmel (2010) investigated children's experience of starting school in an area of socio-economic disadvantage. They find that children's friendships provide a valuable support during the transition to school. They highlight the need to provide support for children to build the higher-order social skills necessary to establish and maintain friendships, prior to and during the transition to school. They note that these skills and the friendships they result in, improve children's long-term educational outcomes. Evans *et al.* (2010) note that curriculum discontinuity

and a lack of collaboration and practice-sharing can make this transition even more challenging for this group of children. Not having adequate support systems in place is also an issue. Linked to this, they note that the most effective transition practices promote good communication and continuity between preschools and primary schools. Planning, communication and collaboration between practitioners and teachers are cited as key elements in successful transition initiatives. This supports the assertion that it is the complex interaction of the individual child and various contextual factors that influences school readiness and leads children towards healthy social, emotional, academic and school adjustment (Dockett and Perry, 2009). School transition policies and practices that are adapted to the particular context and to meet individual needs are more likely to be effective in promoting a smooth start to school (Hirst *et al.*, 2011).

As Evans *et al.* (2010) note children from areas of socio-economic disadvantage are the children most at risk of a difficult transition, so the role of ECCE is very apparent in terms of supporting the development of the skills, knowledge and dispositions needed for a successful transition to school. The positive effect of ECCE on a child's social, emotional and cognitive development is well-established (Melhuish, 2004; Arnold, Bartlett, Gowani and Merali, 2006) with the strongest impact being evident in settings offering a quality service, linked to staff qualifications, training and service regulation (Melhuish *et al.*, 2000; OECD, 2011). It follows that access for all children to ECCE settings has been proposed as an important contributory factor in school readiness (Whitebread and Bingham, 2011; Faulkner and Coates 2013). Magnuson, Ruhm, and Waldfogel (2007) in a study involving over 7,000 children reported that schools were significant in determining whether these positive differences continue, concluding that *whether ECCE setting attendees maintain their advantage, is in part a function of the subsequent classroom environment* (p.33).

Irish research on school readiness and children experiencing disadvantage

In the Irish context, difficulties faced by children experiencing social and economic disadvantage have been considered with regard to educational transitions (O'Kane and Hayes, 2010; UCD Geary Institute, 2012; and in various NEYAI projects (such as: Donegal County Childcare Committee (CCC) 2014a; Dublin South West Inner City NEYAI Consortium, 2014a, 2014b; Cork City Partnership, 2012; 2014).

Preparing for Life (PFL) is a community-led prevention and early intervention initiative operated by Northside Partnership (NSP), which aims to improve the life outcomes of children and families living in a disadvantaged area of North Dublin. The research results from this on school readiness have been very positive (Kiernan, Axford, Little, Murphy, Greene and Gormley, 2008, UCD Geary Institute, 2012). More recent data (UCD Geary Institute, 2016) on the relationship between the Preparing for Life home visiting programme and school readiness shows that children in the PFL programme were more likely to be ready for primary school as compared to children who did not

receive the home visiting programme. Overall, the evaluation notes that the number of children from the PFL community considered definitely ready for school by their teachers rose from 50% in 2009 to 66% in 2015. This was evaluated in terms of teacher reports regarding the skills needed to successfully participate in school life. Children in the PFL programme were judged by teachers to be more emotionally mature and socially competent, had better communication skills and had a better grasp of numeracy skills.

The evaluation reports of the various NEYAI projects note the complexity of factors associated with school readiness in areas of disadvantage. Donegal Childcare Committee (CCC) (2014a) note in its reflection on the NEYAI project that

a consistent tool for sharing information between ECCE setting and primary school is invaluable to help teachers prepare for the positive participation of each child in their new learning environment and provide a seamless continuation of learning for the child (p.49).

They report that the need for this tool comes from evidence-based-knowledge of the CCC and they also note the value of *Aistear* in the primary school sector and stress that further training for primary teachers in *Aistear* would enhance the transition process.

A report on the *Parent and Child Hub Model* which was developed in the context of the NEYAI project *Integration of Services and Continuum of Care Demonstration Model for Children 0-6 Years* undertaken in the Dublin South West Inner City area, notes the importance of collaboration and communication across all stakeholders in order to support children from birth to six years in areas of disadvantage (Dublin South West Inner City Consortium NEYAI, 2014a). The project team argues the case for integrated working which leads to better outcomes for children. The Final Evaluation of the NEYAI and *Síolta* Quality Assurance Programme (McKeown, 2014) notes that the amount of time a child spent in an early years centre had a positive influence on the child's progress during that year. The finding clearly suggests that preschool attendance has a positive influence on child outcomes. The report also advises that social class is the main determinant of children's social and emotional skills development, especially their language and cognitive skills; linked to this, social class is cited as the main socially-generated source of gaps in the skills of children at the start of the state-funded pre-school year. McKeown concludes that for the children who are most disadvantaged, class-related differentials have consequences throughout childhood and on into later life, as they impact on the child's capacity to learn, and influence his/her self-concept and well-being. He concludes:

Understanding the pervasive influence of social class on child outcomes is an essential step towards improving outcomes for children. It is also an essential step in developing services for children – including the coordination of early years services with other services for children and families – and needs to take full account of the impact which lack of resources (in the widest sense) has on child development (2014, p.129).

Finally, the *Early Start* programme has operated since 1994 in 40 primary schools in designated areas of urban disadvantage. The one-year preventative intervention programme targeting preschool children deemed to be at risk of not reaching their potential, is school-based and also aspires to support parents to become actively involved in their children's education. An evaluation of the *Early Start* programme (Early Years Education Policy Unit, 2014) identifies many strengths within the programme in terms of targeting children from disadvantaged backgrounds, promoting their social, cognitive and emotional development, and encouraging parents to engage in their children's education and with the education system more generally. It notes that *Early Start* has adopted a wide range of strategies to engage parents in their children's learning. These include providing information to parents through an open day before the start of the first term, sending materials home for parents to work on with their children, observation days once a month where a parent works with the child in the classroom, sharing resources with parents, and increased parent and teacher communication.

All of these studies and programmes outlined extend our understanding of the predictors of school readiness and give an insight into the multiple factors which influence children's early school progress in Ireland.



School readiness and children with special educational needs

When considering supports for children making the transition from preschool to primary school, children with special educational needs (SEN) have been identified as a group for whom additional consideration is necessary, both in international research (Janus, Lefort, Cameron and Kopechanski, 2007; Janus, Kopechanski, Cameron and Hughes, 2008; Janus and Siddiqua, 2015) and in the Irish context (Kennedy *et al.*, 2012; Ring *et al.*, 2016). This was a group that Evans *et al.* (2010) in their

review of research on transitions from the UK, note can be at risk at points of transition and might need additional support to negotiate the transition process.

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) in Ireland has recently published a guide for parents of children with special educational needs (SEN) to help them negotiate the transition to primary school (NCSE, 2016). This document notes that although most parents have anxieties about how their child will manage school, parents of children with SEN may have additional concerns. This document notes that most parents choose to send their child with SEN to the local primary school and reassures parents that research findings show that inclusion works for the majority of children. The guide gives parents advice on planning ahead for the school start, and includes information on extra teaching support and/or Special Needs Assistants. The NCSE also holds information meetings for parents of young children with SEN in the year before they start school. These meetings discuss the various educational supports that are available for children as they transfer from preschool to primary school.

Kennedy *et al.* (2012) suggest that the principles of good teaching are essentially the same for all children, including those with special educational needs. Nonetheless, they note that there are many children for whom teachers might need to make minor adaptations to their teaching approaches so as to fully support and engage them in the learning process. For some children with SEN a greater degree of adaptation may be required. For this reason, they argue that needs must be assessed individually, and minor support given to some, while others are supported more extensively, up to and including an individual educational plan (IEP). In June 2016, the Irish Government announced the provision of 860 additional Special Needs Assistants for allocation to schools over the period September to December 2016. This 7% increase in allocation is intended to meet current levels of demand for these services (Department of Education and Skills, 2016).

Findings from the Effective Preschool, Primary and Secondary Education (EPPSE) Study (Sammons, 2013) in England argue that rather than relying solely on strategies to support SEN in primary school, it is important to promote children's development at younger ages through access to high quality preschool education to improve school readiness. The study (Sammons, 2013) noted that the impact of high quality preschool can be an effective intervention for the reduction of risk of SEN and that these effects last up to the end of primary education.

In Budget 2016 an initiative, *Supporting Access to Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme for Children with a Disability* (IDG Report, 2015) was announced to enable children with special educational needs in Ireland to participate in the state-funded 'Free' Preschool Year in Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme in mainstream settings alongside their peers. The Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) is a 7-level framework of support ranging from universal supports to highly targeted ones based on the needs of the individual child. As many young children do not have a formal diagnosis when they start preschool, the framework doesn't rely on diagnosis, but focuses on children's developmental level, their abilities and their needs. It is a model of support that is built up around the needs and abilities of each child, and their parents. As part of AIM, a template called an

Access and Inclusion Profile has been developed to ensure as many children as possible can access mainstream preschool provision. The profile adopts a strengths-based approach and is completed by both the parent and practitioner. All the information including a copy of the profile is available at www.preschoolaccess.ie Better Start, the National Early Years Quality Development Service established in 2014 to bring an integrated approach to developing quality in early childhood care and education for children from birth to six years in Ireland, has been given responsibility for many aspects of the framework including the development of the *Access and Inclusion Profile* as well as supporting preschool staff through a team of 40 newly appointed inclusion specialists. The Profile will be an important point of reference for NCCA's work on developing a template for transferring information on children's learning and development as they make the transition to primary school.

School readiness and children from different cultural backgrounds


Evans *et al.* (2010) note that children from minority ethnic backgrounds and those with English as an additional language can be vulnerable during the transition to primary school. They argue that these groups might require additional support to negotiate the transition with confidence. Research within the primary school system in the UK, Brooker (2003), suggests that it is the responsibility of schools, as the professional providers for all children, to make their practices very explicit, in communicating with parents and in interacting with children, especially so when communicating with families from different cultural backgrounds. Brooker argues that greater access for these families to the pedagogy of schools may combat some of the educational disadvantage experienced by children from outside the cultural mainstream. This is especially significant in cases where the parents' instructional efforts during the preschool years cannot provide children with the cultural capital that transposes easily into the official education system. She continues to make the case (Brooker, 2015) that within the formal education system, cultural capital is the most potent form of symbolic capital in producing good educational outcomes. She argues that families from different cultural backgrounds are best supported when they can contribute to the assessment of their children's development in an equal partnership with educators. The preschool curriculum should also incorporate the funds of knowledge specific to these families, for example, the values, knowledge and skills valued within that culture. This, she argues, would better support children from these families and communities.

With regard to children from different cultural backgrounds in Ireland, Ring *et al.* (2016) note that while all preschool practitioners and primary school teachers in their study demonstrated an awareness of the importance of accommodating both linguistic and cultural diversity, a lack of real support and strategies for these children was evident. Articulation of a belief that children from different cultural backgrounds were *just like Irish children* suggested a limited awareness of cultural diversity. This research argues that although the participants were well-intentioned, there was

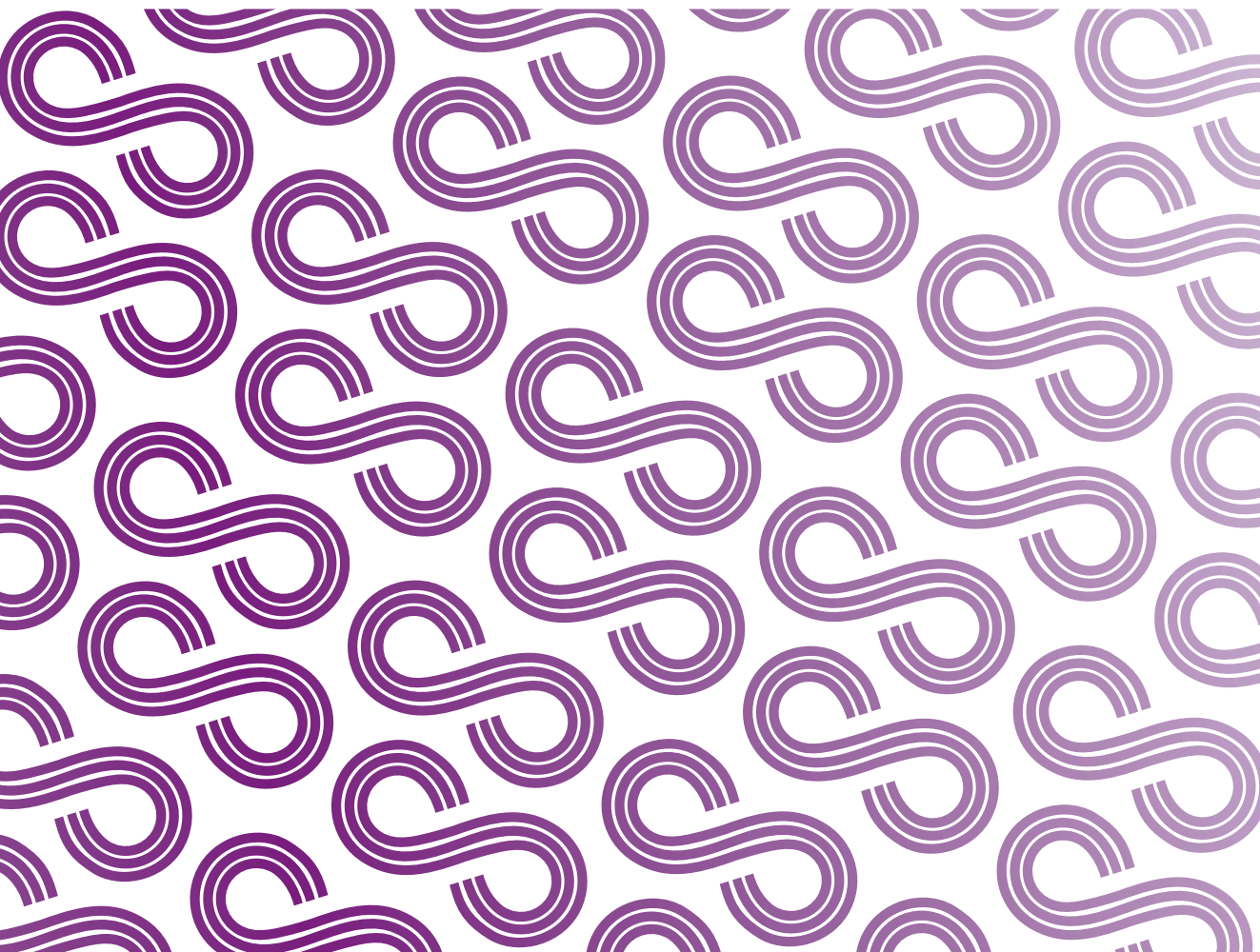
potential for the additional requirements of these children to go unrecognised. The authors note that a lack of specific, targeted strategies could impact negatively by causing diversity to become invisible. Instead, they recommend that diversity should be explored and celebrated in both preschools and primary schools enhancing children's sense of identity and belonging as described in *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009).

The NCCA (2006) has produced guidelines for teachers in primary schools to support children for whom English is an additional language. These provide an overview of language learning, describing how children acquire their first language and additional languages. The guidelines describe school and classroom planning for the needs of the child for whom English is an additional language, and include a range of teaching approaches for developing children's language learning.

Integrate Ireland Language and Training (IILT) was established to meet the language needs of children and adults from diverse cultural and educational backgrounds, who need language skills and information to live and work in their adopted country. Prior to its closure in 2008, the organisation published a range of documents to help Language Support Teachers in both primary and post-primary schools. These documents are currently hosted online by the NCCA (www.ncca.ie, n.d.). This suite of materials includes both tools for assessment of language, and tools to support language development. Kennedy *et al.* (2014) argue the importance of taking the home literacy environment into account when reviewing literacy assessments of EAL children. If possible, they suggest EAL children should be assessed at the same time in both languages, the home language and the language of instruction. They note that there is strong evidence in the literature of a history of disproportionate representation of children with EAL in special education, and suggest this may be due to the use of language-based tests in making diagnoses, resulting in the view that large numbers of EAL children have learning disabilities, when in fact they may not.



The role of play,
pedagogy and curriculum
in the transition to
primary school



International research on play, pedagogy and curriculum

Internationally, preschools and primary schools have developed very much as separate entities and vary in several ways in terms of their objectives and approaches to education resulting in differences in pedagogy and curricula (Perry *et al.*, 2012; Dunlop, 2013; Einarsdottir, 2013; Fabian, 2013; Ministry of Education New Zealand, 2013). A much greater level of continuity between the two educational experiences in terms of pedagogy and curriculum would support children as they make the transition. Woodhead and Oates (2007) point out that internationally preschool curricula tend to be organised around domains of learning, while primary schools often focus on subject or curriculum areas. Dunlop (2013) notes that differences in the curricula in preschools and primary schools are cited as one of the most dominant differences catalogued at the time of transition. Shaeffer (2006) agrees, suggesting that children experience sharp differences in the curriculum when they begin primary school and asks the question:



To ease the transition do we formalise the informal...or de-formalise what is usually considered formal? Unfortunately, the former seems to be the trend (2006, p.7).

Internationally, the research argues for greater alignment of curriculum and practice between preschools and the early years of primary school. It is argued that the more formal approach at primary level should shift towards a play-based approach with a view to smoothing transitions for children (Grieshaber, 2009; Petriwskyi, 2010; 2013). Yet, despite these calls there continues to be a discontinuity at the time of transition from preschool to primary school in terms of pedagogical practice (Rimm-Kaufman *et al.*, 2000; Wright, Deiner and Kay, 2000; Griebel and Niesel, 2011; Margetts, 2002). Whitebread and Coltman (2015) argue that in primary schools in England there has been a reduction in imaginative play opportunities for children in reception classes and in the early years of primary school, which they attribute to the increased pressure on schools to meet

performance targets. In *Transition from Preschool to Primary School: Audit of Policy in 14 Jurisdictions* (O’Kane and Murphy, 2016a) specifically note a change in expectations when the child transfers from the preschool to the primary school, where the focus switches to academic achievement. Yet, research has consistently argued the case for play-based learning for younger children in order to better support their learning and development (Diamond, Barnett, Thomas and Munro, 2007; Zigler, Singer and Bishop-Josef, 2004; Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk, and Singer, 2009; Lundgren, 2009).

The practice of ‘schoolification’, when the formal learning from the primary school filters down to the preschool setting has been documented as taking place internationally (Graue, 2010; Hatcher, Nuner and Paulsel, 2012; Alcock and Haggerty, 2013; Jensen, Hansen and Brostrom, 2013; Gunnarsdottir, 2014). Yet international research demonstrates that an early emphasis on the academic does not result in better academic achievement as the child gets older (House, 2011, Suggate, 2009; Suggate, Schaughency, and Reese, 2008, 2008a, 2012).

From the UK perspective, the *Cambridge Primary Review* (Alexander, 2009) provides a comprehensive review of primary education and advocates that play-based learning should be the focus of education from nursery class through to age six years. The final report notes

anxiety focuses on the fact that at age five – against the grain of evidence, expert opinion and international practice, children in England leave behind their active play-based learning and embark on a formal, subject-based curriculum (p.16).

This is further supported by Wood (2014) who argues that practitioners in the early years of the primary school system experience a tension between the competing demands of play-based approaches and curriculum demands. Early childhood education experts in England wrote an open letter to the UK Government in the Telegraph newspaper in 2013 (Ellyatt) highlighting their concern about the impact of early years policies on the health and well-being of young children. The letter called for an extension of play-based ECCE setting provision and for the start of formal schooling in England to be delayed until the age of seven.

Researchers in the United States also note a more academic focus in the first year of school (Graue, 2010; Hatcher, Nuner and Paulsel, 2012). This has been linked to accountability pressures with a heightened focus on the academic at the expense of play (Hatcher et al, 2012; Bassok, Latham and Rorem, 2016). Graue (2010) develops this topic in terms of the kindergarten class in the United States, noting that

children spend 4–6 times as much time on reading and math activities as they do in play... public perception is that kindergarten is what 1st grade used to be (p.29).

Graue argues that expectations of children at this level have evolved without a clear sense of purpose or a real consideration of the needs and rights of children, and provides a very coherent

argument for a reversal of this trend in cases where play has been abandoned in favour of more formal academic practices. One reason cited for this occurrence is the higher expectations of parents (Bassok and Reardon, 2013; Bassok, Lee, Reardon, and Waldfogel, 2015). Certainly these research studies provide evidence of the push-down of formal academic learning.

Some countries have tried to address this issue. In Denmark, for example, the two Ministries responsible for preschools and primary schools have tried to link their curricula with a view to supporting children during the transition between the two educational settings. They have highlighted language acquisition as being the main focus in terms of key skills to support children at this time of transition. However, this approach has not been without difficulties. Jensen *et al.* (2013) report that in Denmark implementation of national testing at primary level has resulted in a push-down of academic learning into the preschool setting *with some practitioners reporting a change in practice having prioritised academic learning at the expense of care elements* (p.60). The researchers note that this was not the intention of the Ministry responsible and they suggest a more socio-cultural approach to language acquisition for children where competencies which are more interwoven with social skills would result in greater pedagogical sensitivity.

International research consistently advocates interactive, play-based learning as being most appropriate for children in their early years in both preschools and primary schools (Bertram and Pascale, 2002; Diamond, Barnett, Thomas and Munro, 2007; Zigler, Singer and Bishop-Josef, 2004; 2009; Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk, and Singer, 2009; Lundgren, 2009; Perry, Dockett and Harley, 2012; Rose and Rogers, 2012; Baker, 2014; Pyle and Bigelow, 2015). As is evidenced in the research a shift towards a more play-based approach in primary schools would help in the transitions process.

Irish research on play, pedagogy and curriculum

In the Irish context, there are significant differences in pedagogy and curriculum between preschools and the infant classes in primary schools. The preschool system tends to adopt a largely play-based focus while the primary school adopts a more formal approach to learning (O’Kane, 2007; Walsh, Sproule, McGuinness, Trew and Ingram, 2010; O’Kane and Hayes, 2013b). Walsh *et al.* (2010) argue the need for a more integrated early years pedagogy, crossing the preschool setting and primary sector, which would honour the interests and autonomy of the children in these settings. This, they argue, would constitute *a major transformation of early years practice across the first years of compulsory schooling* (p.23).

In primary schools children are expected to adapt to the more academic focus in teacher expectations very quickly (O’Kane, 2007; O’Kane and Hayes, 2010). A greater emphasis on direct instruction happens and there are more formal routines with which the children must quickly become familiar. Children are quickly expected to behave in a way appropriate to school life, for example, being able to sit for periods listening to instructions and acting on them. Children report

that the rules they must adhere to are many, compared to the relative flexibility and freedom of preschool (O’Kane, 2007). A dichotomy is also found between children’s experience of play-based teacher-led activities at school, and what the children consider to be play-times when they can actively control their environment. The research shows that children are clearly aware of the different expectations in the different settings.

NicCraith and Fay (2008) and Darmody, Smyth and Doherty (2010) report that a lot of activities are still teacher-led in junior and senior infant classes. They also note that the academic expectations of parents can become stronger on transition to school, and that parents often do not fully understand the importance of play in infant classes. Murphy (2004) notes that the reasons for this also lie in teachers’ attitudes towards play, as he advises

many teachers appear to see play as a discrete classroom activity rather than an all-pervasive methodology. In other words, teachers’ instructional practices appear to be influenced by their deeply ingrained personal beliefs and understandings rather than by the principles of the curriculum (p.83).



Dunphy (2007) and Darmody, Smyth and Doherty (2010) have questioned whether the pedagogy of the infant classroom in primary schools at present is appropriate to the most effective learning opportunities for children. The importance of developing a play pedagogy which provides opportunities for complex play is clear, but difficulties such as adult-child ratios, lack of appropriate in-service training, outdated design and facilities and lack of time for reflection impact upon the development of a play-based practice. Other researchers note a gap between teachers’ beliefs about the importance of developmentally appropriate practice and actual practice in the classroom in the Irish context (Walsh *et al.*, 2010). It is clear that tensions between play-based and more formal approaches in Ireland have the potential to impact negatively on children’s transition experiences (McGettigan and Gray, 2012; Hunter and Walsh, 2014).

Kennedy *et al.* (2012) also note that the transition from preschool to primary school is a challenge in terms of developing literacy and numeracy, and advise that this is related to markedly different approaches to learning in the two sectors. They suggest that *attention to issues of continuity in pedagogy... is crucial. Optimal engagement by children can be promoted if continuity issues are addressed by educators* (p.319). They argue that play is the most powerful medium for learning in the early years across all curriculum areas, and that play is a very useful methodology through which children can interact with print, and through which they can develop an awareness of its functions and conventions. They suggest that in all early years settings for children aged three to eight years, the environment and resources should support the play of children which will mean that *play is the curriculum* (Moyles, 2010, p.28, cited in Kennedy *et al.*).

O’Kane (2007) suggests that preschool practitioners and teachers of junior infant classes have a limited understanding of each other’s working ideologies and environments. It is clear that on-going professional development and reflection, with support and resourcing, would better enable practitioners and teachers to provide the best possible learning environments and experiences for children (O’Kane, 2015). Continuing Professional Development (CPD) programmes which are cross-sectoral would be particularly useful in terms of developing knowledge of the curriculum and pedagogy in both sectors. This should result in greater curriculum alignment between the two sectors, which in turn should impact on children’s transition from preschool to primary school. Indeed, educational settings working towards greater alignment and continuity across the sectors is central to the goals of both *Síolta: the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* (CECDE, 2006) and *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009).

Síolta, Aistear and the Primary School Curriculum

Since *Síolta* and *Aistear* cover the age span from birth to six years, both frameworks support quality experiences and learning throughout early childhood including infant classes in primary schools. In terms of policy on the transition from preschool to primary school in Ireland, the frameworks have important implications. As yet a clear support plan to help practitioners and teachers to use them to extend children’s experiences has not been put in place. ECCE settings have been engaging with these frameworks since development on a voluntary basis without the support of a national training plan. *The Report of the Interdepartmental Group: Future investment in childcare* (Interdepartmental Working Group, 2015) which is grounded in *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures* (DCYA, 2014) makes some positive policy recommendations around supporting the use of *Aistear* and *Síolta* which have yet to be implemented.

In the case of four- to six-year-old children enrolled in primary schools, teachers use the *Primary School Curriculum* (Department of Education and Science, 1999). The curriculum focuses on what to teach using curriculum areas and subjects while teachers have flexibility in deciding how they teach. Many primary school teachers are using *Aistear* to support teaching and learning in junior and senior

infant classes. Through the *Aistear Tutor Initiative*⁵, the Association of Teachers'/Education Centres in Ireland (ATECI) and the NCCA have been working to support infant teachers in this regard, and this has resulted in an increase in child-led, play-based learning in many infant classrooms for up to an hour per day (Hough and Forster, 2013). Feedback from participating teachers suggests that practical changes to the learning environment and to interactions in primary school classrooms are taking place. The authors also noted philosophical changes to teachers' beliefs with regard to their own role and interactions with children. In the absence of a formal policy on transition, the roll-out of *Aistear* in primary schools should contribute to developing curricular links between the two educational contexts. Engagement with *Aistear* across both sectors is important.



NicCraith and Fay (2013) and NicCraith (2015) have also considered the role of *Aistear* in teachers' practices and have gathered the views of some Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) members who have participated in workshops or summer courses through the *Aistear Tutor Initiative*. They found an increase in play-based learning in many infant classrooms with particular enthusiasm shown on the part of teachers when given support from school principals. One issue highlighted was the need to convince parents of the value of play-based learning. Participants also noted that implementing a play-based approach to curriculum and assessment is challenging in large classes. Other findings include the need to provide high quality professional development in order to support curriculum change. Fallon and O'Sullivan (2013; 2015) conducted a qualitative study on infant teachers' beliefs about play pedagogy in infant classrooms in Ireland. They noted that teachers expressed a clear value in play-based learning. However, they reported too that introducing play as a teaching methodology is professionally risky. Fallon and O'Sullivan report that

⁵ The *Aistear Tutor Initiative* is a partnership between the NCCA and ATECI. Since April 2010, Education Centres and their local *Aistear* Tutors have, through workshops and summer courses, supported over 10,000 teachers and principals in developing practice in infant classrooms using *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*.

play represents a risk to teachers' professional reputations because it renders teaching invisible, is inconsistent with the systems of accountability inherent in primary schools, and is not supported by stakeholders, particularly parents (2015, n.p.).

Similar to earlier findings, Fallon and O'Sullivan note a pressure from parents for a more academic focus at the primary school level. In terms of supporting primary school teachers in using a play-based methodology, they recommend a reduction in class sizes, a more flexible curriculum, and on-going training and professional development. They argue that in order to fully engage in play pedagogy in the infant classes, the attitudes and values of all stakeholders need to change. Such change would support teachers to feel sufficiently confident to engage in innovative practice (Fallon and O'Sullivan, 2015).

Since *Aistear* is designed for all children from birth to six years, its role in fostering greater continuity between preschools and primary schools is clear. A greater level of engagement with the *Aistear* framework in the primary sector will help to smooth the transition for children between the two educational settings. Because of this it can be argued that all infant teachers should have CPD in using *Aistear* to support teaching and learning. Teachers in a study conducted by Gray and Ryan (2016) investigating *Aistear* (2009) vis-a-vis the *Primary School Curriculum* (1999) reported concerns about their ability to teach curriculum subjects through the medium of play and also noted a lack of training necessary to implement a play-based approach to learning. A number of barriers to the successful implementation of *Aistear* in infant classes were identified in the study including *lack of training, parental expectations, large class sizes, focus on the primary curriculum* (2016, p.198). Findings from the study highlight that despite the prevailing political endorsement of a play-based approach, play is afforded peripheral status in infant classes in primary classrooms in Ireland with teachers still viewing formal didactic teaching as *the 'real' work of the day* (2016, p.201).

It is clear that the implementation of aspects of *Aistear* particularly using the methodology of play in the infant classroom, can support Irish primary schools in becoming more 'ready schools', meeting the needs of the individual children as they make the transition to primary education (O'Kane, 2015). However, the perceived barriers to the successful implementation of *Aistear* in infant classes highlighted by researchers such as Fallon and O'Sullivan (2015) and Gray and Ryan (2016) need to be addressed in order for this to happen. In this way, children making this transition would have the opportunity to further advance the capabilities developed in preschools through play-based activities which would extend current dispositions, knowledge and skills. Replacing the *Primary School Curriculum* with *Aistear* in the junior and senior infant classes could prove an effective option. As O'Connor and Angus (cited in Gray and Ryan, 2016, p.15) recommend:

formally adopt Aistear, train teachers in it fully and use it to replace the 1999 curriculum rather than have the two attempt to co-exist when there are such evident compatibility issues.

Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life: The National Strategy to improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020 (DES, 2011) sets out a programme of work for the redevelopment of the primary school curriculum. As part of this redevelopment, the principles and methodologies of *Aistear* will be embedded in the curriculum for the infant classes. This work begins with the development of a new language curriculum for English and Irish for the first four years of primary school. This new language curriculum, published online at www.curriculumonline.ie in late 2015, puts a strong focus on supporting oral language. Implementation will begin in the 2016/2017 school year. This curriculum aligns with the principles and methodologies of *Aistear* and places play at the centre of teaching and learning in infant classrooms. The new language curriculum will be followed by a new curriculum for Education about Religions and Beliefs, and Ethics, and a redeveloped curriculum for mathematics. The structure of the curriculum and the use of time across it, are also being looking at by the NCCA and in time, the whole curriculum for infant classes will be redeveloped. It is envisaged that a new primary curriculum framework will be developed. This wider work will bring an opportunity to revisit the purpose and structure of a curriculum for this age group, and consider for example, whether a subject-based curriculum is still appropriate for 4-, 5- and 6-year-olds. *Aistear's* thematic approach which uses the themes of *Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating and Exploring and Thinking* to describe learning and development, could help smooth the transition to primary school. As noted above, a more fundamental question perhaps is, could *Aistear* be the curriculum framework for the first year or two years in primary school? In New Zealand, the Advisory Group on Early Learning (2015) recommended the establishment of reception/transition classes for 5-year-olds using *Te Whāriki* which is similar to *Aistear*, rather than the New Zealand Curriculum to plan, assess and evaluate in the first year of school with an implementation timeframe beginning in 2016 (Recommendation 14). Could/should Ireland do the same with *Aistear*?



Roles, responsibilities
and relationships in the
transitions process



Transitions as a shared responsibility

The Educational Transitions and Change (ETC) Research Group (2011), an experienced international group of transitions researchers, has developed a transition-to-school position statement targeted at all concerned with the education, care and well-being of young children. The position statement is based on national and international understandings of the importance of the transition to primary school and aims to promote the development of policies and practices to support children and their families making the transition to school. In the report, the group acknowledge that practitioners and teachers in the two educational settings need opportunities to share their expertise, and note that this transition provides an opportunity for staff to communicate and make connections, to work together and to draw support from each other. They suggest that staff from both sectors are entitled to professional regard and respect for their work, and are also entitled to levels of professional support and resourcing to enable them to work to provide the best possible learning environments for children. They make clear the need for on-going professional development and critical reflection. One of the recommendations of the report is *acknowledgement of the central role of relationships* in positive transitions and opportunities for those involved to build and maintain these relationships (2011, p.4).

Research outlined in the literature review of O’Kane (2007) argues that poor communication between preschools and primary schools is a barrier to successful transition for children both nationally and internationally. It is suggested that on-going communication between these groups, and parents, can help ensure that schools build on what children have learnt in preschool and from their life experiences. Following on from that research, O’Kane and Hayes (2010) further investigated some of these issues in a disadvantaged area in Dublin in relation to transitions. One aspect of that project was a nationwide questionnaire that was sent to 304 junior infant teachers in disadvantaged areas with Urban Band 1 DEIS⁶ schools, and resulted in a response rate of 68%. There was an overwhelming level of agreement (90%) that there should be greater communication between the preschools and primary schools. The issues of better understanding of each other’s sector and of greater consistency between the curricula in the two settings, were also highlighted. The final project report noted that in order to maximise the positive impact of quality preschool setting experiences, supports for the transition to primary school should be put in place nationally, as benefits gained during early intervention may not automatically transfer to the new school context. Practitioners across both sectors who took part in the study commented very positively on the value of collaboration and communication.

More recent research in the Irish context, for example, the various National Early Years Access Initiative (NEYAI) evaluation reports including Donegal Childcare Committee (2014) and The Dublin

⁶ Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) is the action plan for educational inclusion, launched in May 2005 and is the policy instrument of the Department of Education and Skills to address educational disadvantage. It prioritises the educational needs of children and young people (3-18 years) from disadvantaged communities.

South West Inner City Consortium (2014, 2014a) note the importance of integrated working partnerships, involving collaboration and communication across all stakeholders in order to support children from areas of disadvantage making the transition to primary school. Dublin South West Inner City Consortium (2014a) notes that an integrated working partnership is rarely straightforward, and stresses the need for all partners to fully 'buy in' to the process. It is argued that an appreciation of the benefits of collaboration and co-operation amongst the various partners to the process is necessary in order to succeed. Research from Ring *et al.* (2016) reports general agreement on the need for communication between preschools and primary schools. Yet, this is still not happening in any systematic or comprehensive manner.

Internationally, the need to build effective collaborations and relationships between teachers and preschool practitioners at local level has also been noted. The Ministry of Education in New Zealand (2013) argues the case for collaborative practices and the sharing of information in order to better explore the teaching and learning practices of the two sectors. They argue that sharing knowledge and examples of assessment practices, examining ideas about school readiness, sharing educational resources and ideas, and exploring the synergies between learning dispositions and key competencies strengthen collaborative relationships. Internationally, many programmes developed to improve communication and coordination between preschools and primary schools have provided evidence to suggest that sustained partnerships can contribute to improved long-term outcomes for all stakeholders (Brooker *et al.*, 2010; Sayers *et al.*, 2012; Trodd, 2013). Trodd argues that a commitment to inter-professionalism is required by all parties, requiring *the highest level of inter-professional working* (2013, xxvi) once again highlighting the need for joint responsibility in establishing and maintaining links. Clearly joint educational experiences for professionals from the two educational settings would enable greater alignment in pedagogical strategies. This in turn would better support children during this important transition.

Studies in Australia involving cross-sectoral co-operation find that it results in the development of stronger relationships between the two educational settings (Dockett and Perry, 2004; Hopps and Dockett, 2011; Hopps, 2013, 2014a). Sayers *et al.* (2012) also report that linking the two sectors in sustained partnerships has not only smoothed educational transitions for children crossing settings, but has also contributed to improved long-term outcomes for children. As Dunlop states

for practitioners, the expanded thinking that comes through co-operation enhances their efforts to support children to move on as learners, to be focused on the cognitive, social and emotional interaction that contribute to the child's growing identity as a school child and bridges children into new opportunities (2013, p.144).

In Finland, the Ahtola *et al.* (2012) study of transition practices, reports that staff in their settings advised that different organisational cultures, as well as passing on information between settings were problematic. They report that this was due to the fact that the implementation of transition practices was too dependent on local factors, leading to different levels of engagement in different settings or localities. Much international research in this area argues for a greater level

of continuity between preschools and primary schools, with a need to develop supportive relationships between the two noted as being critical. (Grieshaber, 2009; Bablett *et al.*, 2011; Petriwskyi, 2013). They suggest policy changes are needed as a way to further develop this continuity and relationship building.

Professional identity and its impact on transitions

Moloney (2010) states that within the ECCE sector in Ireland *professional identity is contentious and problematic* (p.1). Her study reveals that practitioners felt that parents did not respect the ECCE profession to the same extent as the primary sector who have a *professional identity that is instantly recognisable and linked to the practices, ethics, codes and core values by which they are defined* (Moloney, 2010 p.6). It has been argued that quality very much depends on staff training, and many researchers have highlighted the need for highly trained ECCE graduates to have access to a career that is both respected and financially viable (Boyd, 2013; Moloney and Pope, 2013; Moloney, 2015). There are significant differences in the terms and conditions experienced by preschool practitioners and primary school teachers in Ireland. Moloney notes that educators within the preschool sector worldwide struggle for professional recognition and status. She also highlights the fact that although the movement towards professionalism has resulted in the upgrading of professional qualifications this has not resulted in a corresponding increase in professional status, recognition or compensation (Moloney and Pope, 2013; Boyd, 2013; Moloney, 2015). Boyd (2013) argues that ECCE practitioners are among the most poorly remunerated of all professional groups.



In terms of pay differentials, it is interesting to note that in New Zealand, the *Kindergarten Teachers, Head Teachers and Senior Teachers Collective Agreement* has meant that pay parity has been introduced for kindergarten (ECCE setting) teachers benchmarked to the salaries of primary school

teachers holding equivalent qualifications (Ministry of Education, 2013a). New Zealand also has a funding system for ECCE services that provides incentives for services to employ more qualified practitioners, which has resulted in a significantly increased number of qualified teachers in the ECE workforce (OECD, 2012). This suggests that pay scales should reflect practitioner qualifications whatever section of the education system they are at.

Issues such as pay parity are also important in terms of developing relationships on an equal basis. As Bennett advises (Bernard Van Leer Foundation, 2006) *the relationship between primary education and the early childhood sector is neither strong nor equal* (p.16). It is interesting to note that nearly ten years later, Moloney is making the same case in the Irish context (2015). Woodhead and Oates (2007) suggest that internationally the relationship between ECCE practitioners and primary school teachers needs to be redefined to make it more equal so that meaningful relationships and partnerships can be developed. Neither culture should take over the other, they argue. Instead, both sectors need to agree to come together to create and put into practice a common culture. They suggest that such joint collaboration would result in greater continuity and foster successful transitions, and conclude that both sectors need to take responsibility for developing these relationships.

This difference in professional identity has a clear impact on relationships between the two sectors at the point of transition to primary school. Ashton *et al.* (2008) find little evidence of communication and coordination between preschools and primary sector in Australia, and cite links to differences in roles in this regard. Although their sample size was small, they report that within the primary sector there was a worrying

lack of interest in what occurs in services [ECCE settings] and their contribution to children's funds of knowledge; and mistrust of reports from the educators about children who had attended their services (2008, p.12).

They state that some teachers in the study saw a clear value in the transfer of information from the preschool sector and overall cross-sectoral communication generally. Others reported a reluctance to engage with preschool staff or parents, and they did not seem to value collaboration (Ashton *et al.*, 2008). They find this as a consistent theme running through their teacher interviews, and note that it is a theme that had been identified in earlier research (Sawyer, 2000). More recent research into the question of whether preschool and primary school communication is always a positive experience, has noted that it can sometimes have negative outcomes for educators' relationships (Hopps, 2014a; 2014b). Again in the Australian context, Hopps investigated this issue and notes some concerns with regard to the transfer of information between the two educational contexts: a concern that preschool practitioners were not asked about the children in their care and a concern about how the primary school used the portfolios or learning records that were sent on children's learning. So, although the importance of positive relationships between preschool and school is recognised in order to support children and families during this transition, positive relationships

might not automatically result from such communication. As Hopps advises, *some intersetting communications resulted in educators feeling disappointed, frustrated and experiencing a 'breakdown of trust' between settings.* (2014a, p.414). However, while it is important to consider these findings, in general, communication between preschools and primary schools is a positive experience for those involved.

Parents and the transitions process

Parents play a very important role in the transition process, and should be seen as key collaborators in organising and supporting the transition of their children to primary school (Griebel and Niesel, 2006, 2011; Margetts, 2007; Reichman, 2012; Dockett and Perry, 2014, 2014a). However, international research has noted stronger levels of parent-teacher communication both in terms of written and individual verbal communication within the ECCE sector, as compared to primary school (Peters, 2000; Dockett and Perry 2004, Murray, McFarland-Piazza and Harrison, 2015). This is confirmed in the Irish context by Ring *et al.* (2016). Jindal-Snape and Hannah (2013) call for greater policy development with regard to parental involvement in the transitions process.



In terms of family involvement, Brooker (2005a; 2008b) reminds us of cultural differences and the impact these have on children's transitions between settings. In this regard she cites the importance of respectful two-sided dialogue as being all-important. Brooker (2005; 2009) and also Dunlop (2007a; 2007b) considering the role of parents at points of transition, outline how parental understanding of an educational setting can impact on the 'transitions capital' of the individual child – the impact of cultural capital on a child while making educational transitions. Hughes (2015), applying a gardening metaphor to the transition to school, suggests that just as good gardeners allow seedlings to harden off before moving them from the greenhouse, parents should provide

children with gradually increasing autonomy, responsibility for decision-making, and opportunities to express emotional regulation prior to the transition to school.

Kennedy *et al.* (2012) argue that parent education programmes can play a key role in promoting continuity, enabling positive transitions and developing greater communication and more positive relationships with parents. An example in Australia, of an evidence-based initiative which aims to support schools and parents and carers during the transition period is the *KidsMatter Transition to School: Parent Initiative* (Hirst, Jervis, Visagie, Sojo and Cavanagh, 2011). It aims to equip parents with the knowledge, skills and resources they need to facilitate a positive start to school for children and their families. The authors note that starting school represents an important opportunity for working with families to support a positive start to school and to promote children's mental health and wellbeing. This is particularly important given the stability of both academic and social trajectories beyond the early years of school, and the potential for early life transitions to affect future transitions. The project engages with parents and families, providing information and support in order to enhance parental confidence and, in turn, enhance children's confidence. Working with parents has the potential to lead to better outcomes for children during this transition period and beyond. Thus, schools have an important role in supporting children and families which includes not only supporting them to understand the changes, expectations and practicalities (for example, uniforms, starting and finishing times, curriculum and rule changes), but also assisting children and families to adjust to the social and emotional demands of starting school.

Helping parents and carers to become more aware of potential challenges and common behavioural responses as children adjust to change, and providing information and practical strategies for supporting children can help to promote positive parenting practices and support children's wellbeing during this important period. Working in partnership and developing positive relationships between, and among, a range of stakeholders including children, parents, preschool settings, school staff and the wider community provides a strong foundation for transition, as well as fostering a sense of belonging and connectedness to the school community (Hirst *et al.*, 2011). This sense of wellbeing and belonging as highlighted in *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009) is not only important during transition but is also a protective factor for children's mental health throughout school and beyond. Overall, it could be argued that more effective strategies to promote family involvement and communication between families and educational settings are needed. As Fabian states:

The move to school affords opportunities for children to see themselves as expert learners, and successful people. However, supporting continuity of experiences for children requires policies and procedures that promote liaison between settings, the transfer of relevant information and the close involvement of parents and, where appropriate, other relevant professionals (2013, p.49).



In the Irish context, research by Ring *et al.* (2016) considers the concerns of parents with regard to school readiness. The parents in that study reported finding primary school open days particularly valuable because they provided a context for talking about the school to their child. In terms of parental concerns, large class sizes in primary schools, teacher disposition and school culture [parents were concerned that school may be 'too strict' or 'regimented'], bullying, and the level of teacher care and supervision in school were cited as concerning for parents. The role of the junior infant teacher was cited as being very important in terms of fostering the child's sense of wonder, curiosity and individuality. Parents also expressed concern that the infant classrooms in primary school tended to be formal and inflexible. In this research, both preschool practitioners and primary teacher respondents considered parents to be the key decision-makers in relation to when their child should start school, and expressed reluctance to advise parents in this regard. This is interesting considering the findings of the O'Kane and Hayes study (2010) where preschool practitioners reported finding a template for transfer of information to the school context as being very useful as a tool with which to discuss with parents the skills and dispositions most important for children making this important transition.

Conclusion



The purpose of this report is to set out the findings of a review of relevant research on the transition from preschool to primary school in order to guide the NCCA's work on transition. There is a general consensus that a successful transition for children is not only dependent on characteristics and dispositions of the children themselves, but also very importantly on the nature of the relationships between the various people and settings involved. The importance of taking an interactionist approach to this transition is noted. Not only should we consider supporting the child with the skills, knowledge and dispositions necessary to negotiate transitions, but importantly we should consider too the individual contexts in which transitions take place.

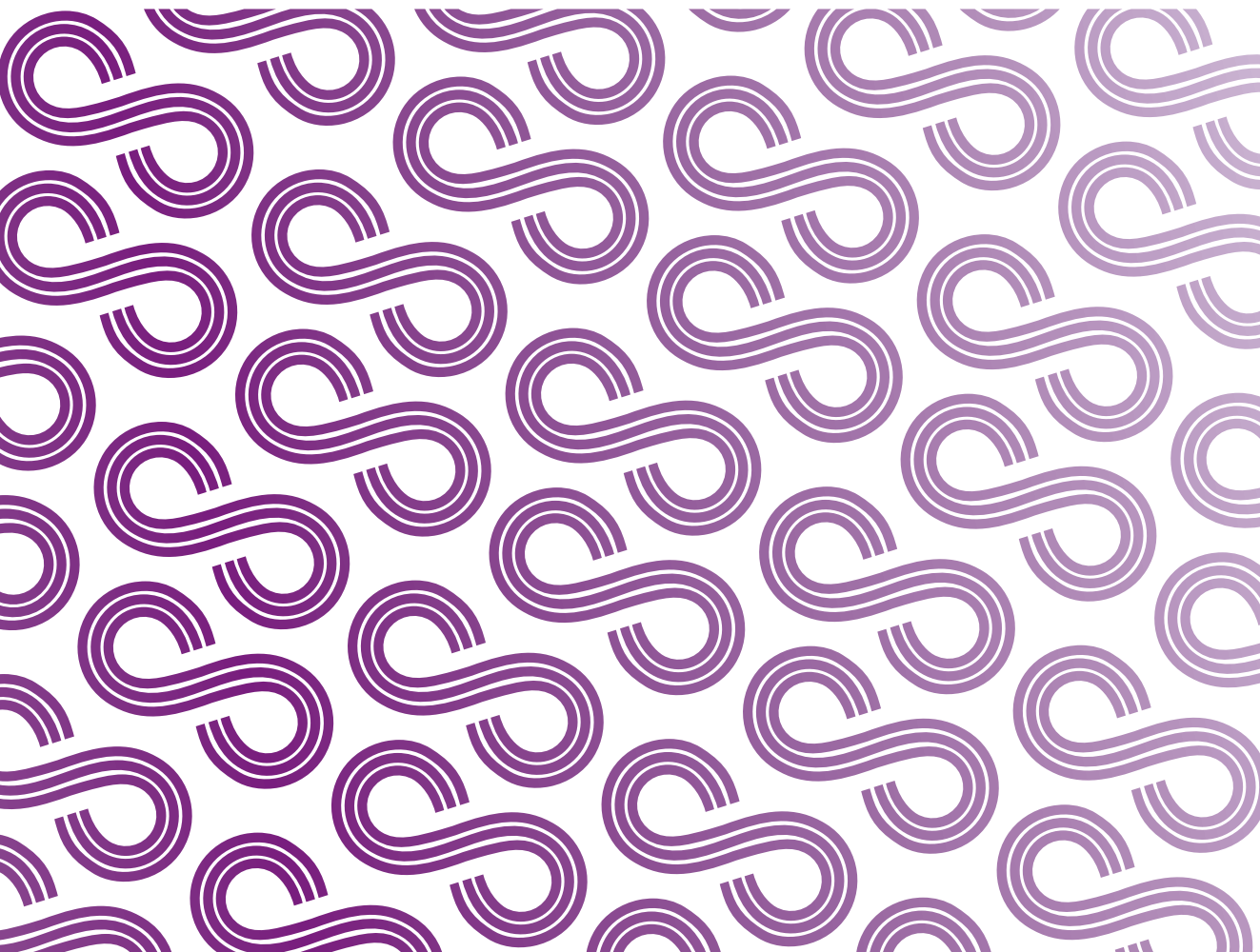
Templates which transfer information between settings not only support connections for children, but can also facilitate supportive relationships between preschools and primary schools to develop which are critical in terms of continuity. However, developed policies on transition from preschool to primary school, stress that transfer of information using templates or portfolios is only one element of the transition process. Additional important factors mentioned are the development of relationships between preschools and primary schools, partnership with parents and families and increased alignment of curriculum and pedagogy. In terms of implications for policy and practice, it is clear that greater continuity of experiences in terms of curriculum and pedagogy between the sectors would better support children making this educational transition. National transition policy is also important in ensuring all schools and preschools work together to ensure as smooth transition as possible for children. The research stresses that children experiencing social and economic disadvantage, children with English as an additional language (EAL) and children with special educational needs (SEN) require particular supports at the time of transition to primary school.



This research report extends our understanding of some of the issues surrounding the transition from preschool to primary school, and gives insight into the multiple factors which influence this important transition. The report focuses on research relevant to the transfer of information between preschools and primary schools and the process surrounding the transition. It should, along with *Transition from Preschool to Primary School: Audit of Policy in 14 Jurisdictions* (O’Kane and Murphy 2016a) and *Transition from Preschool to Primary School: Audit of Transfer Documentation in Ireland* (O’Kane and Murphy 2016b) provide a strong foundation on which the NCCA can build when developing reporting templates for this important transition in young children’s lives. It also provides valuable information for the NCCA as work begins on developing a new primary curriculum framework.



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