INTO Consultative Conference on Education

2008

TRANSITIONS IN THE PRIMARY SCHOOL
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*Transitions in the Primary School*
Foreword

In Ireland, pupils spend eight years in the primary school, usually starting at four years of age and transferring to post-primary at twelve years of age. Children’s experiences of the transition to starting school and the transition from primary school to post-primary school have begun to attract some interest from the education community, in terms of research and policy, as the experience of transitions can impact significantly on pupils’ success in education. There are many issues which affect children at times of transition.

The transition of pupils from primary to post-primary education has received quite some attention recently. For example, the NCCA commissioned the ESRI to carry out research addressing issues of transition for pupils in post-primary schools, which was published in its landmark report Moving Up: the experience of first-year students in post-primary education. Maeve O’Brien’s research on a similar topic has also enlightened our knowledge of how children and their parents experience such transitions. In addition, the Educational Welfare Board was established enabling data to be gathered on school attendance and early school leaving. The Home School Community Liaison Programme, the School Completion Programme and the experience of local area networks and partnerships have also contributed to our knowledge of pupils’ experiences of transition from primary to post-primary school. It is evident from such research and policy work that even the most emotionally secure and confident children can experience challenges at times of transition. The journey from primary to post-primary is an emotional time for pupils. It’s a time of change, where previous achievements may be undervalued, where new routines and disciplines are to be learned and where personal security may be undermined. Primary to post-primary transition is a particularly crucial time for young people from disadvantaged communities when learners can drop out or be made for life. Therefore, how pupils are supported through the transition process is central to the quality of their educational experiences and success through post-primary.

The transition from home or pre-school to primary is equally challenging for children. However, it is a topic on which there is less Irish-based research. We are very grateful to Mary O’Kane who contributed a chapter in this publication based on her doctoral research on transitions from home or pre-school to primary school. Her research highlights the many issues that make for a smooth transition in the Irish context. It comes as no surprise to primary teachers that class size in the infant classes is a major policy issue to be addressed.

There are of course many other transitions in a child’s life. The transition for pupils with special educational needs has been considered briefly here but would warrant a study in itself. Children transferring from educational systems in other countries bring their own sets of needs and challenges. Some children move school during their primary education years, also a form of transition. There may also be transition issues for pupils moving from junior schools to senior schools. However, this publication focuses on the two main periods of transition for primary school pupils – beginning in the primary school and leaving the primary school.

In preparing this publication the INTO Education Committee conducted its own research. Questionnaires were issued to a random sample of schools. Teachers of junior infants and of sixth class were invited to complete questionnaires. Questionnaires were also distributed to a number of post-primary schools, which first year tutors were invited to complete. In addition, the Education Committee held a number of focus group discussions with parents, post-primary teachers, sixth class teachers and junior infant teachers. An overview of current research in the field has also been provided. The INTO greatly appreciates the contribution of all teachers who completed questionnaires and who participated in focus group discussions which enhance the voice of practising teachers in education research in Ireland. The Organisation also acknowledges the contribution of the INTO Education Committee, under the guidance of Deirbhile Nic Craith, Senior Official.

The INTO welcomes the NCCA’s recent remit to advise the Minister regarding national policy on transitions. The INTO is confident that this publication will prove to be a valuable contribution to educational research in Ireland.

John Carr, MA (Ed)
General Secretary
July 2009
# Acknowledgements

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Transitions in the Primary School

Discussion Document
Transitions in the Primary School

**Introduction**

In schooling terms, transition envelops a process of moving from one educational setting to another. These transitions can mean a change in location, teacher, curriculum and philosophy (Margetts, 1999). While the most immediate transition associated with primary school is the move from the primary system to the post-primary system, there are other significant transitions that happen within the primary school, such as the transition from pre-primary to primary, the transition from special school to mainstream classroom or vice-versa, as well as the transitions from class to class within primary schools.

The transition from pre-school to primary school is a significant one and raises many interesting issues which contribute to the debate regarding the provision of universal state-funded early education. More and more, children attend some form of pre-school prior to enrolling in the primary school. As class numbers jump significantly from pre-school to primary, and pupil-teacher ratios differ wildly, there has been an emergence of a plethora of private pre-school providers. One potential implication of this is the increase in the average age of the new entrant to the Junior Infant class. This could have implications in terms of the curriculum for the infant classes, which is designed for four year olds, and for teacher expectations of what children are capable of doing on their arrival into the Junior Infant classroom. This may ultimately have knock-on effects further on in the education system as students are older on entering and subsequently leaving post-primary school.

The transition from primary to post-primary school has been recognised as a crucial stage in young people’s educational journey. It marks a break in the continuity of schooling and can be a time of opportunity for young people. However, it is also a time of vulnerability. Students are required to leave the familiar surroundings, relationships and expectations of their primary school and enter into a new social, cultural and educational setting. Such changes make transfer from first to second-level a significant life event.

Transition also has particular implications for children with special needs. The need for continuity in the provision of support services and the transfer of information is particularly acute in the cases of those children who require extra support. Some children with special needs may attend mainstream primary schools and progress to post-primary education in special schools. Other children may spend some time in special education settings before transferring to mainstream schools. The transition experiences of these pupils also require consideration in planning for educational provision. Further research, beyond the scope of this document, would also be required in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of special needs students in relation to transition.

The Education Committee of the INTO set out to look at some of the transitions that occur in primary school by firstly considering the existing literature and research that was available. Section One considers transitions from primary to post-primary school. This section provides a brief overview of the current literature on transitions from primary to post-primary. Transition as it is managed and organised in Northern Ireland was looked at in particular, and information from other countries was also considered. Section Two considers the transition from pre-school to primary school and transition issues for children with special needs is considered in Section Three. Questionnaires were distributed to junior infant teachers, sixth class teachers and the year heads of 1st years in post-primary schools. These questionnaires were collated and the results are presented in this document. In order to gain a more detailed insight into some of the issues in relation to transition, a number of focus groups were also held in Dublin, Cork and Wexford. Section Four outlines and discusses the issues of concern to teachers in relation to transition and offers some recommendations.
Transitions in Education: Primary to Post-primary

Overview of the Issues

Introduction
For the most part, compulsory education in economically developed countries is split into two phases: primary, which generally begins at age five or six and lasts until age 11/12, and secondary which ends at 15/16, the official leaving age in many countries, but students usually continue to the age of 18. While second-level education used to be seen as the sole preserve of the elite, global economic interests and demands for an educated workforce have seen an increase in this provision of second-level education to the point where, in 2004, there were around half a billion children in second-level schools worldwide (UNESCO 2007).

The transition from primary to post-primary education has been noted as a critical educational step for many children (Smyth, McCoy & Dermody, 2004). According to Hargreaves, Earl & Ryan (1996) transfer is a time of triple transition as students negotiate the move from childhood to adolescence, from one institutional context to another with different regulations, teacher demands, and teacher expectations and the journey from established social groups into new social relations. Therefore, it would appear that the impact of social, emotional, academic and institutional issues should be considered a priority for educators when examining a transfer process in the educational context.

In recent years the effects of transition from primary to post-primary school have been of particular interest to educationists due to reports that many children in the first year of secondary school regressed in major parts of their education. Galton et al, (2000) reported that up to 40% of pupils experience a hiatus in academic progress during the first couple of months after school transfer.

A number of causes for this regression have been identified. These causes include belonging to a poor family (Boudon, 1974), onset of puberty, the effects of bullying by older pupils, separation from friends, excessive travel to the new school, the unfamiliarity of moving from room to room, adjusting to having more than one teacher a day, the inability to adjust to a variety of teaching styles and the lack of curricular continuity across the primary/secondary divide, (Galton, 2000).

The Expansion of Post-Primary Education
The transition from primary to post-primary education has been the focus of a good deal of research internationally; many studies have focused on students’ social adjustment to their new school as well as changes in the learning environment (Hargreaves & Galton, 2002; Eccles et al., 1993; Gutman & Midgley, 2000). Other research has focussed on young people's experiences of the transition process (Ó Dálaigh & Aherne, 1990; Naughton, 2000; O’Brien, 2001).

In 1966, free secondary education for all was introduced in Ireland and in 1967 the Primary Certificate was abolished. This led to a huge increase in the numbers entering second-level education. By 1978 post-primary schools were endeavouring to cope with students who, in the past, may not have progressed to the secondary system. In 1981, the Department of Education published the Report of the Pupil-Transfer Committee which was commissioned in 1978 and involved all the partners in education in Ireland. Its function was to report and make recommendations on the problems of transition from the “child-centred primary schools to the subject-centred post-primary schools” (p. 5).

It is clear that aspirations and recommendations from that report have still not been fully addressed. The report listed such obstacles to successful transfer as bullying or loneliness. Special reference was made in the report to the poor communication among primary and post-primary schools, school authorities, parents, teachers and pupils. Approximately 20% of pupils who transferred at that time – especially slow learners and/or timid/nervous pupils - experienced emotional, intellectual, social, physical, or other difficulties. The 1981 Report recommended urgent changes in the post-primary curriculum to facilitate better alignment with the primary curriculum in Irish, mathematics and geography based on poor results in these subjects in the 1979 Intermediate Certificate. It also suggested methodology changes in many subjects to facilitate a smoother transition process. Teacher in-service in relation to the difficulties surrounding student-transfer difficulties was seen as an important way of addressing associated difficulties.
Students’ Experiences of Transfer
Anticipating the move to post-primary school has been found to cause a certain amount of anxiety for the majority of first-year students while at the same time most students look forward to the move with a sense of excitement (Naughton, 2000; O’Brien, 2001; Hargreaves & Galton, 2002). The main anxieties centred on fear of being bullied, changes in friendships and relations with teachers. Organisational factors such as disciplinary procedures, timetables, more difficult work and homework, having several teachers and subjects and changing classrooms were also found to contribute to pre-transfer anxieties (Naughton, 2000; O’Brien, 2001). Girls were found to have expressed more anxiety than boys about transferring to the new school (Hargreaves & Galton, 2002; O’Brien, 2001; Knox, 1987). Concern about post-primary school was also expressed by those students who did not secure a place in the school of their choice (or whose parents actually made the choice!).

More recent research on the topic was commissioned by the Department of Education & Science in Ireland when the perspectives and experiences of the relevant groups in the transition process - students, teachers and parents - were drawn on. Background factors such as students’ academic performance, their social class, their gender and the type of school attended at primary level were integral to another study (O’Brien, 2004).

In 2004 Smyth et al. examined the experiences of first year students, their teachers and parents in terms both of pupils’ adjustment to post-primary education and their perception of the curriculum and learning within junior cycle. This research set out to explore the social and academic factors which help young people settle into post-primary school in the Irish context. It sought to address the gaps in Irish research on how post-primary schools can influence the integration and learning of their students in first year. Individual student characteristics such as gender, social class and prior educational success were also referred to in this work.

In spite of anxieties about making the transition to post-primary school only a minority of students appear to experience serious difficulties once they have moved to their new school (O’Brien, 2001; Hargreaves & Halton, 2002; Smyth et al., 2004). However, at the end of first year pupils had lost some of their enthusiasm for the new subjects and teachers, when they realised that assessments and allocation to higher and lower courses were integral to school life and that second-year class-groupings were determined by performance at first-year examinations. For most students their excitement diminished as they realised they had to conform to new rules and expectations while having to comply with the rigours of a competitive system (O’Brien, 2004).

The minority ‘at-risk’ group who find it more difficult to settle include some girls, and students from non-national or Traveller backgrounds. O’Brien (2001) reports that students in designated disadvantaged schools appear more reluctant to transfer to post-primary school and worry about more difficult schoolwork in their new school. Students themselves see social networks (friends from primary school and taking part in extra-curricular activities) as the most important factors in helping them to settle.

Transition and the White Paper 1995
The 1995 White Paper *Charting our Education Future* considered the key aspects of education to be quality, equality, pluralism, partnership and accountability, the promotion of equality of access and participation for all as well as the provision of resources to support children at risk of educational failure. These key aspects have direct implications for educators involved in the school transfer process. The White Paper recommends the development of a strong commitment to partnership that will require improved co-operation between primary and post-primary schools; in this regard curriculum discontinuity, communication and preparation for school transfer are key issues.

Transition and the Primary School Curriculum 1999
The introduction to the revised *Primary Curriculum* (1999) outlines the centrality of a special relationship between the primary curriculum and second-level education. With specific reference to the issue of transfer from primary to post-primary school the Curriculum states that consistency of approach between the primary and junior-cycle curricula and the developmental experience they offer should help to ease pupils’ progress from one level to the next; furthermore, assessment procedures inherent in the primary curriculum would assist in facilitating better communication between the teachers and schools at both levels (*Primary School Curriculum*, 1999). Whether this issue has yet been addressed remains to be examined.
Transition and Socio-Economic Factors

School transfer is a complex process and is mediated by the students’ individuality, their social class, the resources of their families and factors that relate to the second-level system in general as well as by the characteristics of individual second-level schools (O’Brien, 2004).

The relationship between socio-economic background and educational outcomes has been well documented internationally. Pupils from lower income and minority ethnic groups have been found to be potentially more at risk of not making a successful transition to post-primary school (Gutman and Riddley, 2000). Apart from socio-economic characteristics parental support has been found to be a crucial factor in facilitating young people’s successful integration into post-primary education (Anderson et al., 2000). The nature of authority structures within the family also influences the transition process. According to Eccles et al. (1993) and Lord et al. (1994) young people who report a democratic family environment tend to have higher self-esteem and more successful adjustment to a new school: this was found to be as a result of parents’ support of their child’s adjustment to the new school, the quality of the affective relationship between the parents and adolescent and parents’ investment in providing opportunities for their children outside of the home.

Parents felt that transfer was a time of significance for their children but differed in their ability to mobilise resources to support children through this challenging time. Those with social, cultural and economic capital used it in the interest of their children in choosing schools, supporting academic work and purchasing social advantage in suitable leisure-time activities. Inequalities between families and pupils became magnified at the time of transfer. In schools designated as disadvantaged there were structures in place whereby more formal transfer programmes were implemented at both primary and second-level. However, transfer programmes were limited to focusing on more tangible or universal concerns and not on supporting the needs of individual students or on ongoing academic or social difficulties.

Although allocation of students on the basis of academic ability to particular schools is not legitimate practice in the Irish education system, evidence suggests that students showing lower academic performance and those from lower social class groupings are over-represented in the Vocational sector (Drudy & Lynch, 1993). The number of subjects taken tends to be fewer in schools which are designated as disadvantaged and/or have a significant intake of students with literacy difficulties. Where students feel they are taking too many subjects, transition difficulties arise a pattern which appears to be related to a broader inability to cope with the academic demands of first year (Smyth et al., 2004).

Parents and Transition

The role of parents in supporting the student during the process of school transfer has been discussed in only a very limited form in the literature. According to Bastiani (1986) the role and experiences of parents during transfer have been neglected in a discourse that has reflected the dominant professional perspective construing transfer as an experience that affects only teachers and children. Bastiani attempts to highlight the difficulties that parents themselves experience at the time of transfer, particularly parents from the lower social class groups with less formal schooling.

The literature on social class and education suggests that parents who themselves left school without completing second-level do not have the same ‘cultural capital’ as parents with more formal qualifications and therefore cannot engage with the system (Bourdieu, 1984). Children are at a disadvantage when their parents are not familiar with the more specialised and technical knowledge of second-level schooling and even more so when their parents are also unfamiliar with the system and culture at second-level (Bourdieu, 1986). Parents may be unaware of the significance of institutional practices in the school and consequently may seem less interested in their children’s schooling and are more distanced from the school (O’Brien, 1987).

School Choice and Transition

Research has found that parents have different abilities to engage with the process of choosing a second-level school and that this is affected by cultural capital, social class and race (Gerwitz et al. 1994). Parents with high cultural capital occupy the middle classes and are skilled at choosing. Migrant families, though they may occupy the middle classes were at a disadvantage as they do not have the first-hand knowledge to decode the nuances of the education system. Those who had left school early or with poor qualifications tended to be in the lower social groupings: in general they had neither the expertise (due to limited knowledge of the education system) nor the emotional interest to engage in the process. Reay and Ball’s (1998) study found that working-class parents
construe their children as the experts in making the choice. Reay and Lucey (2000) found that there are differences as to how children decide on their second-level school: these include children’s own individuality, their ability to engage with their parents and the way in which power is handled in families.

Curriculum and Transition

In most countries the curricula followed at first and second-levels differ considerably and pose a challenge for children during the transfer process. The Report of the Pupil Transfer Committee (Ireland, 1981) made a similar point to that expressed by Gorwood (1986) in the context of the English school system. Both see as problematic the sudden change for the child in moving from a type of learning that focuses on the child’s active participation in the learning process to learning focused on individual subjects and a public examination system. Furthermore they highlight the primary curriculum “where the various subjects are no longer seen as segregated areas of knowledge but more as component parts of a whole”. The work of Gardner (1987) on ‘multiple intelligences’ calls into question the narrowly-based subject curriculum offered at second-level.

Smyth et al (2004) report a substantial group of first-year students experiencing discontinuity in learning experiences between primary and post-primary school and that the curriculum does not follow on naturally from primary level. The majority also see teaching methodologies as quite different. Furthermore, less than one third of first-year teachers felt the primary curriculum was a good foundation for their subject with only half reporting familiarity with the nature of the primary curriculum. However, variation across schools was reported, indicating that the discontinuity may be more prevalent in certain school contexts.

Lack of curriculum continuity also appears to influence students’ social adjustment into post-primary school. Smyth et al. (2004) found that students are more likely to experience transition problems if they feel their primary subjects did not prepare them for post-primary school, if they feel the subjects do not follow on from their primary subjects and if they are not enjoying first-year subjects. Students in the top class within streamed schools report more transition difficulties than those in the bottom classes. Perhaps this may be related to their finding some of the subjects more difficult than in primary school (Smyth et al., 2004).

Entrance Exams/Streaming and Transition

Second-level schools contribute to the subject-based view of their system through the continuation of entrance tests (Kirk, 1997). Teachers in sixth classes prepare children for entrance assessments carried out by second-level schools. The extent of preparation varies among schools but it appears that significant effort and pressure are associated with these assessments. The entrance exams result in many senior primary pupils being taught perhaps somewhat like in the second-level school in order to achieve better examination results. Entrance tests could also contribute to a gap between the primary and second-level schools with primary teachers feeling aggrieved that they are often judged on the results of these examinations by second-level schools, who fail to understand child-centred education (Kirk, 1997). Furthermore it has been found that teachers at primary level are spending time in preparation for these entrance tests so that their students do well: therefore they tailor the curriculum to this end (O’Brien, 2004).

Streaming students in first-year is still common practice in many second-level schools. Streaming as a practice has been much debated in the literature internationally and in Ireland (Lacey, 1970; Hannan and Boyle, 1987 & 1989; Hannan, Smyth et al., 1996). These studies indicated that streaming was embedded in many second-level schools and suggests that this practice has serious implications for student learning and social development (O’Brien, 2004). Many students in streamed classes reported that their teachers “move too quickly or slowly in covering subject material” (Smyth et al., 2004, p. 242). Furthermore the practice of streaming or banding appeared to have resulted in a distinct labelling of students as ‘smart’ or ‘stupid’ even very early on in second-level. This appears to have serious social and emotional effects on pupils: learning should be organised to ensure the non-polarisation of pupils – academically, emotionally or socially - on the basis of being assigned to particular class groupings (O’Brien, 2004). Students allocated to top classes in some ‘streamed’ schools felt increased academic demands relative to their experiences in primary school which resulted in adjustment taking longer. Students in streamed schools, in particular those allocated to the bottom classes, tend to make less academic progress than other students (O’Brien, 2001 & 2004; Smyth et al., 2004). The lower social class groups tend to be over-represented in the lower streams (Lacey, 1970; Ball, 1981).

More worryingly, it has been found that once students were allocated to ‘streams’ they were likely to stay there (Hallinan, 1987). Some schools at second-level are using tests to allocate students to streamed groups. Most
students in disadvantaged schools were anxious about ‘class placement’ at second-level. They were concerned that if they were placed in too high a class they would find the challenge too much of a strain and if they were placed in too low a class that they wouldn’t get the education that they needed. This issue is directly related to policies on streaming in second-level schools (O’Brien, 2004). It appears, therefore, that dialogue and communication about the curriculum at the upper end of the primary school and at the entry year to second-level is essential to the successful participation of students in first-year. Streaming, as an issue, requires further in-depth investigation as the practice itself is highly questionable given the negative impact it can have on many pupils.

**Relationships Between Teachers and Students**

Students tended to be positive in their evaluation of how they got on in primary school when they had good relationships even if they were finding the academic aspect of schooling a struggle (O’Brien, 2004). More girls than boys reported difficulties with friends. Students expressed worries about their relationships with teachers at second-level and these seemed particularly intense for some male students. Fears were mainly about teachers’ strictness, about standards of work and strictness about rules (O’Brien, 2005).

**Social and Emotional Issues**

Primary teachers described social, emotional and academic characteristics that they felt were needed by students to participate at second-level. High self-esteem and confidence were key characteristics as well as a positive outlook and interest in learning. Social skills were also considered essential - the ability to mix with other students and to form relationships with teachers were viewed as more important than high academic ability which alone was not considered sufficient to cope with transfer (O’Brien, 2004). Teachers in non-disadvantaged schools question the ability of some students to manage peer pressure and pressures associated with second-level and adolescent culture.

In disadvantaged schools teachers described the distance between the culture of care of the primary school and the academic and exam oriented culture of second-level as a major obstacle to successful transfer. They also believed that in many cases students were not ready to form relationships and meet the demands of several teachers in contrast to what they perceived as the significant, familiar and more intense and caring relationship at first level. The literature on school choice supports the view that working-class students and their families feel more comfortable with the local and familiar in terms of relationships and organisation (Reay & Ball, 1998; Reay & Lucey, 2000).

Findings from a British study (2007) ‘What makes a successful transition from primary to secondary school?’ indicated that a partnership approach must be adopted. An approach where children, their parents and schools are involved in addressing important transition issues such as social adjustment, institutional adjustment and curriculum interest and continuity were identified as factors for successful transition from primary to post-primary. The most successful schools in this study were those with very close links and co-ordination between primary and second-level schools. Teachers in the study reported that they wanted more information and a better understanding of the different approaches to teaching between primary and second-level schools (www.dcsf.gov.uk/research). As we have seen, research carried out in Ireland has produced similar findings.

**Interventions and School Transition**

In Ireland, in recent years, there has been a move on the ground to give recognition to the significance of school transfer. Intervention programmes for transition are in place in many school communities, particularly where children are at risk of educational failure or early school leaving. Many intervention programmes are structured and operate on an ad-hoc basis through some of the DES intervention schemes. Such programmes assist in the transition from primary to post-primary by:

- providing information on the new system and structures which the young person will encounter;
- enabling children to identify strategies which will assist them in overcoming the difficulties which may arise;
- providing a forum for children and their parents/guardians to express any fears that they may have during the process of change (SCP, 2005, p. 20).
Some examples of transition programmes include:

**The ‘Let’s Go’ Programme**
This programme has a three-pronged approach:

Part 1 is targeted initially at the whole class but, in particular, at potential early school leavers in the primary school to address children’s problems and fears associated with transition from primary to post-primary.

Part 2 is a Transition Summer Programme normally delivered in the summer holidays by youth and community groups in the community setting.

Part 3 is the second-level school-transition programme initially addressing recommended induction and monitoring procedures during the first month in the second-level school (VEC, Galway, 1997).

**Home School Community Liaison (HSCL)**
Many schools in the HSCL scheme have developed sophisticated transfer programmes. These schools drew on the resources of the HSCL coordinator to develop and manage the programme. A successful transition programme within HSCL ensures that good communication and positive relations are fostered and developed between parents, teachers in the primary and post-primary schools and the community support services with an emphasis on support for parents whose children are at risk of educational failure. In general, a smooth relocation in a new school follows a transition programme that is based on the principles and practice of partnership (HSCL, DES, 2007).

HSCL’s involvement in school transition programmes includes close networking between all local HSCL coordinators before, during and continuing after the point of transfer to the new school (HSCL, DES, 2007). Some examples of transfer programmes that have been introduced by HSCL to help parents to provide knock-on support for their children include:

- Co-ordinating or facilitating workshops for parents to erase their concerns, fears or worries about school transfer;
- Arranging for issues raised at consultative stage to be addressed, informing parents of the challenges their children may encounter on transferring to a new school;
- Familiarising parents with the new school - its layout, significant personnel, the curriculum and timetables;
- Consulting meaningfully with parents and teachers and producing a Welcome Booklet containing all relevant information about the new school thus ensuring that all parents receive and understand all important relevant information;
- Ensuring, through home visitation and parent workshops, that specific sensitive concerns that parents and families encounter as children prepare to move on to a new stage in education are respectfully identified and addressed.

Students and parents praised these HSCL programmes for their helpfulness in allaying their fears about bullying and for the opportunity they afforded them to connect meaningfully with other second-level schools (O’Brien, 2004). Other positive outcomes of HSCL intervention included the alleviation of fears and worries about transferring to a new school. Parents also felt respected because, through consultation, they were given due recognition; in turn parents gave recognition and appreciation to schools for this - their hopes, fears and concerns were heard and addressed (HSCL, DES, 2007).

**School Completion Programme (SCP)**
Transition programmes are a key intervention in the School Completion Programme (SCP). Such programmes arranged within SCP are targeted in the main on support for vulnerable children as they prepare to transfer from primary to second-level school. Practices differ from cluster to cluster in SCP with some support programmes spanning both levels of education. Examples of topics addressed as a support for targeted children include: change and life, being prepared, timetables, peer pressure, entrance assessment, reasons for rules, consequences of choices, visits from second-level in May/June with follow-up workshops during their initial weeks in second-
level. The hoped-for outcomes of such support programmes include a smooth transfer process to second-level, facilitation of peer friendships, improved self-confidence, with improved integration of targeted children in their new school (SCP, DES, 2005).

**Primary/Secondary Co-ordinators**

In Scotland and England primary/secondary co-ordinators have been appointed to targeted schools. Their role is to identify children who may be at risk when they make the transfer from primary to second-level. Better reading and writing, improved maths scores and improved attendance and behaviour have all flowed from the deployment of primary-secondary co-ordinators in South Lancashire. An independent report underlies the value of the new system which is to be extended as part of the new community schools initiative. Co-ordinators work in clusters, focusing on basic standards between P6 and S2 and are said to have been almost universally successful in helping to tackle key transition difficulties that have dogged pupils, their families and schools for many years. Other initiatives have contributed but the co-ordinators have been vital in developing resources and pushing best practice. (TESS, 21 June 2002).

In Ireland, Furlong (1999) raised the issue of the role of pastoral care in structured transition programmes which would be introduced in sixth class and continued at second-level. Another example of an intervention strategy is the mentoring system which many second-level schools operate whereby a senior student is ‘buddy’ to a first-year student. However, research indicates that communication between primary and second-level schools, the involvement of parents, induction programmes for students, awareness of curriculum discontinuity and curriculum differentiation would all be important elements of any meaningful transfer programme.

**Meitheal**

The Meitheal Programme in Co Wexford, which is supported by the Wexford Area Partnership and the Department of Education and Science, is a training programme for students at senior level in secondary schools. In this programme the students are trained to become mentors for incoming students at junior level. It is a programme based on pro-respect between students and one that enables students to take responsibility for the happiness of others and for the safety and well-being of all who share a school environment.

The programme is advertised among senior students who are invited to become Meitheal Leaders in their respective schools. All applicants are interviewed and a selection is then made. The students who are chosen to become Meitheal Leaders undergo a training programme in the summer prior to their return to school the following September. This training programme covers the areas of personal development, identity, self-esteem, communication skills, listening skills – skills that are necessary for the students to develop if the programme is to be successful.

After their training the students return to their respective schools as sixth years and each is given responsibility for a number of incoming first-years. It is then the task of the Meitheal Leaders to ensure the smooth transition of these young people into the school and to be able and available to assist them in any way necessary during their first few days in school. After this initial work it is then expected that the Meitheal Leaders will work with the junior students, developing a relationship of trust and mutual respect. The hope for the remainder of their first year is that if the junior students should experience difficulties or anxieties of any kind they can turn to their Meitheal Leaders and find in them understanding, respect, advice and assistance. The programme has proved to be effective in promoting the happiness of students in general as well as reducing instances of bullying, isolation and early school leaving.

It is vital to the success of the programme that there are teachers who will volunteer to act as overseers of the programme within each school. It will be their function to organise the day-to-day running of the programme and to provide any in-school assistance or back-up that is needed. It is also hoped that the programme co-ordinator will be in a position to offer in-service to these teachers, educating them in the principles and ethos of the programme and offering support and resources to them for the successful organisation of the programme in their respective schools.

**Some International Experiences**

Sweden and Finland provide a continuous, undifferentiated programme of education that does not have a primary/secondary divide (Metais, 2003). Children in these countries stay on the same campus for the whole time, although at age 11/12 they may move to another part (see Appendix I).
In Norway, organised education begins in Kindergarten, at up to age six. All children now have a statutory right to access as a consequence of reforms in education during the 1990s that sought to bring coherence and continuity to primary/secondary education – ages six-16), *The Committee for quality in Primary and Secondary Education in Norway* (2007).

In countries such as France, the UK and Ireland, transfer occurs around age 11/12 and the child moves to a larger school campus, sometimes involving substantial travel between home and school. Transfer in these cases is virtually an automatic process, although in Spain and in Italy transferring children may have to pass a certificate of mastery of the primary curriculum (Metais, 2003). Formerly, pupils failing to pass this test would have been held back for a further year, but more recently this practice has been phased out in favour of remedial classes for those in need as this was seen as less psychologically damaging.

It is worth noting that, where transfer is automatic, the role of the primary school reports is limited. Indeed, parents may choose not to send the reports to the new school or in some cases the second-level school places so little importance on them that they don’t request them. Some secondary schools do provide a form for the primary school teacher to complete before transfer. In Japan, the primary school passes the SHIDOYORUKU, a statutory cumulative record of a child’s school attendance and learning throughout years one to six which has had to be updated yearly. It includes information regarding knowledge and understanding, student attainment and performance which is given as a grade (from A to C) for each subject. Teachers also address skills such as talking, listening, reading and writing as well as the children’s behaviour and attitude.

In the Netherlands, secondary school governors decide on the admission of pupils on the basis of their primary school report/recommendations, and parental preference. The primary school’s recommendation for the child is based on the child’s school performance and increasingly on the results of the CITO test of Primary education. Some secondary schools set their own admission tests as well.

Some countries, for example New Zealand, the USA, Canada and parts of Germany and Britain, operate a junior or middle school level. This was seen as a means to ease the passage from single teacher/single room in the primary school to a slightly more difficult multi-teacher/room environment in the second-level school, and as a way of diminishing the culture shock for some pupils. It also enabled the pupil to defer selecting either a vocational or an academic course at an age at which they would have had little time to think about a career until they had become more mature and thus able to make a more informed judgement on a future career path.

In Germany, the Netherlands and Singapore, children wanting to pursue a technical career would opt to transfer to a vocational school; this is done in line with the final qualification at primary school and the performance of the child. The final report of the primary would be important in the child’s final choice. Once this choice has been made it is difficult to change paths. It is especially difficult for those opting for a vocational path as the academic structure in the non-vocational schools is more difficult than in the former and, in the past, it has been found that those taking this route have struggled to catch up and keep up with the rest of the class (Metais, 2003).

**Conclusion**

In general, findings in all the literature examined indicated that school transfer from primary school to second-level is a multi-faceted process that draws upon the resources of students and their families and militates against those who do not have adequate resources in the socio-cultural area (DES, 1981; Smyth et al., 2004; O’Brien, 2001 & 2004).

Findings by O’Brien (2004) indicated that schools were just beginning to view transfer to second-level schooling as a time of special significance in the lives of students. Teachers at both levels believe that there is a need for closer dialogue and that this needs to be supported at an official level. All research to date indicates that a meaningful partnership approach needs to be adopted in relation to transition from primary to post-primary education: contacts, information and training by teachers are necessary in order to understand better the differences between systems, to enable teachers at both levels of education to listen to each other and to develop strategies so that pupils and their families (particularly those at risk of failure) can be involved and supported academically, socially and emotionally throughout the transfer process (Smyth et al. 2004).
It is clear that transfer from primary to second-level schooling is a significant status passage in the lives of young people and that recognition of the transfer passage is essential for those involved. The research also indicates strongly that much work needs to be done in the area of curriculum between primary and second-level schools within the system. Furthermore, there is a need to target support for particular groups of pupils in order to make transfer a worthwhile and successful journey for all (O’Brien, 2004).
Transition from Primary to Post-Primary School

Results of INTO Survey

Sixth Class Teachers

Introduction
The INTO Education Committee distributed a questionnaire to 298 randomly-selected schools in the Republic of Ireland in order to gather the most current data possible in relation to transition from primary to post-primary. The schools were asked to ensure that a sixth class (or in the case of multi-grade classrooms a senior class) teacher completed the questionnaire which focused on the issues of preparing pupils for the transfer to post-primary schools. A total of 206 questionnaires were returned for analysis, thus giving a response rate of 69%. In general, percentages have been rounded to the nearest full percentage in the narrative.

Profile of Respondents
The gender profile of the sixth class teachers was 34% male and 66% female. This contrasts sharply with the respondents to the Junior Infant questionnaire, 99.5% of whom were female. The gender balance in the profession is currently 85% female and 15% male overall. In relation to the number of years teaching that the respondents had, almost 30% had 10 years or less experience and over 50% had more than 20 years. See Table 1 below.

Table 1: Sixth Class Teachers - Number of Years Teaching

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No of Years Teaching</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;= 10</td>
<td>29.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 - 20</td>
<td>17.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 - 30</td>
<td>30.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31+</td>
<td>21.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>98.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>System</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One third (33%) of the respondents taught 6th class only, a third (35%) taught combined 5th and 6th classes and under a third (28%) taught a combination of 3rd to 6th or 4th to 6th. Nearly half (46%) the respondents had been teaching 6th class for five years or less, 16% taught 6th class for between 6 and 10 years and 23% taught the senior class for between 11 and 20 years. See Table 2 below.

Table 2: No. of years teaching 6th class

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. of years teaching</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;= 5</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>45.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 - 10</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>16.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 - 20</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>22.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 - 30</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31+</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>98.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>System</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>206</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Half the respondents taught in schools with fewer than 100 pupils and only 8% taught in schools with more than 400 pupils. In the case of half the respondents there were fewer than five teachers in their schools and in the case of 11% there were 21 teachers or more in their schools. Just under 10% taught in city schools, 12% taught in suburban schools, 19% taught in town schools and the majority (59%) taught in rural schools. A large majority (76%) taught in mixed schools, 11% taught in boys’ schools, 9% taught in girls’ schools and a small minority
(3%) taught in girls’ schools with mixed junior classes. A total of 90% of schools were full stream schools and 21% had disadvantaged status. Regarding disadvantage status, 5% were in DEIS Band 1 urban, 4% were in DEIS Band 2 urban and 13% were in DEIS rural. Eight schools (4%) taught through the medium of Irish.

Moving to Post-Primary
The number of post-primary schools that pupils progressed to varied. One respondent stated that pupils went to 26 different post-primary schools and 14% stated that they ‘fed’ only one post-primary school. A majority (68%) of respondents stated that children from their primary school went on to transfer to between 2 and 5 different post-primary schools.

School Choice
Respondents were asked to rank the reasons pupils and their parents used to select a post-primary school. The highest rankings were given to ‘siblings already attending school’ and ‘proximity to home’. See Table 3 below.

Table 3: School Choice (Rank)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Choice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Siblings already attending school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Proximity to home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>General reputation of school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Friends going to same school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Reputation for good exam results</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Type of school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Good opportunities for sports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Gender mix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Parents attended the same school</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Transfer Tests
Teachers were asked how many of the post-primary schools that their pupils transferred to organised transfer tests: One fifth of post-primary schools did not organise transfer or entrance tests though a significant number of schools did. (See Table below) Half the respondents (54%) said that all their pupils did transfer/transition tests.

Table 4: Do any of these (post-primary schools) have transfer tests?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transfer Tests</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valid None</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>20.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>28.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>50.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>99.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing System</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>206</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Transfer tests took place most often between October and March and usually in the post-primary school. Respondents were asked if they prepared their pupils for the transfer tests. Two thirds of respondents (66%) said that they did not prepare their pupils for the transfer tests and one third said they did. When asked to comment on the tests, many teachers were of the opinion that the timing of the tests put pressure on 6th class teachers to complete the curriculum early in the year. The issue of the different curricula between primary and post-primary was noted here, with one teacher stating “I feel at times there is a complete disregard for the 6th class curriculum to ensure that the children are prepared for the entrance exams”. The tests, according to primary teachers, impact on their work. One teacher commented: “they upset the planning of work for the year as I end up rushing through work in order to have the course finished by February/March”. Another teacher noted that “all post-primary schools have a different emphasis in their exams, and a wide area needs to be covered”. Only 9% of teachers said...
they were consulted by the post-primary schools with regard to the content of the transfer tests. The majority (74%) said they were not consulted and 16% said they didn’t know.

Advantages of Transfer Tests
Teachers were asked their opinion about the advantages and disadvantages of the transfer tests. Respondents were of the opinion that the advantages of the transfer test included: alerting the post-primary school to any potential problems of the incoming pupils; giving an overview to the post-primary school of the ability of the incoming pupils and giving the children an idea of the work ahead of them. The 6th class teachers generally felt that the advantages, if any, of the transfer tests were for the post-primary schools. A number of respondents raised the question of why the current standardised tests (e.g. Drumcondra etc.) could not be used instead of a separate transfer test. It was felt by many of the teachers that the transfer tests were used to stream pupils in first-year of secondary school. One teacher stated that unless the transfer tests were in line with the Primary School Curriculum, there was no advantage to them. Another teacher noted that from a practical point of view, the prospect of doing entrance exams “stops my boys from going nuts after the Confirmation”.

Disadvantages of Transfer Tests
In relation to the disadvantages of transfer tests, many teachers felt that there was significant pressure to cover the 6th class programme by February/March. The pressure was to prepare children for early transfer tests and to conform to parental expectations in relation to children’s performance in the tests. Here, too, the issue of the two separate curricula was raised, with English, Irish and maths in particular being cited as very formal. In addition, teachers felt that children became anxious and stressed about the exams, and if they under-achieved on the day, could be incorrectly streamed. One teacher noted: ‘Children are too aware of the implications of these tests. We spend eight years telling them that doing your best is good enough and suddenly only being one of the best is good enough’.

Curriculum Alignment
When teachers were asked how closely aligned the transfer tests were with the primary curriculum, the surprising result was that nearly a quarter of respondents didn’t know, as they had never seen or been given access to the tests. Teachers commented that “children were not allowed to bring back samples of the test” and “we haven’t been consulted therefore we don’t know if the content reflects the thrust of the Revised Curriculum”. A total of 55% of teachers felt that the tests were “somewhat aligned” and 18% felt that they were “not at all aligned”. See Table 5 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very closely aligned</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat aligned</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at all aligned</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don't know</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Preventing for Transition
Respondents were presented with a list of possible strategies employed by schools to prepare the 6th class children for transition to post-primary, and were asked to indicate which strategies were used by their own schools. Over 80% of respondents stated that they distributed information booklets, organised information meetings or had post-primary teachers visit the school. Only a minority of schools (26%) had a particular programme on transition. See Table 6 below.
Table 6: Strategies for preparing for Transition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies for preparing for Transition</th>
<th>Yes %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Distribution of information booklets</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information evenings from 2nd level school</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organised trips to 2nd level school</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-primary students come in to talk to senior classes</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-primary teachers come in to talk to senior classes</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A specific programme on transition</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Other strategies mentioned included: dealing with transition under the SPHE programme; the organising of liaison events between schools by the DEIS co-ordinator; the organisation of a parents’ evening; 6th class pupils having lockers in the classroom.

**Transfer of Information to Post-Primary Schools**

In total, 83% of respondents stated that they transferred information to post-primary schools in relation to their pupils. Teachers felt strongly about this, with over 90% agreeing or strongly agreeing that pupil information should be transferred. However, there did not appear to be any standardised practice in relation to the transfer of pupil information from the primary to the post-primary level. In some cases, no information was transferred; in many cases, only information on SEN pupils was transferred, and a number of schools had significant involvement with the local post-primary school which involved one-to-one meetings with First-year Heads and the class teacher, where each pupil was individually discussed. Just over one fifth (22%) of respondents stated that they were informed by the post-primary school when a pupil enrols with them.

Information, if transferred, was given in a variety of ways:

- Some post-primary schools had their own ‘transfer forms’ which were to be completed by the primary school before the pupil entered second-level.
- Primary schools provided information (sealed envelope) to parents to bring to the open-day at the post-primary school.
- Informal discussions between class teacher and principal of post-primary school.
- Test results from standardised tests were passed on.
- Information from some primary schools was forwarded only if requested by the post-primary school.
- End of year reports were given to parents who may bring them to the relevant post-primary school.
- Reports were posted on to the First-year Head.
- In cases of Special Needs, psychological reports were passed on – with parental permission.

**Successful Transition**

The teachers were asked to identify the factors that contributed, in their opinion, to successful transition from primary to post-primary school. The most overwhelming answer was good communication between the primary and post-primary school. Communication - to include consultation and awareness of the different systems and curricula at both levels - was seen as the single most important factor in de-mystifying the prospect of second-level education and therefore reducing the fear and anxiety experienced by many pupils in 6th class. Following communication, teachers felt that a child’s personal attributes such as confidence, self-esteem, maturity and independence were of great significance in dealing with the transition from primary to post-primary school. Other positive influencing factors included parental support, siblings attending the same school and having friends moving with them to post-primary school. Plenty of information for the pupils and parents was also seen as important, including information evenings and visits to the post-primary school in question.

When asked then to identify those factors that inhibited a successful transition, the inverse of the above was true. Lack of communication between schools was cited as the major problem. It was noted that those children who lacked self-esteem, who were shy or introverted or who did not know anyone else transferring to the same post-primary school would find the move to post-primary difficult. The pressure of transfer tests was also seen as a negative factor inhibiting successful transition. A lack of knowledge of the practical ‘housekeeping’ issues at second-level was also a cause of anxiety as was the perceived lack of information in relation to subjects and practical matters such as timetables, dealing with many classrooms and many teachers and the system of lockers.
The practice of streaming pupils immediately in the 1st year was also seen by many teachers as unhelpful. The lack of coherence in the transition between curricula at primary and post-primary level was also underlined as a major hurdle for primary school children transferring to post-primary. Essentially, lack of information and fear of the unknown were seen as significant factors in inhibiting successful transition.

Supporting Transition
A number of strategies were outlined by 6th class teachers that they had found useful in preparing their pupils for second-level. Most of these suggestions could be summed up by the teacher who said “cover the curriculum and foster confidence”. Among the strategies suggested were:

- Spend a day each term in the post-primary school.
- Co-ordinate curriculum between 5th – 6th and Junior Cert programme.
- Encourage independence and responsible decision-making.
- Set practical tasks in the use of lockers and timetables.
- Set homework over a week.
- Liaise with secondary schools in relation to trips to the school.
- Introduce a Transfer Programme in 6th class.
- Invite past pupils to come and talk to the 6th class.
- Keep regular contact with local post-primary schools.

Supporting Transition at Post-Primary Level
The 6th class teachers were asked what could be done at post-primary level to best aid the transition process. More communication was the overwhelming response to this question. Suggestions as to how this could be arranged included providing more information in the form of information sessions for parents and for pupils or the production of a booklet, DVD or development of school websites to showcase the school and give details of the layout, rules and routines. Another suggestion was the fostering of stronger links between the two levels of schools by organising open days/evenings or a tour of school. Sharing venues, e.g. sports halls, to allow primary school pupils to become familiar with the physical layout of the post-primary school was also suggested.

In relation to the curriculum, many respondents felt that, in general, post-primary teachers were not familiar with the revised curriculum that was being taught at primary level and therefore had unrealistic expectations of the pupils coming into first-year. This was seen as a system problem, with one teacher noting “the problem is at Department level – we’re singing off two different hymn sheets”. A number of respondents suggested that the operation of a ‘buddy system’ or a ‘mentoring system’ whereby first-years were paired with a senior student e.g. transition year student, could be a successful way of integrating the new student into the post-primary school.

Another suggestion related to the abolition of entrance exams – or if traditional exams were insisted upon, these should be set by primary teachers.

Comments
In general the sixth class teachers were very concerned with how their pupils would cope with the transition to post-primary school. While the perceived misalignment of the curricula at primary and post-primary level was of major concern, it was also felt the lack of information about the post-primary schools led to unnecessary anxiety among those pupils about to transfer. More information from the post-primary school and familiarisation with the physical buildings were seen as very important in allaying fears, particularly among those children who were transferring from small rural primary schools to much larger post-primary schools.

The personal coping skills of children were seen as being of vital importance in ensuring a successful transition. It was felt that the maturity of the pupil, their level of self-esteem and confidence all contributed to how well they would transfer. Of the 206 respondents, only two teachers felt that the area of transition was not of importance, with one stating: “Way too much time is being taken up on this issue – the children are confidently looking forward to their new school in September and enough is being done to prepare them”.

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*Transitions in the Primary School*
Other general comments included:

“Aptitude tests would be more appropriate than transition tests.”

“I would welcome involvement from post-primary schools into primary schools – transfer tests are simply one example of this.”

“National guidelines regarding transfer from primary to post-primary were needed.”

“Align the curricula at primary and post-primary level.”

“Inservice needed for primary and post-primary teachers in relation to curriculum alignment.”

“Pupils should be given a sense of self-esteem/confidence enabling them to hold their own in bigger, more diverse school world.”
Transition from Primary to Post-Primary

Results of INTO Survey

Post-Primary Teachers

Introduction
As part of the INTO Education Committee research on transition from primary to post-primary, it was decided to distribute a questionnaire to those teachers who have responsibility at post-primary level for the new entrants. Approximately 190 post-primary teachers received the questionnaire which was distributed by the 14 Education Committee representatives in Districts 3 to 16. A total of 67 responded to the survey giving a 33% response rate.

Profile of Respondents
In relation to the gender profile of the teachers, 60% of respondents were female and 40% were male, which broadly reflects the gender composition of the post-primary teaching profession. The vast majority (85%) of teachers had over 21 years teaching experience. See Table 7 below.

Table 7: Years Teaching

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years Teaching</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;= 5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 - 10</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 - 20</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 - 30</td>
<td>43.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31+</td>
<td>40.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The respondents were subject teachers from all areas of the post-primary curriculum and 85% had specific responsibility for 1st year students. Ten respondents were HSCL co-ordinators. Three quarters (76%) of respondents taught in a secondary school with 9% each teaching in Vocational and Community Schools and 6% teaching in a Community College. Approximately 60% of teachers taught in schools with up to 500 pupils. The remaining 40% taught in large schools with over 501 pupils. A full breakdown is given in Table 8 below.

Table 8: Size of school (number of pupils)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. of pupils - size of school</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;= 300</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>23.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>301 - 500</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>38.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>501 - 700</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>23.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>701 +</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The majority of teachers worked in a school with up to 50 teachers. Only 17% taught in a school with 51 teachers or more. See Table 9.

Table 9: Size of school (number of teachers)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. of teachers - size of school</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;= 25</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>21.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 - 50</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>61.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51 - 75</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>76+</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The majority of respondents taught in urban schools, with 33% teaching in cities, 30% teaching in suburban areas and 33% teaching in towns. Only 4.5% of respondents taught in rural areas. There was an even spread across mixed schools, boys’ schools and girls’ schools with one third of respondents teaching in each. Just over one third (37%) taught in schools designated as disadvantaged. It was interesting to note that the number of primary schools that ‘fed’ into the secondary schools ranged from four to 100 with over a quarter 28% of respondents stating between that their schools had between 10 and 12 primary feeder schools.

**Transfer/Entrance Exams**

The vast majority of post-primary schools surveyed (87%) set Transfer or Entrance Exams with 81% of them holding the exams between January and April. All schools held the exams on their own premises and the exams were set by various members of staff within the school, including guidance counsellors, subject teachers and Department Heads. Others stated that they used standardised tests including Drumcondra, NFER Nelson Vernon, LASS Software Package and GRT Ready Drumcondra. Almost two thirds (65%) stated that they did not consult with the primary schools in relation to the content of the tests.

The most important reason stated for the use of Transfer Tests/Entrance Exams was to plan for potential resource needs. The least important purpose was selection (i.e. to get a place in the school) with only one school stating that this was the reason for the tests. See Table 10 below.

**Preparing for Transition**

A number of strategies were used by the secondary schools to help prepare students for the transition to post-primary education. Most schools invited prospective students to an open day (98%), with the vast majority having information booklets about their school (97%), organising information evenings for pupils of primary schools or sending teachers to speak to students in local primary schools (93%). One third (34%) send students to speak to pupils in primary schools. See Table 11.

---

**Table 10: Purposes of Transfer Tests**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>For what purpose are the transfer tests/entrance exams used?</th>
<th>Yes (%)</th>
<th>No (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To allocate students to classes according to ability</td>
<td>55.6</td>
<td>44.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To plan for potential resource needs</td>
<td>94.8</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selection purposes (i.e. to get a place in the school)</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>97.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To ensure mixed ability in all classes</td>
<td>64.7</td>
<td>35.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To assist schools in banding classes</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>50.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 11: Strategies to Prepare for Transition**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies used by secondary schools to prepare students for transition to post-primary schools</th>
<th>Yes (%)</th>
<th>No (%)</th>
<th>Unanswered</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Information booklets about your school</td>
<td>96.7</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information evenings for pupils of primary schools</td>
<td>95.1</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meetings with parents of prospective pupils</td>
<td>85.1</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sending students to speak to local primary schools</td>
<td>34.1</td>
<td>65.9</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sending teachers to speak to local primary schools</td>
<td>93.3</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inviting prospective students to an open day</td>
<td>98.3</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Only one respondent said that he/she was not aware of any strategies used in their school. Other strategies that were noted included the organisation of an activity day in August; a 6th year mentor allocated to new students; a fun morning in school before the summer; teachers having 1-1 meetings with students before end of first month and meeting parents and students before starting in school.

Teachers were asked if they were aware of any strategies used by their local primary schools in order to help to prepare the students’ transition to post-primary school. While 13 teachers stated that they were not aware of any, the majority of respondents noted the various strategies they were aware of. The most popular strategies included:
• Primary schools allowing secondary schools access to their school.

• Primary schools co-operating with secondary schools re: their open days and encouraging 5th and 6th year students to attend open evenings in the secondary schools.

• HSCL teachers in primary and post-primary liaising with each other.

• Primary teachers briefing students on the changes ahead of them and preparing them for the different school environment.

• Introducing the pupils to a sample of the new subjects e.g. French.

**Strategies for Primary Schools**

The post-primary teachers were asked what, in their opinion, could be done by the primary school to best prepare their 6th class pupils for the transition to second-level education. In relation to personal skills it was noted that pupils should be encouraged to be independent. It was suggested that the 5th and 6th class pupils could be exposed to a greater variety of teachers perhaps by way of team teaching and be informed about the new school environment e.g. moving from classroom to classroom, new teachers and using a homework journal. It was also suggested that, if possible, in the last few months of 6th class, extra subjects could be introduced, and if they haven’t been given homework at weekends then it should be started so that they are prepared for this when they start in post-primary in September. Liaising with the post-primary school was seen to be very important, and it was suggested that samples of the post-primary timetable could be sought by the primary school. Another way of increasing the communication between the schools was to engage in activities with the secondary school and find ways of working together on local projects. To prepare for transition, past pupils who have completed 1st year could be invited back to relate their experiences and 6th class pupils could maybe visit the secondary schools and use facilities such as Science Labs/Sports hall.

**Strategies for Post-Primary Schools**

Some of the strategies suggested that could be adopted by the post-primary school to aid successful transition included the introduction of a comprehensive induction programme and a well-structured transfer induction policy. Many felt that an orientation day in the post-primary school should be held, where pupils could meet all their teachers and where it could be explained what will be expected of them with regard to books, homework journal and so on. In general, a closer relationship between the two levels was seen as being vital, including a greater awareness by 2nd level teachers of the curriculum used in primary schools, and meetings between the relevant post-primary teachers and the 6th class teachers at primary level. Putting in place a mentor or ‘buddy’ programme was also seen as a positive initiative. Some schools noted that the County Youth Federation had put in place a transition from primary to secondary school programme of which they were part. The Meitheal programme and the organising of bonding days were also mentioned.

**SEN Pupils**

From the school’s point of view the biggest issue in relation to pupils with special educational needs was the fact that the supports given to special needs children in primary school (from resource hours to a SNA) do not automatically transfer with them when they move to secondary school. It is the responsibility of the secondary school to arrange for the necessary assessments to be carried out and this causes major delays in the allocation of supports and hence they are not available when the child starts school in September.

A further issue for schools was that proper facilities – such as lifts and resources – were not always in place in time to meet the needs of the special needs child. With regard to the transfer of pupils with special educational needs it was felt that the primary school should advise parents to let the prospective new school know about learning difficulties and other needs of the students. It was also recommended that students not be allowed to withdraw from Irish without receiving sanction from the Department of Education and Science.

From the pupils’ point of view, it was argued that the process of transition entailed the same worries as it did for every child – fitting in, making new friends, feelings of isolation, fear of bullying and a fear of failure and not being able to do exams.
Curriculum

Respondents were asked to indicate how familiar they were with the primary school curriculum. Just under one fifth (19%) said they were not familiar with the primary school curriculum at all. However, it is heartening, that two thirds (66%) were somewhat familiar and 15% were very familiar with the primary school curriculum. Almost a quarter of respondents were very familiar with how their own particular subject was addressed in the primary curriculum, with half being somewhat familiar. See Table 12 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How familiar are you with how your own particular subject areas are addressed in the primary curriculum?</th>
<th>Freq</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very familiar</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>24.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat familiar</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>50.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at all</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not applicable</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>16.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Respondents were asked to state to what extent they agreed with the statement that teaching methodologies and approaches at second-level are broadly similar to those at primary level. A majority of 62% of respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed. Only a minority agreed. See Table 13 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“Teaching Methodologies and Approaches at second-level are broadly similar to those at primary level”</th>
<th>Freq</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>18.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don't know</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>18.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>53.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One teacher stated that in her experience students were progressing to secondary education with appallingly low levels of literacy and numeracy. Whether this was specific to this school (urban community college, designated disadvantaged) or a more widespread problem, is moot.

Challenges faced by new First-year Pupils

The challenges faced by new entrants to post-primary schools are many. When asked to identify some of these challenges, the answers included coping with the length of the school day; the large number of subjects and teachers that the students have to cope with on a daily basis; adjusting to a big school with a large number of pupils and teachers – particularly if the pupil has come from a small rural school. Practical issues like coping with the varied timetable, having to move from class to class every 40 minutes and ensuring that they have the correct books for each lesson were also noted as challenges. Social issues such as concerns about bullying and making new friends, especially if the pupil has moved to a school on his/her own, were also noted.

Factors Influencing Transition

Respondents were invited to identify the factors which, in their opinion, influenced transition. Responses given referred to the arrangement of open evenings by second-level schools and the distribution of information booklets to parents and pupils. It was also stated that it is very important to have good communication and co-operation between the primary and post-primary schools and with the parents of new students. Many of the schools provided a pastoral and academic support system to ease transition for the new pupils. Schools provided this in different ways, from 6th year students mentoring 1st year students, prefects mentoring 1st years, and a tutor system where each class was allocated one teacher to whom the students could talk if they had any issues or concerns.

Issues that could be seen as contributing to problems in the transition process focused on the lack of communication between the primary and post-primary school. In addition it was noted that it was not helpful if inaccurate reports of the progress of students were received from the primary school.
Post-primary school teachers were asked to identify pupil-factors that influence transition. They felt that the pupils who had siblings in the school, and who established good school habits – such as doing homework and being mannerly – achieved a successful transition. They also stressed the importance of good parental support of, and involvement in, the pupil’s education.

**Transfer of Information between Primary and Post-Primary**

In relation to the transfer of pupil information between primary and post-primary schools, 65 of the 67 teachers who responded agreed that primary schools should provide information on pupils’ progress/achievement to the post-primary school. The overall majority (83%) of teachers stated that they did receive information on achievement from feeder primary schools. Of the 13 that stated that they didn’t or didn’t know, nine stated that they did seek the information.

In general, it appeared that it was the HSCL teachers that gathered the information from the primary schools and parents if necessary. In some cases the principal or guidance counsellors from the secondary schools were also involved. This information was received orally and informally or by email in some cases. Some post-primary schools sent forms to the pupils that had been accepted into their school and requested anything out of the ordinary that the primary school felt was important for them to be aware of. The respondents felt that receiving information was very useful and noted that they would like to receive full details (including psychological reports) in relation to those children with SEN. Some teachers also noted that they would like to receive relevant social and personal information, including relevant information on the family background of the child. One teacher stated that the old system of report cards was very effective. A number of teachers stated that they currently received adequate information.

**Conclusion**

There was a general consensus that good communication between primary and secondary school was essential. Primary and post-primary education should not be viewed as totally separate experiences but rather as a continuum. One teacher felt that there should be a national plan for the transfer of pupils from 6th class to 1st year, stating that the needs of all children needed to be met in a uniform and consistent way in all schools.

Over 80% of post-primary teachers agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that “transition to second-level is an issue which requires specific interventions in education in Ireland”. While there was a consensus that the majority of students cope well with the transition, it was vital that the necessary supports be in place for the few that didn’t handle the transition well. Most responding schools stated that they had the supports in place whether it was the HSCL teacher, guidance counsellors or a pastoral team made up of the aforementioned and others.

It is interesting to note that in relation to transition, a number of the same concerns were common to those teachers of 1st year students in secondary school and the junior infant teachers. The issues of immaturity, length of school day, dealing with a new environment, not fitting in, special needs children and the delay in getting the necessary resources and supports in place by day one of school were all raised repeatedly. These are issues that affect all teachers who have to deal with children in transition.
Transition from Primary to Post-Primary School

Findings from Focus Groups

Introduction
Following the distribution of the questionnaires on a national basis, a number of focus group discussions were subsequently held in order to explore in a more detailed way the opinions of primary teachers, post-primary teachers and parents in relation to the issue of transition from primary to post-primary school. Two focus group discussions were held with primary teachers of sixth class pupils. The first focus group discussion was held in Cork involving seven teachers from a variety of schools, none of which was disadvantaged. The second focus group discussion took place in Dublin involving six teachers from schools designated as disadvantaged. Two focus group discussions were also organised with post-primary teachers, one in Cork involving five teachers and one in Dublin involving six teachers. Four of the post-primary teachers in Dublin taught in schools designated as disadvantaged. The final focus group discussion took place in Dublin involving fourteen parents. The discussions were wide-ranging, but generally centered on entrance tests/assessments, the curriculum, subject choice, methodologies and special needs.

In general, teachers were concerned about the social, functional and logistical issues around the area of transition. Parents’ concerns revolved around relationships with teachers, care, understanding, emotional issues, bullying, special needs, readiness, school policy, communications, information and reporting.

Communication
The issue of greatest concern to all – primary teachers, post-primary teachers and parents – is communication. The theme of communication emerged in all focus groups in various dimensions. All groups noted the lack of communication between the different sectors. It is evident from teachers’ comments that very little communication takes place between teachers in primary schools and teachers in post-primary schools. The system does not appear to facilitate this. The following are examples of such comments.

“I think the biggest problem is that there is little or no link between the primary and secondary school.”
(Primary teacher)

“We don’t know what is going on in secondary schools now and teachers of first-years don’t know what is going on in the Primary school.”
(Primary teacher)

Primary teachers commented that second-level teachers didn’t seek their opinion about the pupils that were transferring. Primary teachers were also of the view that there needed to be more formal structures between primary and post-primary to facilitate communication, as the primary school had very useful information on students that could be passed on. For example:

“We have second-level schools who never approach us looking for feedback on the children, which is a pity really but they have their own criteria for assessing children. But we are the people on the ground with very valid information that really needs to be given to them - There is a lack of trust.”
(Primary teacher)

“The primary school teachers had taken them at a very young age and brought them along and lived with them, seen their strengths, weaknesses, their anxieties and even medical conditions and other things.”
(Primary teacher)

Post-primary teachers said that it was vital to have good relations with the feeder schools but wondered could more be done at primary level to prepare sixth class for secondary in terms of emotional and organisational development. Many schools had transition and intervention programmes to assist students but there did not appear to be a cohesive policy in place nationally. Some second-level teachers expressed the view that more
needed to be done in this area. Teachers listed a variety of interventions taking place including open nights, student induction days and 5th/6th class visits.

Parents also had issues with communication. Quite a number of parents expressed the view that transition was a huge milestone and they felt powerless to help as the second-level was a mystery to them as parents. Many were of the view that there should be more information made available to parents regarding subject choices while the children were still in primary school. The lack of knowledge of the second-level system and the uncertainty this creates are captured in the following comments:

“There should be programmes put in place specifically for parents.”
(Parent)

“It is not explained to parents what subjects are and what is involved in them and it needs to be explained so that the kids don’t come in doing three subjects they hate.”
(Parent)

The following interpretation of what open days can mean to parents when they feel they don’t receive the information they require, poses a challenge for schools to consider!

“Many second-level schools have open days but these are mainly to sell the school not to inform parents.”
(Parent)

The theme of communication also permeated many of the other issues raised by teachers and parents.

Concerns Relating to Transition
In general, teachers were of the view that most children made the transition from primary school to post-primary quite well. Post-primary teachers were generally of the opinion that children that do well in primary would also do well at second-level and that most students adjusted well. However, there were a few children who needed more support in the process. There were intervention programmes available in some areas. However, teachers considered such programmes to be sporadic, diverse and depending on individual contacts.

Primary teachers stated that there were a lot of pupils in their schools who were not ready for the move to second-level. Special needs children were particularly vulnerable especially those whose supports did not travel with them.

“I think for special needs children or children with problems the transition to secondary is a total nightmare.”
(Primary teacher)

Post-primary teachers commented on the need to consider the whole area of special needs. It was felt that time and energy were being wasted trying to get help for some students when this entitlement to help should have followed from primary school. Many said that entrance tests were used to identify those with special needs.

Primary teachers were of the view that parents and children were not adequately prepared for transition in social, emotional and organisational terms. According to primary teachers, the lack of self-esteem, lack of co-ordination, poor listening and immaturity were major factors inhibiting successful transition programmes for some children. Many children, they felt, were listening to ‘street talk’ about what will happen to them when they transferred. Some teachers expressed the view that it is the ‘average’ child that suffers more in that s/he does not fit into any particular category. It is interesting that the post-primary teachers were of the view that more could be done at primary level in preparing children for secondary in terms of social and emotional development.

Post-primary teachers also expressed views about children who had difficulties with transition. According to the post-primary teachers, a whole school approach to ‘problem children’ was needed in order to assist them and supports should be put in place for children who were experiencing difficulties prior to transition. There was a recognition among post-primary teachers that some children don’t settle in to post-primary school well, as evident from the following comment:
“There are always those who don’t settle in by Christmas and you have to be careful about those.”
(Post-primary teacher)

Post-primary teachers were of the view that transition itself was not the main problem but rather issues associated with different teaching methodologies, the number of teachers, organisational issues, timetables and rules.

“Academically it takes them a while to settle in but I am not personally worried about that but about their self esteem, interacting with other students and finding their way around.”
(Post-primary teacher)

According to one post-primary teacher, some schools had flexible transition policies, to give students time to adapt but according to this teacher such policies appear to be at odds with what the DES are demanding i.e. for schools to stream students at an early stage.

Many parents also expressed anxiety about their children transferring to second-level in a number of areas. Some felt that their children would not be able to organise themselves with different classes and different teachers, a view shared by the primary teachers. Other parents listed the transition itself coupled with physical and emotional changes in the young people as hugely worrying. Transition was an emotional time for parents too. They were concerned about how well their children would settle and whether they would be bullied, and the pressure on students, in general, as the following comments illustrate:

“You feel closer to them in Primary’ ---‘They are developing as well and it’s all coming together and it’s not an easy time.”
(Parent).

“If you report that a child is being bullied and nothing is done about it you can just picture how you feel and how the child feels.”
(Parent)

It is evident from the above comments that both teachers and parents have concerns about some pupils regarding their transition to second-level.

However, the transition to post-primary was also seen as an exciting time for pupils. Parents stated that their children blossomed when they went to second-level with one parent expressing the view that the fact that the students have different teachers was the key factor in this development. One parent said that her children were looking forward to second-level with all the different subjects and activities.

All parents felt that some type of a mentoring or buddy system was a good idea for schools.

**Entrance Tests/Assessments**

Entrance tests were a matter of concern among all the groups of participants. The same themes recurred in all the focus groups around the issues of timing, content of the test and liaison between the primary and post-primary school. Such tests were criticised by parents as they caused a lot of anxiety, not alone for the students, but for the parents as well.

**Timing**

The timing of transition/entrance tests was an issue of concern for both parents and primary teachers. There were several examples given of post-primary schools holding entrance tests in October and November of the sixth class year. Some parents felt that they had only gone into sixth class, were only settling in and that this was far too early. The timing was also an issue for teachers. This was compounded by the fact that in any sixth class there could be children going to several secondary schools in the area. The tests impact on the primary school curriculum for the year when there are secondary schools holding tests at varying times between October and March/April.
Test Content
There was a lot of confusion about the content of the entrance or transition tests. In general, the parents were not aware of the content of the tests. They weren’t sure if it was based on the primary school curriculum and felt that it wasn’t fair that the children had spent eight years studying the primary curriculum and then they were getting an exam on something else. Parents expressed interest in seeing entrance examination papers. The general tone of the discussion is summed up in the following comment from a parent:

“I would love to see it. I’ve never seen the paper. My daughter came out and said it was okay but she said a lot of them thought the maths was very hard and there were one or two things that we hadn’t done.”

(Parent)

There was a similar concern among primary teachers about the content of the tests. Primary teachers are not generally aware of what’s included in the tests. This is evident in the following comment:

“We were that time preparing for tests, trying to get tests. This is what people did - trying to see what kind of questions were for that school or what comes up in this or that school. Teachers were very much in the dark in regard to the content. They felt it would be helpful if the post-primary schools gave general guidelines. Is it a standardised test? multiple choice? based on which curriculum? It would help children if they knew the format expected of them, length of time allocated. Children have real fears about topics coming up on papers which have not been covered.”

(Primary teacher)

An example was given of one feeder school for a particular post-primary school that was aware of the content of the test and spent a huge amount of time teaching to the test.

The post-primary teachers confirmed they did transition tests. However, there was a huge variation in the time of year they were administered and the format of the tests. Some schools used a combination of standardised tests and their own tests. Sometimes the tests were based on the fifth class programme. Some are set by the career guidance teacher. Tests were usually in English, maths and Irish. One post-primary school took the fifth class standardised tests and nothing else.

An example was given of one school, which had complete streaming and two learning support classes, where the tests were set by the English, Irish and maths teachers in conjunction with two primary schools. The reasons for the tests were to decide the allocation of pupils to the various streams. This school also does a reading test and in the beginning of September they do the NRIT test. Another school uses AH2 – numerical, reasoning and general IQ testing.

There are differing practices in relation to streaming and mixed ability groupings. One school did not separate the honours and pass in Maths until 2nd year but Department of Education inspectors advised that this should be done at Christmas in 1st year. When they tried not to separate for Irish and English until 3rd year they were similarly advised. Another school reported that they are going back to mixed ability grouping on the recommendation of the Department of Education.

The following is an example of practice in relation to transition tests:

“They have now reverted back to a mixture of the standardised and they do an essay to get a flavour of the child----it is not actually their ability but a flavour of how the child thinks.”

(Post-primary teacher)

Many parents were of the opinion that some evaluation of students was important upon entry to second-level but that it could be organised better and more consideration should be given to reports from the primary schools. There was general agreement among parents that it would be preferable if school reports from primary schools were used instead of entrance tests. This, it was felt, was especially true for students with special educational needs. There was general agreement among all participants that better communication systems should be put in place in order to alleviate stress prior to entrance test and examinations.
Transfer of Information from Primary to Post-primary

Related to the issue of what is being tested was the use of primary school records and assessments. Primary teachers generally were of the view that post-primary schools disregarded the assessment from the primary school. There was general agreement among the parents that primary school reports on progress and achievement should be passed on to post-primary schools and that these should form the basis of decisions in regard to class allocation and subject choice.

There was a variety of practice among schools in the transfer of information between primary and post-primary schools. One primary school reported that they pass on all reports of standardised tests together with school reports, the NRIT and all psychological reports. Some post-primary schools have developed forms which deal with other issues such as behaviour and punctuality. However, there seemed to be general dissatisfaction among primary teachers with the level of co-operation in regard to children with behavioural and emotional difficulties. It was felt that such children were often misunderstood and misplaced in classes which led to difficulties, possible exclusion and ultimate failure within the education system. Several examples were given of such incidents with children which the primary teachers felt could have been avoided if post-primary schools had more consultation with primary schools.

Teachers in post-primary schools were of the opinion that reporting from primary schools should be more formal where reports could be filled in advance and emailed to the schools. However, there were reservations expressed in both groups on exchanging information: particularly in regard to confidentiality. Some post-primary teachers felt that perhaps children should start with a clean slate. In cases where there were difficulties, primary teachers were a little unsure of how much information to pass on as it was not clear what would happen to it. This uncertainty is evident in the following comment:

“There are huge issues around confidentiality. We know of children with lots of family issues and we don’t know whether to pass them on or not.”

(Primary teacher)

There was a suggestion the NCCA report card template would help in a move towards a more formal system of information-transfer nationally.

Curriculum

Parents had most concerns around the choice of subject areas. Many felt that children had to make subject choices without having a real understanding of what the subjects entail. The children were then confined to a three-year programme which they may dislike. Many parents felt that there should be information evenings for parents when the children are in fourth or fifth class. This was felt necessary as parents did not have a full understanding of what was entailed in many subjects outside of the basic subjects.

There was also concern that many children have to pick their subjects so early. One example was of a child who had to make her choice between the Saturday of the entrance exam and the following Tuesday. Once the choices were handed in there was no room for a change of mind. Sometimes subjects are in a combination and the child may have no interest in the second subject. An example was given of one college where the children are given the opportunity to experience the subjects each term and make their subject choices at the end of first-year. It was felt that many children need advice in regard to science as many did not understand that science was required for many different careers. A similar concern was expressed by the primary school teachers in that the children don’t know what is entailed in each subject and nobody is giving them this information. One area in Dublin was identified as having a good strategy for the last number of years with a transition programme which included the area of subject choice. The pupils are given opportunities to discuss subject content and attend four different classes in a morning.

Post-primary teachers also gave examples of open nights for parents and students where the children do mini classes in areas like Art, Science and Computers.

Concerns around how children would cope with the different methodologies were expressed by all groups. Parents were concerned about children having to get used to a variety of teachers and a variety of subjects. Primary teachers expressed concern about the transition from a more pastoral-based approach in primary school to a more subject-based approach in post-primary school. One teacher in the post-primary group felt that the
curriculum in post-primary school was dominated by state exams which changed the approach to teaching from child-friendly and experiential in the primary school to the achievement of points in post-primary.

The over-emphasis on academic performance was mentioned by one post-primary teacher who stated that schools should encourage students to engage more in the arts, sport and extra curricular activities. Other teachers pointed to the busy lifestyle of students and felt that students needed guidance to live a balanced life. One teacher focused on the information and communication age and students’ needs to be supported to develop these skills. The following comments were made by post-primary teachers in relation to curriculum.

“There should be more to school than books.”

“It’s not so much having to know facts but how to process information, what we need are good communicators, good collaborators and good organisers.”

Role of Parents

Teachers at both levels acknowledged the important role of parents in the transition process. This is evident in the following comments from some post-primary teachers:

“Obviously happy contented children of whatever gender thrive.”
(Post-primary teacher)

“Parental involvement was vital.”
(Post-primary teacher)

“The more you get to know them and their parents the better it is for all.”
(Post-primary teacher)

However, it was noted that this was very difficult to achieve when post-primary teachers had 28 different students coming in to them every 40 minutes. It was also stated that teachers needed to take into account the socio-economic situation students find themselves in. As one teacher put it:

“It is very easy to have this notion of a family in your head but what is the family now?”
(Post-primary teacher)

In relation to school choice, primary teachers stated that it was the child that usually chose the second-level school - they go where their friends are going. It is interesting to note that most parents reported that it is the siblings who make the choice of second-level school attended. It was generally agreed that the possibility of not getting a place in a second-level school was very worrying for parents.

Concluding Comment

The discussions in the focus groups yielded some very interesting views on the various aspects of transition. There was much consensus among the primary teachers, the post-primary teachers and the parents regarding the various issues. It is clear that the tests held by post-primary schools cause a lot of unease among primary teachers and parents, in addition to creating pressure for pupils. Policies on transition, which involve parents and pupils, primary and post-primary teachers are likely to improve the process of communication, which, in turn, should enhance the experience of transition for pupils.
Transition from Primary to Post-primary

A Case Study in St. Mary’s N.S. Cobh: 2006 -2008

Transition from primary to post-primary school is widely regarded as one of the most significant challenges facing our pupils. This limited study focuses on the views of a small sample of primary and post-primary pupils, parents and teachers. It originated as an attempt to ascertain the expectations and concerns of each of the groups and also to determine commonalities across the spectrum.

The study was conducted over a period of three years and tracked three cohorts of pupils from sixth class through to the end of first-year. A total of 50 pupils participated, together with 20 parents, six primary teachers (two principals and four sixth class teachers) and six post-primary teachers (two principals and four first-year year heads). Research was carried out using questionnaires, interviews and focus groups.

The study is based in a large urban Catholic girls’ school (with Infant boys). Most pupils choose to enrol at one of two post-primary schools lying in close proximity to the primary school. One of these is a large voluntary co-ed secondary school; the other is a smaller VEC Community College. A small number of pupils travel a distance of ten kilometres to an all-girls voluntary secondary school. The study addressed the following issues:

- Pupils’ expectations of post-primary school.
- Pupils’ concerns about post-primary school.
- Parents’ concerns about post-primary school.
- Personal attributes which aid transition.
- Means by which schools could facilitate transition.

The research was designed to enable possible comparisons between the views of the different groups of participants with regard to each issue. The precise wording of questions was adapted to suit the circumstances of the group. In addressing concerns about post-primary school, for example, primary pupils were asked: “Does anything about moving to post-primary school worry you?” First-year pupils were asked: “When you were in sixth class, what do you remember worrying about regarding the move to post-primary?” Parents of primary pupils were asked “What do you think your child is worried about?” And teachers were asked “What do you think pupils worry about regarding the move to post-primary?”

Study Results

What are Sixth Class pupils’ positive expectations of post-primary school?

Pupils and parents were asked this question. Responses ranged across a variety of aspects of post-primary school but there was quite a similarity of response among the participant groups. Most frequently mentioned, and equally ranked, by both primary and post-primary pupils were new subjects, new friends, new teachers, better facilities/equipment. These also figured highly with parents, who also listed extra-curricular activities and different styles. The similarity of response between pupils and parents was notable and would seem to indicate that parents are very aware of their children’s expectations of post-primary school.

Table 14: Sixth Class pupils’ positive expectations of post-primary school

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Primary pupils %</th>
<th>Post-primary pupils %</th>
<th>Primary parents %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New subjects</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New friends</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New teachers</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extra facilities/equipment</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extra-curricular activities</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New learning styles</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**What are Sixth Class pupils’ concerns regarding post-primary school?**

Each of the participant groups was asked to list what they believed to be the chief concerns of pupils entering post-primary education. As with the previous question, there was a quite significant degree of similarity in the responses of each group. Bullying was believed by all groups to be the issue of most concern to pupils making the transition from primary. It is heartening to see this level of awareness of the problem but it may also be indicative of increased prevalence of bullying among older pupils. Other recurring themes among primary and post-primary pupils were making new friends, fear of getting lost, coping with new subjects, increased workload, and new teachers. The parent and teacher groups also listed these themes which again illustrates an encouraging degree of awareness of the issues as perceived by the pupils. It is worthwhile noting that academic performance did not appear to be a major concern for the pupils’ groups.

**Table 15: Sixth Class pupils’ concerns regarding post-primary school**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Primary pupils %</th>
<th>Post-primary pupils %</th>
<th>Primary parents %</th>
<th>Primary teachers %</th>
<th>Post-primary teachers %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bullying</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting lost</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making friends</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping with new subjects</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased workload</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New teachers</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic performance</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**What concerns do parents have regarding pupils’ transition to post-primary school?**

With the first cohort of participants, this question was posed to parents only. However, in subsequent years primary pupils were also asked what they believed their parents’ concerns to be. As with the previous questions, the similarity of the responses was striking. The main themes of bullying, making friends, coping with the workload emerged once again. A sizeable number of parents worried about the change from a single-sex classroom to a co-ed situation, while many also doubted their own competence particularly regarding new subjects.

**Table 16: Parents’ concerns regarding pupils’ transition to post-primary school.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Primary Pupils %</th>
<th>Primary parents %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bullying</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making friends</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased workload</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change to co-ed</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence with new subjects</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Which personal attributes help pupils in their transition to post-primary?**

This question was asked of each group and it is interesting to note the differences in response. Primary pupils placed most importance on academic skills, which contrasted markedly with their response to Q2 where they did not rate academic performance as significant. They were also the only group to rate such skills so highly. Secondary pupils placed a high value on non-academic skills, social skills, concentration, behaviour, and time management. Parents, however, prioritised academic achievement together with adaptability. They also listed social skills, behaviour and time management but did not assign the same importance to these. Both groups of teachers rated self-confidence, high self-esteem and good social skills as essential attributes for successful transition. In designing transition support programmes, perhaps we should focus more on developing pupils’
confidence, social skills and adaptability, thus raising children’s awareness of the importance of these, not just during the transition to post-primary school but as essential lifeskills.

**Table 17: Personal attributes which help pupils in their transition to post-primary**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill</th>
<th>Primary pupils %</th>
<th>Post-primary pupils %</th>
<th>Primary parents %</th>
<th>Primary teachers %</th>
<th>Post-primary teachers %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic ability</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adaptability</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social skills</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behaviour</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study skills</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication skills</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What strategies could be used by schools to make transition easier?

Each group of participants was asked to suggest strategies which schools might adopt in an effort to ease the transition process. The responses were, once again, strikingly similar, with the same core suggestions coming from each group, which reflects the findings reported in much of the literature on this subject. During the life of this study, many of the strategies have been adopted by local schools (some as a direct response to the study). These are indicated by italics in Table 18 below.

**Table 18: Strategies which could be used by schools to make transition easier**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Suggested strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organise visits to post-primary school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater contact between primary and post-primary schools (pupils and teachers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary past-pupils to speak to sixth class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-primary teachers to speak to sixth class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourage more co-operation between ‘feeder’ primary schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set up a buddy system to encourage pupils to voice their anxieties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organised transfer of pupil records</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Show DVD of post-primary activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allow primary pupils to experience a day (or part) in post-primary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More parental involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organise inter-school activities- games, quizzes, debates etc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set up email/video conferencing between sixth class and first-years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusion

This was a very limited and subjective study of a very small group of participants over a relatively short period of time. Nevertheless, the issues of concern to these pupils as they made the transition to post-primary were broadly similar to those identified in other larger national and international profiles (e.g. Smyth et al, 2004; Fouracre, 1991; Stradling and MacNeil, 2000; Zeedyk et al, 2003). These included making friends, fear of getting lost, anxiety about ability to cope with new subjects, teachers and learning styles. Fear of bullying is the most prevalent fear although speaking with students who have completed first-year is somewhat reassuring as, for most students, this fear proves to be unfounded.

The extent of consensus between all of the participants is also noteworthy. Awareness among parents and teachers - and the pupils themselves - of the areas of concern in the transition process is very encouraging. Local and national programmes and initiatives to support transition need to take cognisance of and utilise the experience and expertise of these groups who are most affected.

As more attention is focused on this crucial stage of development for our young students, it is incumbent on those involved at primary and post-primary level to develop innovative and effective strategies, individually and co-operatively, to ensure the most beneficial outcome for our pupils.
Transition from Primary to Post-Primary

Northern Ireland

Introduction
Despite the relatively small size of the school population, Northern Ireland has some variations in transfer that are worth noting. The major procedure, which is currently under review, has been the 11+ examination. In the Craigavon area there is a procedure called the Dickson Plan which uses a phased transfer approach with comprehensive junior secondary level and selection at 14 to transfer to either a vocational or academic course. An alternative approach is the continuous system for children from age three to 16 in the Rupert Steiner School.

The 11+
The 11+ examination is a remnant from the days when second-level education was the preserve of the wealthy so that they could access a university education. Gillard (2006) reports the first usage of the terms primary and secondary education as a means of delineating the different stages of education in *Education of the Adolescent*, (1926). It was recommended that primary schooling should finish at 11 for all “normal children” (sic) and that they should then go on to some form of post-primary education, designated as secondary.

Gillard (2007) in his brief history of English education records the changing governmental attitudes to second-level education in the twentieth century. The Spens Report (1938) recommended three types of secondary school - grammar, technical and secondary modern - the so called ‘Tripartite System’. The Norwood Report (1943) claimed this system was needed because children had three types of minds: minds that either liked learning, liked applied science or did not like ideas and were generally dull. The Butler Education Act (1944) which came later, was predicated on the notion that the nature of a child’s education should be based on his/her capacity and not parental circumstances.

The 11+ test was predicated on the grounds that children’s intellectual development was believed to be set in stone by age 11 and could not progress later - a view promulgated by the psychologist Cyril Burt and educationist Percy Nunn who asserted the “absolute determination of intelligence by hereditary or genetic factors” (Galton, Simon and Croll, 1980). The 11+ did provide a limited access to a grammar school education and subsequently the potential to join the middle classes for the children of poor families if the child was able to pass a verbal reasoning test and thus qualify for a scholarship. However, that context has now changed given that second-level education is now universal.

Universal Second-level Education
When second-level schools became available to all, by the 1960s, the newer schools were designated as secondary modern/intermediate to differentiate them from the grammar schools. Each sector taught a slightly different curriculum. The grammar schools taught modern subjects as well as The Classics whereas the secondary schools taught modern subjects and crafts instead of Latin and Greek. Since there had not been an increase in grammar school places, they represented about 25% of the available school places, and the 11+ was then used as a method of selecting who was fit for a more academic career.

Criticism of the old verbal reasoning tests of the pass/fail type as opposed to the modern adaptation of grades, (which was dependent on the size of the examined cohort in any year, see Table 1 below) and also an increase in available spaces (raised to about 38% when the school population was not shrinking) in grammar schools in 1989, brought changes to the examination in the early 1990s so that the test (two sessions) now covered mathematics, English and science.

Supporters of the 11+ make a great case for this method of selection because they claim that it gives poorer children a chance to better themselves. Recent research by Gallagher and Smith (2000) and McNally (2007) does tend to support this by showing that both poor and wealthy children do better at grammar than at secondary schools. It is not clear, however, if factors such as resource availability, lower expectations of non-grammar school teachers or the psychological affects of being labeled a failure contribute in any way to below par performance of children in the non-grammar sector. There is a number of factors that impact on pupil achievement in schools. It is worth noting that in non-grammar schools the average number of pupils on free

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Transitions in the Primary School
school meals is usually over 25% and in grammar schools the figure is usually below 7%. Major criticisms of the examination still point to the fact that children from wealthy families could, by providing their children with tutors rehearsing the format of the test, buy them a place in the grammar school.

**The 11+ - a Valid Measuring Tool?**

Gardner and Cowan (2005) carried out a large scale analysis of 3000 practice scripts in Northern Ireland. They were unable to access real scripts from government offices. The practice tests had been sat by pupils in simulated exam conditions and marked in exactly the same way as the real scripts, that is the results were age adjusted, standardised and weighted to establish whether tests present a valid means of selection. Table 19 below, sets out the distribution of grades awarded in this exam;

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grade A</td>
<td>will be awarded to the 25% of the transfer age group who achieve the highest results in the tests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade B1</td>
<td>will be awarded to the next 5% of the transfer age group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade B2</td>
<td>will be awarded to the next 5% of the transfer age group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade C1</td>
<td>will be awarded to the next 5% of the transfer age group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade C2</td>
<td>will be awarded to the next 5% of the transfer age group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade D</td>
<td>will be awarded to the remainder of those who took the transfer tests</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: Transfer Procedure 2008. Booklet for parents p.5)

Gardner and Cowan discovered that the highest and lowest grades (A-D) were separated by just 18 of the available 150 marks and that the standard error was in the order of 4.75. Therefore, candidate ranking has the potential to misclassify up to 2/3 of the test-taking cohort by as many as three grades. Further, the paper highlights the lack of difficulty of the paper which allows children with 70% of the answers correct to be awarded D grades. This, they say, argues the case for this exam to comply with international testing standards. The DENI does, however, issue a caveat to parent about both this exam and the grades.

It is important to stress that these grades do not determine children as being suitable for any particular type of school and that none of these grades guarantees a pupil a grammar school place or a place at any school (Transfer Procedure, Booklet for parents, 2008, page 6).

Changes to Northern Ireland’s Education provision in the 1990s - there is now only one Curriculum (no separate grammar/vocational) - have meant that there is even less need now for the 11+. Both sectors now teach vocational as well as academic subjects, hence, one of the reasons the Department of Education (DENI) is phasing out the examination.

Apart from the above, many educationists have voiced concerns about how the preparations of pupils for this test completely skews the primary school key-stage 2 curriculum as parental pressure forces schools to hot-house pupils in the year leading up to the test dates in November. Since pupil numbers have started shrinking there is also pressure of competition among the primary schools and the chief reference point for parents is the school’s success in obtaining 11+ passes.

Post November there is a hiatus in the school year as P7 pupils feel they have finished because the exam is over. Therefore, motivation of the pupils becomes more difficult. For the pupils and parents there is the pressure of impending failure and then the anxious wait between November and the first Saturday in February for the results. To appreciate the concerns of parents one has only to look at the amounts they are willing to pay to have their children attend the correct grammar school. Apart from the coaching fees with tutors during the two years leading up to the 11+ (fees about £25-30 per hour) there is the addition of yearly fees in the new school. Some parents are being asked for up to £2000 per year (Doyle, 2008).

Grammar schools may celebrate that they have the cream of P7 pupils coming to them but the secondary schools have to deal with children whose self-esteem has been dealt a savage blow by being labelled a failure at 11, especially so when the grading system is so flawed. Children may have got 70% of their answers correct and still be labelled failures. Most of the secondary schools have evolved good practice to rescue the self-esteem of their
year 8 intake by developing extensive pastoral-care programmes. This is seen as less of a priority in the grammar-school sector (Gallagher et al., 2000).

On top of this the number of school children has been falling in Northern Ireland in the last two decades. Initially this hit the Controlled sector (mainly Protestant Community) but this has also begun to affect the Maintained sector (mainly Catholic Community) in the last ten years. As a consequence schools in the jurisdiction have now a surplus of over 50,000 places in schools across both primary and secondary sectors. This is forecast to rise to 80,000 in the next generation as birth rates continue to fall year on year.

This has led to the closure and amalgamation of many schools in the secondary sector with non-grammar schools faring worse. This is because the grammar schools fill their places with children that, in the past, when there was pressure on places, would have been deemed “failures” - that is they do not achieve A, B or C grades. The corollary of this is that secondary schools will shrink and die as grammar schools continue to opt for filling desks rather than keep their much vaunted academic excellence and have empty desks. Many of these schools have already had to employ teachers who specialise in remedial education. Eventually there may be a two-tiered grammar sector with the less well-regarded filling the role of the extinct secondary schools.

The Dixon Plan

In the 1960s, the government of Northern Ireland established a new city, Craigavon, in County Armagh. At this time the Dickson Plan for transfer between primary and secondary education was put in place where children would automatically transfer to a junior secondary school at 11 (no exam) where they stay until 14. Selection for either an academic/vocational placing would take place at 14 and pupils either transferred to a local grammar or secondary school (DENI, 1998). However, some families entered their children for the 11+ and when successful sent their children out of the area to other grammar schools.

In an evaluation of the Craigavon system carried out on behalf of the Department of Education for Northern Ireland (DENI, 1998), it was reported that the delayed selection system received a high degree of popular support in the area because it seemed to have solved some of the more negative aspects of the 11+. It concluded that a significant part of this popularity was due to the wide range of alternatives available to pupils. It was found that the three senior grammar/high schools in the area achieve creditable levels of performance at least comparable with those outside of the area. There was also some evidence that those who are not selected at 14 were not as well served, particularly in the Controlled (state) schools. The report concluded that the two-tier system, on the evidence collected, did not provide a better alternative to the 11+ system.

Proposals for Change in the Transfer Arrangements

In 2002, the Minister for Education in the devolved Assembly stated that the 11+ would cease to be used as a selection tool post 2008. This proposal was supported by all the teacher unions. The proposal was also welcomed for the most part by Nationalists and attacked by Unionists. The subsequent collapse of the Assembly and the negotiations to restart it gave the opponents of change a chance to include clauses that would give them a veto over any initiatives they did not like.

When the Assembly restarted in 2007, the new Minister for Education proposed to follow through on the 2002 promise to stop academic selection at 11. However, the Minister was reticent to publish proposals for its replacement and the hiatus of almost a year gave the opponents of change the opportunity to attack the minister and her proposals.

A compromise was proposed to allow the grammar schools to academically select 50% of their year 8 intake in 2009, reducing to 30% and then 20% in the subsequent two years.

While this has not been taken as a total victory by the Grammar school lobby, led by the Association for Quality Education (AQE) and the Governing Bodies Association (GBA), it has led to two diverse reactions. AQE has proposed that the grammar schools should commission their own entrance exam to select potential pupils and claims to have signed up about 36 grammar schools who buy the test. The minister has countered this by saying that the costs of any legal cases of appeals brought by parents as a result of these tests will not be borne by the Department of Education but would have to be met by the defending school. She has also stated that any dilution of the new primary curriculum by schools taking time to prepare pupils for grammar school entrance exams would be “punished”, but how this would be done is not clear.
Possibly as a result of this, the GBA has brought forward another set of proposals that would in effect mirror the initial three years of the Dixon Plan with pupils attending “Comprehensive” second-level schools and then sitting academic selection tests at age 14, where they would then decide to take either the academic or vocational route. Further developments are awaited.

**Big School**

In 2002, Young Enterprise (YE) and the Dominican College, Fortwilliam, Belfast, developed a programme to deal with the move from primary into grammar school. The programme, called ‘Big School’, has now spread to around 120 schools in Northern Ireland and in 2008 it was adopted by schools in England where it is being used in P7 classrooms.

This programme was developed, with assistance from CCEA, to form an integral part of the new secondary curriculum which emphasises learning for life and work. New year 8s are involved in this programme, generally in the first two weeks of the new school year. Usually it takes three hours to deliver, so for that day the school suspends normal classes. The programme is delivered by people from Young Enterprise and teachers from the school who have been trained in the programme by YE. There is a cost to the school for joining the programme, an affiliate fee of £250, but at present this is a fraction of the true cost (£150 per class plus facilitator’s fee of £800 per session) because it is heavily subsidised with grants from the Ireland Fund (Peace Money).

**Case Studies**

Three case studies of transition practices in different schools are presented in order to illustrate the issues pertaining to transition from primary to post-primary school in Northern Ireland. The selected schools represent the various sectors in Northern Ireland’s education system.

**Case Study 1 Ashfield Boys’ Secondary School, East Belfast**

**Background**

Ashfield Boys’ Secondary School is a ‘Controlled’ (state) school, that is mostly attended by children from the Protestant community, set in suburban east Belfast, and caters for pupils from age 11 to age 18. It has a current roll of 648 pupils, which has risen year on year during the last decade and is forecast to grow to 700 pupils in 2008/09. The significance of this is that at present, schools in Northern Ireland in general and in Belfast in particular, are suffering a demographic downturn which means that there are currently in excess of 50,000 empty desks in the jurisdiction. This, in turn, has led to a period of rationalisation of school places and teachers’ posts, with the prospect of more to follow.

Pupil intake in 2007/08 was 110 in addition to seven pupils with statements of health or learning disability. A further 52 were rejected because of a lack of space. These pupils are drawn from 27 primary schools in the north Down/east Belfast area although the majority comes from just 10 schools. Despite the school’s location in the suburbs the vast majority of the pupils are from working class areas of east Belfast and would in the main be children who did not sit the 11+ transfer test or failed to attain a grade that would gain entry to the local grammar schools.

**Dealing with Transfer**

One aspect of the demographic downturn has been to create a climate of stiff competition among the non-grammar sector and consequentially this has made these schools very pro-active in their recruitment practices and Ashfield is no exception. In the first term every year the principal and the vice-principal visit the ten schools, from which most pupils transfer, to address the transferring pupils. They provide a powerpoint presentation about the school and its history. Each child is given a magazine produced bi-annually by the upper sixth media studies pupils. As they were also given a magazine the previous term when they were in P6 this provides the pupils with a second exposure to news from the school.

In January, the school has two open nights for prospective pupils. This year they had 1000 visitors with 300 pupils registering as potential pupils. In the third term pupils are notified of the school they have been assigned to by the Education & Library Board. They usually try to assign according to pupil/parental choice, grade achieved in the transfer test, area of residence, school criteria, and religious preference. At this stage the vice-principal and
the year 8 head-of-year visit the primary schools to gather relevant information about the new pupils such as strengths and weaknesses or mitigating family circumstances. They also bring bridging units of work which start in the final term of P7 and finish in the first term of year 8 in Ashfield.

By the end of the summer term pupils are made aware of uniform requirements and school start times. On their first day, they are the only pupils. They are provided with a booklet which sets out the school’s policy on bullying and who pupils should contact in the event of it happening to them. There is a year-head, a pastoral-care teacher and for those who may require it, a student counsellor.

Parents
Parents are seen as valuable partners in this enterprise, and to this end the school maintains on-going contact with pupils’ homes. Contact begins with a parents’ meeting within the first six weeks of the new school year. This is maintained in the standard way with term reports, information sheets, school magazine, telephone calls for both positive and negative reasons, and finally the principal maintains an open-door policy for parents to drop in when they have problems they wish to discuss.

Community
Ashfield school is embedded in its community. Its grounds and sports facilities are used all year round by a variety of groups and organisations from church-based clubs, youth clubs, community-events organisers and even a local semi-professional football club (Glentoran). Altogether these groups provide an income of £80,000 per annum. Being close to the community has provided a bonus worth about £5,000 to the school’s annual budget because vandalism which affects schools during holiday periods has been vastly reduced.

A very positive effect of this open door policy is that local primary school children who use the facilities become very familiar with the school’s environs. It is, therefore, less of a prospective ordeal for the new year-eights and in fact helps to create “ownership” of the school for the boys, so that it becomes ‘My School’.

Pupils
Incoming year 8s are given a booklet to aid induction that contains vital information about the school and which teachers to contact about various issues. Bullying, which is often cited as a worry for new pupils, is taken very seriously by the staff who run a high-profile campaign called ‘Ashfield Beats Bullying’. The principal, staff and pupils identify with the campaign by wearing a blue plastic wristlet. It is the school’s intention that, “No pupil will be allowed to adversely affect the education of others”. Pupils who affect the education of others adversely are expelled.

Year 8 pupils have a dedicated head-of-year as well as a teacher in charge of induction. Pupils are given instruction in peer-mediation skills which operate alongside a mentoring scheme where senior pupils mentor the new intake.

Conclusion
Ashfield School seems to have adopted many strategies to make the school a success for the boys attending it. In 2007, the Education Minister used this school as an example of how schools could be successes in a post 11+ era during a debate about the phasing out of academic selection, when proponents of keeping grammar schools were forecasting the demise of Northern Ireland’s great education system. Ashfield School provides an exemplar model of how to smooth the transition process for pupils.

Case Study 2 Malone College Belfast

Background
Malone College is a relatively new school having been established in 1997, the building itself having been finished in 1999. This school is managed by the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Schools and it has a pupil mix currently of 40% Catholic, 40% Protestant and 20% other.

Malone College has a current roll of 800 pupils, approximately 50% girls/boys. Its intake in the school year 2007/08 was 130 including ‘Statemented Pupils’. The school expects its new intake to be similar for 2008/09. In the recent past they received pupils from 64 primary schools. The geographical spread of these schools is within a
radius of south Belfast, where the campus is situated. Most of the pupils are either bussed in or are dropped off/collected by car by commuting parents.

Given that the majority of their pupils transfer from integrated primary schools and had intended to stay in this sector, around 30% do not enter the 11+. Of the rest, more than 10% attain A or B grades. The school does, however, produce its own set of tests in English and maths as a means of arranging class placements for the benefit of the pupils. The tests are held on the first two days of their first term. On these days the year 8s are the only pupils in the school.

**Transfer**

In the first term of a new school year the senior management team (SMT) and the year 8 co-ordinator form teams of two that divide the 18 main feeder primary schools into batches of three/four each. As far as possible, allowing for staff changes, the same people visit the same schools each year. This has enabled both sides to form good working relationships with the primary schools as well as a good level of trust.

Each team brings posters, booklets and some current year 8s - previous pupils of the primary school being visited. The teachers make a presentation and then they finish with the potential pupils quizzing the year 8s about life in Malone College.

This is followed up in January with classroom assistants visiting the main feeder schools a fortnight before the school’s Open Day (rather than an open night) to put up posters advertising the date of the event.

Once the results of pupil school-allocation have been delivered to the parents, the primary schools are asked to provide information about the pupils. Each child is sent a school information pack with information such as the start of term, uniform, etc.

**Easing Transfer**

Each September about 20 year 13 pupils are chosen to act as mentors for the new intake - usually three to a class. To facilitate this role, these pupils are enrolled in Childline’s CHIPS Programme, which entails a one day training course in mentoring. The main focus of this programme is countering bullying but the mentor helps in other problem areas too. Most of the work with the year 8s is in the first term. Once they pass January they rarely need to see the mentor for help. The school is involved in a programme called ‘Jigsaw’ which is organised by the Belfast Education and Library Board, and aimed at pupils mostly in P7. It involves four primary schools in a pilot study.

Problems (e.g. sexual abuse/suicide) that are too serious for the mentors can be referred to a designated teacher or her assistant who can send the child to the trained counsellor who attends the school once a week. This counsellor is provided by Contact Youth.

The school is also an “Extended School” which means it opens at 8am to facilitate a “Breakfast Club” for pupils, where they can buy cereals or a cooked breakfast at a subsidised price. This extension of the school day is mirrored in the afternoon with the provision of various clubs for pupils until 4.30 pm.

As the lunch break is quite short, there are two lunch sittings. The junior school have their lunch first and are followed a period later by the senior school. This lessens the opportunity for potential bullying.

There is a strong Students’ Council that has access to both the SMT and the school’s Board of Governors. In the past, pupils have made representations to the SMT. For example, a request was made to have televisions in the lunch hall at lunch time: the request was granted.

**Parents**

The parents of new year-8s are invited to the school in June for a School Barbecue as a means of getting to know them. At the end of September they are invited to a parents’ meeting for an update on their child’s progress. The main Parents’ Meeting occurs in January. Parents are also encouraged to join the school’s Parents’ Council, which is not just a fund raising group as they are also involved in making school policies. And because many of the school’s board of governors are on the Parents’ Council, they have access to the governors as well.
Case Study 3 Corpus Christi College, Belfast

Background
Corpus Christi College (CCC) school is situated close to the inner city of Belfast. Like inner-city areas in other parts of the world it has a high rate of social deprivation. It was founded just over 20 years ago with the amalgamation of four secondary schools that had suffered a reduction in pupil numbers due to demographic changes. Unlike modern rationalisation programmes, this programme received little in the way to funds to help make the amalgamation run smoothly.

When the school opened it had a roll of about 1200 pupils. However, teething troubles between pupils from different parts of west Belfast and problems in passing from one site to another gained it a reputation as being a rough school. The intake plummeted as parents were frightened to send their children to it and the natural feeder primary-school principals were reluctant to let the representatives in to speak to the pupils at transfer time. The management and the staff of the school set in train a number of initiatives that over a period of years changed the perception of the school in the outside community and at the same time helped year-8 pupils in their new school career.

Open Doors
In order to dispel the myth that it was a ‘scary’ place it was decided to open up the school and invite the parents to come and visit as and when they liked. This was arranged for a two week period during the second term. Classroom doors onto corridors were also left open so that the visitors could see exactly what their sons were doing in class. Feedback from the parents and the local area was positive. In recent times the primary-school girls are also encouraged to come to these sessions, not because the school intends to admit girls but because they report back to parents with greater detail what they see in the school.

Following the success of the above, the seven local primary schools were once again approached. Initially contact was only with the principals with the promise that material about the secondary school would be distributed among the pupils. They were not allowed to make a presentation. Over time this situation eased, firstly with the school’s head of pastoral care being allowed to speak to the boys under supervision. Today, the presentations are allowed to be done freely.

To get to this stage meant that trust between the secondary and the primary schools had to be built. This was done by the secondary school by making its facilities and teachers available to train the primary staff in IT, in the early days of its introduction to primary schools. In addition, sporting events for P6 pupils from the local primary schools were organised so that the pupils would be familiar with the school in the year preceding transfer.

The P6 pupils are also invited to come to the school for a specially organised Science Week during which they are allowed to use the science labs for experiments and the home economic kitchens, where they cook and then eat what they make. Again, the pupils and their families are invited to the annual school show. Pre-visit publicity invites them to spot former primary colleagues now treading the boards in CCC. It also gives scope to the school to display work by the music, drama and art departments.

Within the school, departments were asked to self-examine to see where they could improve the image of the school. One step was to introduce more trips that were linked to specific subject areas and more sporting trips. These trips helped to attract more pupils.

An Extended Service School
As was stated above, the school is situated in an area of high social deprivation characterised by high unemployment rates for both males and females. With a large percentage of single parent families which means around 90% of the school population is on free school meals - an indicator used by government to measure poverty. There are a large number of suicides among young people due to depression and other mental-health problems - some of which are associated with drug and alcohol abuse. Rather than ignore or deny the problems, the school became proactive in tackling them head on. The school has a zero-tolerance policy on drugs. Dealers are expelled. Users are suspended pending a visit from parents and an agreement by both to attend a course on drug abuse. Failure to complete the course means expulsion.
The school’s management team set up a panel of people (called Corporate Care Management Team) drawn from the school (principal, head of pastoral care and the SENCO), social services, local doctors, the Housing Executive, West Belfast Project, Contact Youth, the local priest, a representative from the local special needs provider, the probation service - in all about 20 different agencies operating in the area. Due to having a number of spare rooms within the two sites the school was able to offer accommodation to groups such as West Belfast Project which run courses such as anger management for parents. This panel meets about every six weeks and discusses how they might address the problems of pupils that have graduated from a problem in class to a more serious problem involving drugs and abuse.
Transition from Pre-school to Primary School

Introduction
A lack of research on transitions in the early years has been noted in the Irish context (Walsh, 2003; Hayes, 2004; INTO, 2006) despite having been identified as being of great importance educationally in the lives of young children (Pianta & Cox, 1999; Bernard Van Leer Foundation, 2006). The cultures of pre-schools and primary schools in Ireland are often very different. The two educational services have developed independently of each other and can vary widely in their objectives and approaches to education. This section includes a report of a study conducted by O’Kane (2008) which gathered questionnaire data on the practices and policies in place in Irish pre-schools and primary schools relating to the area of transition, and the practices teachers in both settings feel are of most benefit to children undergoing this transition. Some findings from this data are described, with particular reference to the responses of the teachers of junior infant classes. Secondly the findings of a survey carried out by the Education Committee of the INTO on the views of junior infant teachers are presented.

The Transition from Pre-school to Primary School in Ireland: Views of Primary School Teachers

Mary O’Kane, Centre for Social and Educational Research, Dublin Institute of Technology

Introduction: The Building Bridges Study
The overarching aim of this study was to provide an information base on the transition from pre-school to formal schooling in Ireland, and to improve understanding about how best to support children’s learning during this time. The theoretical framework for the project was based on the ecological systems model of development proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1979; 1992). As there was no previous formal Irish research study in this area, an exploratory approach was taken, and the study drew on a variety of sources to present the perspectives of pre-school practitioners, primary-school teachers, parents, and children themselves.

Phase 1 of the study involved a questionnaire being completed by a nationwide sample of 249 pre-school practitioners and 250 teachers of junior infant classes. Questions covered beliefs about the transition process, skills that teachers believe are important for children to possess on arrival at school, and transition practices in place at pre-schools and schools. Response rates were high, with a total response rate for the pre-school questionnaire of 77% and the primary school version response rate of 83%. This paper reports some of the findings from the questionnaire, with a specific focus on the views of the teachers of junior infant classes.

Background to the Study
The review of literature on transition undertaken for this study identified a growing concern with the issues of differences in culture and curricula in pre-schools and schools, and the issue of school readiness. The literature also supports the idea that achieving a successful transition may be contingent on a degree of continuity between pre-schools and primary schools. It was also noted that the inter-relatedness of the individual systems within which the child exists are important at the time of transition, and the impact of social, cultural and transitions capital are important. With this in mind, the importance of communication between stakeholders was noted. Two areas of particular relevance to this paper are attitudes and beliefs about the child during transition and issues involving the professionals supporting transition.

The Child During Transition
Increasing numbers of young children in Ireland are attending pre-school programmes prior to starting formal schooling. Therefore their experience of beginning the junior infant class is often a transition from a familiar pre-school environment to a new unfamiliar environment. This period of transition is a time of rapid change in the

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1 Phase II took a more qualitative approach to the subject, following a case study sample of seven children through their first year in the primary school system. This phase investigated the perspectives of the children themselves, their parents, teachers and classmates, using observation data, semi-structured interviews, and child discussion groups to gather information about the process. Differences were noted by the children between the more formal ‘work’ based pedagogy of the junior infant classroom as compared to their pre-school experiences. The issue of cultural capital being transferred across the home-school environments was also apparent.
life of a child (Margetts, 2000). With this change comes the stress of adjusting to a new setting, often much larger than the pre-school setting, a new teacher, and new classmates (Margetts, 1999; Griebel & Niesel, 1999, 2000; Fabian, 2000). School child:adult ratios are much larger than those of Irish pre-schools, and children are mixing with a larger and more diverse group of children. Although the infant class curriculum is characterised as play-based, with a focus on active learning, the child is moving from the pre-school environment where the learning context is generally more informal and less focused on the achievement of specific learning outcomes than primary school classrooms. They will now be compared across the board with classmates, and will be assessed on whether they have reached certain standards expected at junior infant level. Studies have shown that there is more verbal instruction at school, and a much greater focus on the skills of literacy and numeracy (Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta & Cox, 2000; Margetts, 2002). Teacher expectations in formal schooling are different to pre-school settings, and children have to adapt to these (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2000; Pianta & Cox, 2002). The academic expectations of parents can also become more emphasised on transition to school, indeed Irish infant teachers have reported that parents often don’t understand the importance of play as a learning tool at this level but instead have expectations about children developing their reading and writing skills (Nic Craith & Fay, 2008). Thus, the transition to school poses many challenges to children, and some children will be more successful than others at meeting these challenges.

International research has noted that generally the skills identified by teachers as being of importance to children starting formal school are social skills; independence; language and communication skills; and the ability to sit, listen and concentrate (Dockett & Perry, 2004, 2005; Peters, 2007; PNC Financial Services, 2007; 2007a). Such skills would support children dealing with the new rules and levels of negotiation which they have to learn in the school settings. However, the issue of sitting still, listening and concentrating is a contentious one. Fabian (2002) notes that although the ability to sit still is suggested to be the most advanced stage of movement it is identified as being of importance when starting formal schooling. Indeed, the INTO note that “play, movement and noise is an integral part of the learning environment of young children, not just sitting or controlled in a structured way in classrooms” (2006, p.73). However, many researchers have reported an expectation reported by children, that school children should be working quietly at their desks (Corsaro & Molinari, 2000; Dockett & Perry, 2004a; Sharp & White, 2005). These studies suggest that children focus on play at pre-school level, but in school they focus on work. This may in some way explain the different skill sets expected at the two educational levels.

Dockett & Perry (2007) also remind us that both teachers and parents expect children to adapt to huge changes on entering school. They are expected to demonstrate greater levels of responsibility, independence, and self-regulation than are expected at home or pre-school. They highlight the importance of considering the implications of such changes for children, and ensuring that overwhelming demands are not placed on them at the time of transition. They warn against the dangers of the most experienced stakeholders in the transition process (the adults) expecting the least experienced stakeholders (the children) to make all the changes.

**The Professional Supporting Transition**

Research has shown that poor communication between ECCE programmes and schools is a barrier to successful transition for children (Pianta & Walsh 1996; Kagan & Neuman, 1999; Christenson, 1999, Margetts, 1999). It is suggested that ongoing communication between these groups, and parents, would help ensure that schools were building on what children have learnt in pre-schools and in their life experiences. Fabian (2002) reported that often pre-school practitioners are vague about school procedures, and very often the schools’ knowledge of pre-school life is equally vague. She suggests that better communication is needed for both groups to develop an understanding of each others philosophy and procedures. Timperley, McNaughton, Howie & Robinson (2003) found that although pre-school practitioners and primary school teachers described their commitment to collaboration during the period of transition, in practice they had very different expectations of each other. They found that schools proposed that pre-schools should teach children how to behave in school-appropriate ways by familiarising them with appropriate routines and expected behaviours. Pre-schools felt that they should prepare children by teaching developmentally appropriate numeracy and literacy skills, and that schools should offer children opportunities to learn appropriate routines and expected behaviours through pre-enrolment visits. These differences in expectations may well lead to a more difficult transition for children, and remind us of the importance of communication between the two groups of teachers.

Neuman (2000) however suggests that barriers to such communication are complex and involve more than the often cited time constraints. She reports on an OECD project aiming to improve links between ECCE and Primary Schools. This project identified various barriers to ensuring smooth transitions. Firstly, philosophical

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*Transitions in the Primary School* 45
differences between the two settings were an issue, with schools and pre-schools having different visions and cultures, and a lack of shared goals. Staff attended different training programmes and worked with different pedagogical approaches and methods. Neuman suggested that staff in both settings perceive greater links between pre-schools and schools as a threat to their individual approaches. She proposed that cultural differences are reinforced by structural differences, in that pre-school and primary services usually fall under different administrative auspices, adhere to different regulations, and inspection regimes differ. Indeed, this is the case in Ireland. She also cited the fact that many different pre-schools feed into each school as an issue. However, from an Irish perspective, the Early Start Pre-school Project, staffed by trained teachers and pre-school practitioners has proven to be a very successful collaboration. Both the pre-school practitioners and the teachers are under the general supervision of the Board of Management. Evaluation of the project has found that the Early Start pre-schools have been successfully incorporated into the primary school system (DES, 2002).

Providing program continuity through developmentally appropriate curricula for pre-school and primary school children has also been proposed as one of the keys to successful transition. Dunlop (2002) proposes “children’s ability to claim the new setting as their own and to benefit educationally from it, may be reflected in the degree to which their educators have collaborated in a shared conceptual framework of children’s learning” (p.98). Pre-schools and Junior infants classes in Ireland may be operating in different types of settings but the commonalities between how the age groups catered for in both settings learn, and the range of developmental levels represented in each program, call for similar learning environments and teaching strategies. In practice however there are discontinuities associated with curricula in the two settings. Generally these involve the move from “a developmental approach to a cognitive curricula approach” (Margretts, 1999, p.2). Siolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Education (CECDE, 2006, 2006a) and the Framework for Early Learning (NCCA, 2004) will have important implications here. Both will cover children from birth to six years, and as such will be relevant to both pre-school and primary education at infant level. Their implementation could create more coherence across the various learning opportunities available to children in this age group, while also acknowledging the diversity of settings. However, it is not clear at the present time that the financial commitment necessary to support the implementation of these practice frameworks is available at national level.

The benefits of shared learning contexts while learning through play have also been highlighted by researchers (Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden and Bell, 2002; Brooker, 2005). However, Bennett et al (1997) found that achieving high quality play-based classroom experiences involves a high level of resources, time for staff to properly engage as play-partners, time to observe, discuss and reflect on learning, and theoretical and pedagogical skill. Dunphy (2007) has questioned whether the pedagogy of the infants’ classroom is appropriate to the most effective learning opportunities for children at this level. She cites the EPPE research findings (Sylva et al, 2003, 2004; Taggart, 2007) which she suggests provide very clear signposts for infants’ classes teachers with regard to effective pedagogical approaches. Theses studies identified periods of sustained shared thinking as being particularly important in terms of extending children’s learning. Dunphy (2007) reminds teachers of the importance of developing a play pedagogy which provides opportunities for complex play during which the adult can support and extend children’s learning. She cites lack of appropriate in-service training, time for reflection, and a limited understanding of the principles underlying this suggested approach, as being challenges to the development of a more play based practice.

**Teachers of Junior Infant Classes - Questionnaire Findings**

**Class Context**
A wide range of class sizes was reported, ranging from a minimum of four children in the class, to a maximum class size of 36 children. Forty-eight per cent of the classes were junior infants pupils only, while 52% reported mixed class groupings. Seventy-five per cent of teachers categorised their school as ‘non-designated disadvantaged’ (NDD) while 25% categorised their school as ‘designated disadvantaged’ (DD). Over half of the classes (52%) reported only one adult was present in the classroom. Of the classes who reported more than one adult, few other staff were in the classroom on a full time basis.

**Attitudes and Beliefs of the Teachers**
Ninety-four per cent of teachers felt that less than 40% of children are at risk of experiencing some difficulties making this transition, the DD sub-group were more likely to expect higher levels of difficulties.

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2 The mean figure was 22.22, with a median of 23.00, and a standard deviation figure of 6.057
The teachers of junior infant classes were then asked about which groups of children might be at risk of experiencing a difficult transition to formal schooling. From a list of 12 categories of children, teachers were asked to identify the extent to which they agreed these children are more at risk [Table 20]. The three groups of children identified as being most at risk were those with low self esteem, those with behavioural problems, and those children who have difficulty sitting still, listening and concentrating.

Table 20: Levels of agreement that certain groups of children might be more at risk of experiencing a difficult transition to formal schooling

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Agreement That Group are at Risk (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low self esteem</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behaviour problems</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty listening/concentrating</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special needs</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disadvantaged backgrounds</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No pre-school experience</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From minority groups</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youngest children</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No friends starting</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Firstborn</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban areas</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The teachers were then given a list of six particular skill areas, and asked to rank them in terms of their importance for children to possess on arrival at school. There was general agreement that Independence and self-help skills, social skills, communication and language skills, and Concentration and Listening Skills were all important for children to possess when starting school [See Table 21]. Pre-academic and problem-solving skills were not considered to be as important.

Table 21: Level of agreement from Teachers of Junior infants Classes that Particular Skills are Important for Children to Possess on Arrival at School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skills</th>
<th>Agree Strongly</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither Agree or Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree Strongly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Independence and Self Help Skills (n=207)</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication Language Skills (n=207)</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Skills (n=207)</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concentration and Listening Skills (n=207)</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem Solving Skills (n=205)</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-academic Skills (n=207)</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Following on from this, the teachers were asked in their opinion, the three most important skills for a child to possess on arrival at school. Teachers were asked to decide on three skills, and rank these skills first, second and third most important. Answers given were grouped into skills categories. Once again, independence, social skills and communication skills were considered to be the most important.

In a follow up question, teachers of junior infants classes were asked if there were any other factors (apart from age and the personal skills of the child) that they felt influenced parents in the decision to send their child to
formal schooling. The cost of childcare was cited by 40% of the respondents as being a major factor in the decision to send a child to school.

Details of suggestions taken from the literature on the transition to formal schooling were given to the teachers of junior infants classes. They were asked to indicate their level of agreement that each statement is important for children’s transition to formal schooling. The highest level of agreement found in this section was with the statement that class sizes in the early years of school should be reduced (96%). This was followed closely by the statements that pre-school practitioners (94%), teachers of junior infants classes (93%) and parents (93%) should all promote the skills of social competence and resiliency. The teachers of junior infants classes were also generally in agreement that school entry age should be raised from four years so children are more mature when making the transition to formal schooling (69%) and that the curriculum in the infants classes should have a greater focus on learning through play (67%). There was also some level of agreement that information and evaluations should be passed from pre-school to school (62%). Sixty percent also agreed that there should be greater communication between pre-school and primary school teachers.

**Policies and Practices Considered Important by Teachers of Junior infants Classes**

Teachers of junior infant classes were asked about the transition practices that they already had in place in their school, and about practices that they felt should be put in place in schools [Table 22]. The practices most widely reported to be in place already in primary schools were sending letters to parents before term starts, arranging for the children to visit to the school on one occasion before the term starts and arranging one meeting for parents before term starts.

**Table 22: Transition Practices Already in Place in Primary Schools, and Practices Teachers of Junior infants Classes Felt Should be put in Place in Schools**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transition Practice</th>
<th>Already in Place in my School</th>
<th>Should be in Place in Primary Schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Letters to Parents before Term Start</td>
<td>92% (n = 205)</td>
<td>92% (n = 192)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letters to Children before Term Start</td>
<td>13% (n = 205)</td>
<td>24% (n = 192)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent Meeting before Term Start</td>
<td>73% (n = 205)</td>
<td>84% (n = 192)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home Visit before Term Start</td>
<td>4% (n = 205)</td>
<td>15% (n = 192)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Child Visit to School Before Term Start</td>
<td>77% (n = 204)</td>
<td>84% (n = 193)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Series of Child Visits before Term Start</td>
<td>18% (n = 206)</td>
<td>30% (n = 196)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-school visits to Primary School</td>
<td>18% (n = 206)</td>
<td>40% (n = 197)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication with Pre-school in place</td>
<td>30% (n = 206)</td>
<td>74% (n = 198)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-school observations in place</td>
<td>8% (n = 206)</td>
<td>41% (n = 197)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-school evaluations in place</td>
<td>10% (n = 206)</td>
<td>60% (n = 197)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourage Friendships for new children</td>
<td>47% (n = 206)</td>
<td>63% (n = 200)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition Plan in Place</td>
<td>21% (n = 206)</td>
<td>48% (n = 197)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interestingly, only 30% of primary schools already have some form of communication with pre-schools in place, however, 74% of teachers of junior infants classes believe such communication should be in place. Only 10% of teachers reported receiving some form of evaluations of children from pre-schools, however 60% reported that they felt this practice should be in place.
Teachers of junior infants classes were asked about the way in which they felt that pre-schools could assist the transition process. The most popular areas in which it was felt pre-schools should facilitate transition were encouraging independence in children (99%), using classroom-types rules (91%), and holding a discussion with the class on what to expect at primary school (88%). Teachers of junior infants classes did not feel generally speaking (63% against) that it was appropriate for pre-schools to incorporate academic skills into their curricula.

**Difficulties in the Junior Infants Classroom**

The teachers were asked what, in their opinion, was the greatest difficulty that teachers are facing at present in the junior infants classroom. Two hundred and four teachers responded to this question, giving a total of 347 responses. Class sizes at junior infants level was clearly considered to be the greatest difficulty the teachers of junior infants classes are facing, being mentioned 117 times (30% of total responses). Other difficulties such as children starting school too young, challenging behaviour, and mixed abilities of children starting, were also mentioned.

Finally, the teachers were asked if they could change something to improve the life of teachers at junior infant level, what would that be? Two hundred and one teachers responded to this question, some suggesting more than one change, providing a total of 320 responses. Again the class sizes at junior infant level was the major issue, being mentioned 130 times as being the thing teachers considered most important to change at junior infant level (40%). The need for a classroom assistant was also a priority for many teachers, with many stressing that this is of importance for every junior infants class, no matter whether single-grade or multi-grade, no matter what class size, or whether a school has designated disadvantaged status or not. Children starting school too young, the need for greater resources at infant level, and better adult:child ratios were the next most popular answers. The issue of adult:child ratios is also clearly linked to the class-size and classroom assistant issues.

**Qualitative Responses from Primary School Teachers**

At the end of the questionnaire the teachers were given the opportunity to make any other comments on the process of transition from pre-school to formal schooling. Many comments were concerned with the class sizes that teachers are working with, and the consequences of working with such numbers. Teachers reported that with such high numbers classroom management and housekeeping activities took up much of their time. They reported that this was difficult for the teacher, and unfair to the children themselves. They particularly noted the difficulties for children adapting to the large class size in comparison to the small pre-school ratios. Difficulties with these sizes were also highlighted when children with additional needs are present in the classroom, as explained by this teacher: “This is my very first year with the luxury of a small class (17). It is solely because I have a child who was assessed for ADHD before he started primary school. In the last three decades I have handled numerous ‘problem’ children single-handedly and with mixed class groupings, ie junior/senior infants, or senior/first of 30 PLUS pupils!!”. [Multi-Grade, DD Teacher]

The age at which children start school, and the range of ages within the junior infants classroom was another topic covered by many of the teachers. Suggestions were made with regard to the younger children, these included raising the school start age, developing a 3-year infant cycle, or providing a year of free pre-school education for children. The comment of the teacher below in relation to independence at junior infants level may go some way to explaining links between age and independence which may be influencing teachers: “The children at this level need a lot of ‘minding’ when they start, tying shoe-laces, help with coats, some arrive not fully toilet trained! It is difficult to work with such large numbers [30] when they need such a level of attention” [Single Grade, NDD Teacher].

**Discussion**

Responses estimating the percentage of children who are at risk of experiencing a difficult transition are in line with international findings (Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta & Cox, 2000; Hausken & Rathbun, 2002). The skills identified as being of importance to children starting formal school (social skills; independence; language and communication skills; and the ability to sit, listen and concentrate) are also similar to those found in international research (Lin et al, 2003; Wesley & Buysse, 2003; Dockett & Perry, 2004, 2005; PNC Financial Services, 2007; 2007a). It is easy to see how such skills, in essence the ability to negotiate classroom life without the constant attention of the teacher, would be valued by a teacher working with a class of up to 36 four and five year olds. Socially, the ability to wait turns, share, anticipate change, and ‘read’ the teacher will increase positive experiences within the classroom.
The skills of concentration and listening identified by the teachers also serve as a reminder that children are making a transition of expectations as well as of physical setting. They are moving from a socially-focused learning environment to one in which they are being judged and compared with each other. Although the revised curriculum used at infants level in primary schools also places an emphasis on child-centred learning, there is a greater emphasis on direct instruction, and a necessity to implement a pre-set curriculum. The INTO also advise that movement rather than learning while sitting still is important in the infants classes (2006). However there appears to be a difference between rhetoric and reality, as the skill of sitting still is one that teachers say they value in the classroom. Teachers of large classes clearly find this skill useful in terms of classroom management, and the ability to listen and concentrate useful in practical terms.

This emphasis on independence, social skills and communication skills, combined with the lack of emphasis on academic skills, would suggest that the teachers in this study feel that parents should not be so concerned about preparing their children academically for school, but concentrate on equipping them with the social and independence skills necessary for classroom life. The teachers in this study have suggested that children with the ability to negotiate classroom life independently, equipped with good social skills and the ability to concentrate and listen for short periods of time, are more likely to be successful at primary level. With regard to the skills of independence and the ability to sit and listen, the dichotomy between these two skills areas is of interest. The balance between acting independently when required yet also sitting still when required may well be a difficult balance for children of four and five years old to understand.

Pre-school teachers clearly have a role in supporting children in this area. They can help children to interact with adults and peers in positive ways, be responsible for themselves and their belongings, and build their self-esteem and confidence. These skills will benefit the children at pre-school level, but will also greatly assist them in their transition to formal schooling. Indeed the teachers in this study suggested that encouraging such skills, while also introducing classroom-type rules, and discussing the transition with children were the most effective ways that pre-school practitioners could support the transition process.

Communication between pre-school practitioners and primary school teachers was reported to be low, and few teachers reported that information was transferred from pre-school to primary school. However, 74% of the teachers of junior infants classes believe such communication should be in place, and were also in favour of the transfer of information between the two educational settings. The importance of continuity in many areas between pre-school and primary education has been noted, and it is recommended that bonds between these two settings should be strengthened. The OECD (2002) has emphasised that strong links between the two sectors can have a number of advantages in terms of developing shared goals, educational methods, and creating coherence in staff training and development. If the two cultures can come together while respecting each tradition, the resulting continuity of approach could benefit children making the transition between the two educational settings.

The findings on the need for smaller class sizes and more classroom assistants echo the findings of international studies (Wesley & Buysee, 2003). For many years, the importance of small class size has been noted in terms of enabling teachers to work with the diversity of experiences and abilities in the infant classroom. International research has found that both class size and adult-child ratios in ECCE influence both programme quality and children’s learning and development (National Research Council, 2001). The Government of Ireland had committed to a reduction in class sizes for children under nine years of age to below the international best-practice guidelines of 20:1 (Programme for Government, 2002) which makes the announcement of Budget 2008 with regard to the increase in class sizes particularly disappointing. As some of the teachers in the study suggested, two pairs of adult hands in a junior infants classroom are necessary in purely practical terms. Two adults in the classroom would better enable teachers to work with children individually and in small groups, and to have time to better understand the needs of the individual children. From the perspective of the children entering the junior infant classes, adult:child ratios which are more in line with their experiences at pre-school would also assist children in ensuring continuity and making the transition between the two environments. The move from an environment with low adult:child ratios to one with much higher ratios emphasizes discontinuities, and research has shown that children are very aware of the different levels of adult attention within the two settings (Ledger, 2000). It is clear that class sizes and adult:child ratios will impact on the ability of the schools to be adequately ready to meet the needs of each individual student.
Concern was also expressed about the cost of pre-schools in Ireland, with significant numbers suggesting that the cost of pre-school is a factor in parents sending their children to school at four years of age. Raising school entry age has been suggested as a way to address this issue, but this may be problematic in itself given the lack of government fee support at pre-school level. Historically there has been resistance to such suggestions from both parents and primary school teachers. One concern is that children from middle-class families are more likely to be given access to a high-quality pre-school setting, and these children could make good use of an extra year at pre-school. However, children from disadvantaged backgrounds may not have this choice. Free early education for three year olds in advance of entry to primary school has been suggested by both the OECD (2004) and NESF (2005) reports. Following on from this, it is suggested that to provide a free quality pre-school service to all children aged three/four could well address the problem of four year olds in infants classes. A year of free, quality pre-school education could ensure that all children were given the opportunity to learn and develop in pre-school, rather than starting formal school at an early age.

**Conclusion**

This paper has given an overview of the findings from the teachers of junior infant classes responses to the questionnaire. However, it is important that these responses are considered, not in isolation, but along with the responses from the pre-school practitioners, and in tandem with the data from Phase II of the study, which involved parents and junior infant children themselves. Indeed, the findings from the full study concur with the notion that transition to school is an adaptive process for children and their families, and that all stakeholders should be involved in communication about the process. The study also confirmed the value of involving multiple stakeholders, particularly the children themselves, in the research process. This paper has been too short to include the full range of viewpoints. They are, however, available in written form (O’Kane, 2007).³

³ Mary O’Kane is most happy to respond to any requests for further information on her study.
Transition from Pre-school to Primary School

Results of INTO Survey

Infant Teachers

Introduction
In order to ascertain the views of teachers on the issue of transition, questionnaires were distributed to 298 schools selected on a random basis. The staff representatives were requested to invite the Junior Infant teacher(s) to respond to the questionnaire. A total of 209 questionnaires, a response rate of 70%, were returned.

Profile of Respondents
The overall majority of respondents were female. Only one respondent was male. Over one third of all respondents (36%) had fewer than five years teaching experience and 55% of respondents had fewer than 10 years teaching experience. The majority (78%) of teachers had taught junior infant for less than 10 years and 21 respondents (10%) had taught junior infants for more than 20 years. See Table 23 below.

Table 23: Number of years teaching Junior infants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years Teaching Junior infants</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;= 10</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>77.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-20</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>12.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21+</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>208</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Almost half of the respondents (47%) taught in schools with fewer than 100 pupils. Just under 9% of respondents taught in schools with more than 400 pupils. There were fewer than five teachers in almost half the schools represented (50%). Almost 12% of represented schools had more than 21 teachers. See Table 24 below.

Table 24: Number of teachers in schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. of teachers - size of school</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;= 5</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>49.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 - 20</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>38.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21+</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>11.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>208</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Less than 10% taught in city schools, 16% taught in suburban schools and 15% taught in town schools. The majority (59%) taught in rural schools. A large majority (81%) taught in mixed schools. The remainder taught in boys’ schools (7%), girls’ schools (8%) or girls’ schools with mixed junior classes (5%). Most schools (95%) were full-stream schools and 5% were junior infant schools. In all, 22% were designated disadvantaged – 8% were in DEIS Band 1, 4% in DEIS Band 2 and 10% were rural DEIS schools. Only 3% of respondent schools taught through the medium of Irish.

Class Size
The average class size of respondents in the survey was 22.5 pupils per class. However, the number of pupils in each class ranged from fewer than 10 up to 39, with 5% of respondents having more than 31 pupils in their class. Many of these pupils were in multi-grade classes. About a third of respondents (34%) had a special needs assistant (SNA). An additional 2% had two SNAs. More than two fifths of respondents (44%) had pupils in their classroom who did not have English or Irish as a home language. Almost 14% had five such pupils or more.

Respondents were invited to state what they thought was the optimum class size for junior infants. The majority (93%) were of the opinion that the optimum class size was 20 pupils or fewer. Just over two fifths (42%) considered 20 the optimum number of pupils in the classroom and just over a quarter (26%) stated that the...
optimum number was 15. Only 7% of respondents stated that the optimum number was 21 pupils or more. See Table 25 below.

Table 25: Optimum number of pupils in Junior infants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Optimum number of pupils in Junior infants</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;= 14</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>25.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-19</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>17.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>41.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21+</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>208</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Respondents were asked a similar question in relation to the optimum number of pupils in a multi-grade classroom with junior infants. Just over two fifths (41%) thought that the optimum number of pupils in such classes should be 15 or fewer. The optimum class size for junior infants where a childcare worker was also present was considered by almost half the respondents (49%) to be 20. See Tables 26 and 27.

Table 26: Optimum number of pupils in Junior infants in multi-grade

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Optimum number of pupils in Junior infants in multi-grade</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;= 14</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>17.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>24.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-19</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>18.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>32.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21+</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>208</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 27: Optimum number of pupils in Junior infants in multi-grade with one childcare worker

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Optimum number of pupils in Junior infants in multi-grade with one childcare worker</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;= 14</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>14.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-19</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>11.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>49.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21+</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>23.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>208</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pre-school Experience

Three quarters (75%) of respondents gave information in relation to their pupils’ attendance at some form of pre-school provision prior to attending primary school. The majority of children had attended some form of pre-school provision, with less than 6% of children not attending any. Most of these children were in rural areas. In some cases (5%) respondents did not know whether the children had attended some form of pre-school provision. The majority of children (56%) attended playschool, 16% had attended Montessori and the remainder attended Early Start (5%), childminder (4%), crèche (3%) or a naíonra (3%). Some children may have attended more than one form of provision. See Table 28 below.
Almost all respondents (97%) stated that attendance at some form of pre-school influences how children experience their first year in primary school. In their comments, respondents stated that a pre-school experience prepares children for the routines of primary school and develops social skills such as sharing and taking turns. They are also used to being with other children and with other adults. They settle in better, adapt more quickly and are familiar with group situations. They are able to do jigsaws, colour and have a knowledge of basic counting. They can also sit, listen and pay attention when required. According to teachers, children that attend some form of pre-school are more independent, more confident and more mature, and therefore, more ready to start school. The following comments are illustrative of the teachers’ views.

“Children have less fear of school environment.”

“Children who have attended some form of pre-school are generally more settled and more familiar with a group situation and therefore adapt quicker.”

“It makes children more independent, better able to mix and converse with peers, better able to share and take turns, better able to draw/glue/paint.”

“They appear to be more school ready, have developed social skills, an awareness of routine, number and literacy and they are less tired after an active day.”

However, teachers also stated that it depended on the pre-school, as the quality varied.

**Curriculum**

The vast majority of respondents were of the view that the Primary School Curriculum was appropriate (57%) or very appropriate (40%) for junior infants. Respondents were slightly less positive about the appropriateness of their classrooms for providing a play-based, active-learning curriculum for junior infants. Almost a quarter (24%) stated that their classrooms were not appropriate. Classrooms were very appropriate according to 30% of respondents and appropriate according to 46% of respondents. A similar response was received in relation to the appropriateness of the outdoor environment. One quarter (25%) stated that the outdoor environment was not appropriate, a further quarter stated that it was very appropriate and the other half said it was appropriate (50%). A majority (61%) stated that they had sufficient equipment and materials in their classrooms for junior infants. However, it a matter for concern that 39% of respondents stated that they did not have sufficient equipment and resources in their classroom.

**Expectations**

The respondents were asked to detail their expectations in relation to what they expected children to be able to do on entering primary school. While the expectations varied widely from children being able to write their own name to the two respondents who stated that they had no expectations, there were recurring themes which came across and could be categorised broadly under the headings of social skills and cognitive skills.
Under social/personal skills, teachers felt that children should be able to cope independently in relation to toileting, eating lunch unaided, dressing themselves (coats and shoes) and opening and closing of lunchboxes and schoolbags. Under cognitive skills, teachers were of the opinion that children should be able to identify basic colours, recite nursery rhymes, count or at least be able to join in, be able to listen to stories, to hold a pencil or crayon correctly, recognise their own name and be able to do jigsaws.

Respondents were also asked to give an opinion on what they thought parents’ expectations were in relation to their children starting school. The general view among teachers was that parents’ expectations for their children were initially that they are happy and that they settle into school life, make new friends and mix with other children. Once children were happy and well settled there were expectations that they would learn the ‘basics’ or the ‘3Rs’.

Challenges of Transition

Challenges for the Junior Infant teachers
Over half (52%) of the respondents taught in a multi-class situation, a situation which created a number of additional challenges. The main challenge faced by teachers in multi-class situations was the overall classroom organisation which involved trying to give the junior infants work (i.e. colouring) so that adequate time was left for the other classes. In addition they felt pressure to ensure that other grades in the classroom did not miss out on teaching time. Space was a big issue in the classroom with overcrowding being cited as a major problem.

Some of the challenges that all teachers felt regardless of classroom situation were:

- Getting the children into the daily class and school rules and routines (e.g. forming lines, sharing, cleaning up after themselves, taking turns).
- Helping the children to adjust to their new surroundings.
- Getting the children to sit in one place and adjust to a new schedule (times for breaks, toilets etc).
- Coping with clingy children and putting parents’ minds at ease.
- Lack of time and not being able to give significant one-to-one time with each child in order to get to know them (strengths and weaknesses).
- Children’s poor listening skills.
- Trying to keep each lesson interesting and fun.
- Dealing with children who are not ‘school-ready’.
- Helping children who have no English.

One teacher stated that her greatest challenge was getting the children to answer her in Irish. This comment came from a teacher in a school teaching through the medium of Irish.

Challenges for Pupils
Respondents were asked to identify the main challenges the pupils faced on commencing in junior infants. These callenges were identified by their teachers as:

- Learning class and school rules and routines.
- Adapting to the New structure of the day.
- Sharing with others.
- Sitting in their seat and concentration levels.
- Making friends/socialising with peers in the yard.
- Leaving their parents/guardians.
- Coping with tiredness in their new long day.
- Being one of many (ratio of adult to child much higher than playschool).
- Minding their belongings.

Factors Influencing Transition
Respondents were asked to indicate to what extent certain factors were significant in influencing how well children settled in to school. Home environments supportive of education and class sizes were the most significant factors according to respondents. See Table 29 below.

---

Transitions in the Primary School
Table 29: Significant factors impacting on settling in

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How significant are the following factors on how well children settle in Junior infants?</th>
<th>Very Significant</th>
<th>Significant</th>
<th>Of little Significance</th>
<th>Not Significant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experience of some form of pre-school</td>
<td>58.5</td>
<td>37.1</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior parental contact with the school/teacher</td>
<td>34.8</td>
<td>49.3</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior visit to the school by the child</td>
<td>48.5</td>
<td>39.3</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home environment supportive of education</td>
<td>90.3</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age of child</td>
<td>57.0</td>
<td>42.5</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maturity of child</td>
<td>84.5</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suitability of classroom environment for infant teaching</td>
<td>64.7</td>
<td>35.3</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suitability of the curriculum experience in infant classrooms</td>
<td>61.2</td>
<td>37.8</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class Size</td>
<td>89.9</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siblings already attending the school</td>
<td>23.8</td>
<td>53.2</td>
<td>21.5</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Home and Pupil Factors
Teachers were asked in an open question to identify the home or pupil factors that influence how well pupils settle into junior infants. In relation to home factors that had a major influence on how well children settled in junior infants, teachers referred to the following:

- Stable home environment/family background.
- Parents talking to their child positively about school and their own “positive” experiences.
- Parents not clinging to their child in the morning.
- Parents helping to have their child ready for school and independent (can do up coat/shoes, use toilet facilities, able to open lunchbox etc).

There were also pupil-related factors that influenced the transition to junior infants, according to teachers. These were as follows:

- Maturity/age of child.
- Having siblings already in the school.
- Whether they had already experienced periods of separation from their parents previously.

School factors
In addition to pupil and home factors, teachers were invited, in an open question, to identify school-related factors that influenced transition to junior infants. The recurring themes were as follows:

- Class size.
- Plenty of space.
- Bright, clean, friendly and fun environment.
- Welcoming classroom with plenty of resources.
- Staff – extra adult pair of hands would make a huge difference.
- Teacher preparation.
- Teacher and other staff members who get to know the new children.
- Experience of teacher.
- Good parent - teacher communications.
- Having a buddy system with older children minding the new children.
- Partitioning of yard/break times for initial settling-in period so that younger children are not overwhelmed by big groups of children.
Supporting Transition
A number of respondents employed strategies to support children through transition to primary school. Such strategies included inviting children and their parents to an open day in the school prior to their starting school (86%), holding an information meeting for parents prior to children starting school (78%), and inviting parents to a meeting in the school early in the school year (43%). In addition, 86% had an information brochure on the school.

Strategies to support pupils to settle into Junior infants
Some of the strategies used by respondents to support the pupils in settling into junior infants were as follows:

• Providing a fun, welcoming and enjoyable learning environment.
• Establishing an open door policy for parents.
• Encouraging older pupils/siblings and staff to welcome the new children.
• Allowing an older sibling into the class for a short while if a child is upset.
• Meeting with parents and pupils before September.
• Providing information booklet for parents.
• Establishing a daily routine as soon as possible.
• Setting clear and simple rules and trying to get the children into a routine as soon as possible.
• Having a gradual build up to the full day, shorter first and second week.
• Having plenty of play, story time and fun activities.
• Giving plenty of praise and encouragement.
• Setting up a buddy system in the yard.
• Providing rewards and treats.

It is interesting to note that only one respondent referred directly to the INTO Tips for Parents booklet.

Infant teachers play a key role in ensuring the successful transition of children to the primary school. Having been asked what infant teachers could do to support transition, respondents made a number of suggestions, many of which they were already doing. Teachers were of the opinion that it was important to provide a bright, welcoming classroom with plenty of fun and play activities for the children. Classroom organisation (being prepared and organised) was stressed. Respondents rated the teacher’s disposition highly. Junior infant teachers were of the view that it was important for the teachers of junior infants to be patient and caring and have a warm, friendly and welcoming manner. Good communication with parents was also noted as being important and it was felt that pre-school visits by the children and parents prior to September proved very useful for helping the children to settle into their new environment. The recommendation of one teacher was “demand smaller classes for infants especially mixed classes and not based on averages” and another recommended “INTO to fight for lower class size for those with infants in multi-grade classroom eg. 16 in 4 classes”.

Whole-school policy plays a part in supporting transition to primary school: transition is not the sole responsibility of the junior infant teacher. Many schools have policies and strategies in place as mentioned above. Suggestions of what schools could do to support transition included the following:

• Having children and parents visit prior to start in September (open days induction days).
• Liaising with pre-school facilities if possible.
• Providing a school information leaflet/booklet.
• Liaising with home (if any issues).
• Having good communication between school and parents.
• Providing a warm, welcoming and friendly environment.
• Allowing extra time allowance for start of day and at lunchtime.
• Providing extra help/classroom assistants for junior infant classes.
• All staff to take time out to introduce themselves to the junior infants.

Parents can often support their children during the transition process to primary school. Respondents were asked to identify what they thought parents could do to support their children at this time. Respondents felt that parents’
promotion of their children’s independence was important. The every-day tasks such as taking off and putting on the children’s coats can be very time-consuming for the teachers who are dealing with large classes of junior infants. Other suggestions included:

- Asking parents to talk positively about their own school experiences.
- Encouraging parents to teach their children nursery rhymes and reading to them at home.
- Asking parents to do homework with their children.
- Reinforcing the work done in school.
- Talking/asking their child about their day in school.
- Asking parents not to linger in the morning when dropping their children to school.
- Having good communications with both the teacher and school.
- Ensuring belongings are child-friendly.
- Ensuring that parents are familiar with the curriculum for junior infants.

Where children with special needs were concerned, it was generally felt that in order to ensure the smooth transition of special needs children into junior infants or into the primary school at any level, that all the necessary supports (especially a SNA) and resources are in place from the outset. It was seen as vital that parents informed the school and the teacher well in advance if their child had special educational needs so that the necessary supports and resources, and adaptation of school buildings or facilities would be in place from the start. It was felt that further training on the area of special needs was required. On the other hand, as one respondent stated, many children with special needs have similar experiences to other children in adapting to their new environment: “special needs children can have the same issues as other children in adapting to a new environment, interacting with others, learning, understanding the rules etc”.

**Concluding Comments**

There was a strong view expressed by the respondents that smaller class sizes and the appointment of a classroom assistant were vital in junior infants in order to ensure that the children were given the time and attention that is required to ensure a successful transition into primary school. The curriculum was mentioned by a few respondents. One respondent referred to the need to update the primary curriculum. Another was of the view that some of the children who attended a crèche or a playschool had completed some of the content of the junior infant curriculum and felt that this shouldn’t be allowed.

Some references were made by respondents to children’s age and maturity levels when starting school with some respondents of the view that some children are too young or not ready to start school. This is an issue which warrants further debate and consideration. It is unclear how widespread this view is. However, the concern of respondents is reflected in the following comments:

- The age of a child starting is the most important factor as the more mature the child is, the easier the transition.
- Raising the school entry age and reducing class size would make a positive difference.
- Children are starting far too young, maturity being an issue.
- Children should be at least four years and nine months before starting school.

The role of parents in supporting their children when starting school is of immense importance according to respondents. And, in general, the school environment, which should be bright, welcoming and happy, was thought to be central to successful transition.

“School should be a happy stimulating place for children.”
Transition into Primary School

Findings from Focus Groups

Introduction
The INTO Education Committee conducted two focus group discussions in May 2008 with teachers of infants classes on the subject of transition into primary school. One focus group discussion took place in Cork involving five teachers of junior infants in a variety of schools, none of which was disadvantaged. The second focus group discussion took place in Dublin, involving nine teachers of junior infants in DEIS Band 1 schools. The purpose of the focus groups was to look at the teachers’ perception of parental expectations at this time, and at the teachers’ experience of parental involvement. Also, the teachers’ expectations of parents, children and the education system as they initiate children into primary education were discussed. Finally, particular challenges that teachers of junior infants faced as children experienced formal schooling for the first time were highlighted.

The move from pre-school to primary school involves many changes for young children. While many pupils adjust quickly to these changes, adjustment for other pupils may take significantly longer. Some junior infant pupils arrive from pre-school placements which approximated the infant classroom, well equipped to deal with their new situation. Others arrive to find their new learning environment strange and unfamiliar.

Parental Expectations and Involvement
Teachers of junior infants in the focus groups had significantly more to say about their own expectations of parents, children and the education system than any expectations they perceive parents might have of them or for their children. However, some teachers of infant classes did comment on the expectations of some parents that formal learning would begin in junior infants and that their children would have homework. Some parents had unrealistic expectations for literacy in junior infants. One teacher stated:

“Sometimes I feel that there is pressure coming from parents to begin reading and do proper writing before their children are ready.”

In contrast other teachers pointed out that for some parents the infant classes were not places of significant developmental learning at all, as evident in the following comments:

“Some parents just think of junior infants as just playing,” was how one teacher put it.

“They (parents) can’t seem to realise how much their child misses …when they are late or miss days in school.”

“Some parents are treating infants’ classrooms as a playschool or crèche.”

Teachers indicated that some parents expected regular progress reports on their children. Academic progress was not always the main interest of parents. Some wanted to know how their children were socialising and others were more interested in the teacher’s opinion of how content the child was at school.

The majority of comments by teachers referring to parental expectations focused on parents wishing to be allowed to observe, share and in some cases record their child’s first experiences of primary school. Teachers commented on the reluctance of some parents to be separated from their child. As one teacher said:

“They (parents) find it hard to let go. Even though you ask them not to come into the classroom, they do and nearly make the child cry when they say that they are leaving.”

Teachers also expected that parents would attend information meetings at the school before the beginning of the school year. These meetings often took place in the summer term of the previous school year. Teachers also expected the school to tell the parents about the curriculum for infants and what would be expected of parents and of their children as they begin primary school.
Most of the teachers agreed that parents are prepared to attend meetings dealing with transition issues during their child’s first term in school. Parents of infant children are also more likely to attend their child’s school performances, open days, sports days and award ceremonies. For example:

“The parents come into the room every morning and I meet them then, thus reducing the necessity for additional formal meetings.”

“The kids love having their parent there with them (in the classroom).”

Pre-school Experience
Teachers had mixed views on the benefits or otherwise of pre-school attendance by the incoming children.

On the positive side teachers found that junior infants who had attended pre-school did not have separation anxiety problems on the first day and were used to being with other children and making friends. One teacher suggested that those who hadn’t been to pre-school are “Very clingy and don’t know how to interact with other children”. Another pointed out that those who had been to Early Start or Nursery Schools were “used to socialising and they have friends”.

In terms of readiness for junior infants teachers pointed out that those who had been to pre-school had an academic advantage. One teacher stated “They know their letters, their numbers and their colours”. Another said that links between the pre-school and the primary school made life easier for all concerned as the pre-school staff “are more in tune with what is happening in the school, especially in junior infants”. Early Start was singled out as being particularly effective. One teacher put it like this, “the difference that Early Start makes to the children is just fantastic.” Teachers mentioned some particular skills that children from a quality care/educational pre-school experience had usually developed and some indicated that they would expect children arriving in the infant classes to be able to use the toilet, wash their hands, eat lunch and be able to sit and give attention to the teacher for at least some parts of the day.

On the negative side some teachers indicated that there was a huge variety in standards among pre-schools. One teacher complained that a large group of children from the same pre-school came into her class and “their behaviour was atrocious”. In her opinion they had been “let run riot” in pre-school. Others pointed to the fact that the letters learned in pre-school were all capitals and the children had to be retrained when it came to making their letters. In the Montessori system and others the freedoms allowed and low ratio of adults to children would be in marked contrast to the infant classroom.

Another point made by infant teachers was the lack of structure in pre-school in terms of rules and regulations. It was felt that a degree of structure in pre-school would prepare children for the junior infant class. One infant teacher complained that in pre-school “they did whatever they wanted and they cannot understand why it is different in big school”. The problems highlighted by infant teachers were; not waiting to take their turn, not staying in their seat, running away from the teacher and being rude to other children. The length of the school day also posed problems as children were absolutely exhausted at the end of a more structured day.

Special Needs (SEN)
A significant challenge pre-transition relates to the application for and processing of supports for pupils with SEN. It was widely expected that parents would inform the school at time of enrolment of any special needs their child might have. It was also expected that the parent would provide the school with any relevant documentation that might support an application for resources to support the child’s learning. In relation to this many teachers were of the opinion that professional development provision in relation to supporting children with SEN and including them meaningfully in mainstream classrooms is at present inadequate. The following comment reflects this viewpoint:

“More and more we are being asked to integrate children with special needs, but we are not getting the support we need nor training.”

It was noted that some schools have had the experience of children with SEN arriving at the start of the school year without the school having received any indication of the child’s possible needs at the time of enrolment. Children often lose out in such situations. The following examples illustrate the challenges involved:
“I have a child who arrived without information. He was diagnosed with dyspraxia early in the year. Resources have now been put in place for next September but he has lost one whole year.”

“I have a child with motor control issues, it was noticed at the start of the year, but her parents are still waiting (in May) for an assessment and for her application for resources to be processed.”

These are difficult situations to accept. Supporting some children with profound SEN while educational supports are being sought can be a challenge. The lack of occupational and speech therapists in the community available to families leaves the teacher and the family to manage without the professional expertise that might make all the difference. Teachers also pointed out that they do not always agree with the findings of assessments carried out by educational psychologists. The professional judgement of the teacher is sometimes ignored. Teachers gave a number of examples of incidences when parents and teachers took issue with the findings of assessments. Communicating information to parents about a child’s difficulties/needs especially when the parent may be unaware that any problem may exist can also be a challenge to the teacher of the infant classes. This may happen when the child is an only child or a first child and the parents have few points of reference against which to measure their child’s development.

Expert guidance for the teacher from ‘centres of excellence’, educational psychologists, occupational therapists and speech therapists which could make a significant difference to the children are not perceived to be widely available. Teachers expressed a desire for needs-led professional development opportunities in the area of special education to help them support the learning of the children in their care.

Starting School
The first challenge for the junior infant teacher is to establish and maintain school and classroom routines. Discrete time periods for the various activities and sequences of activities need to be set up. As one teacher explained:

“Not that I want to be rigid but you have to have defined times for eating and non-eating, toilet time, yard time etc. so that there can be some order in the day.”

In the first weeks and months the teacher spends much time getting the children used to taking part in shared activity and in encouraging and modelling patterns of expected behaviour. Children are being taught to socialize and co-operate in groups. The following comment illustrates this point:

“Many children wouldn’t know how to behave in group situations. Their social skills can be very poor. They can be very demanding, believing that they can have what they want whenever. Many do not understand that they have to wait in turn and for a lot of them the concept of routine is alien.”

Some teachers mentioned discipline in this context and referred to controlling noise levels at times in the classroom. Organising belongings can be difficult for some children and therefore a challenge for the teacher. One teacher pointed out that some children ‘can’t manage their belongings,’ i.e. schoolbags and lunch boxes. Some also have difficulty with their clothes i.e. shoes, zips, buttons, jumpers and coats and can’t remember where things should be kept and where they are to retrieve them. Some children have yet to learn to recognise their own name on their belongings. Parents do not always remember to put labels on belongings or items of clothing and sometimes forget to renew faded labels. Children can also be tired coming to school due to insufficient sleep or the length of the school day. Children who are placed in the yard with older children can find the situation daunting and there is also the difficulty associated with adjusting to being one among many. Teachers of the infant classes may find themselves spending much time comforting fearful children and allaying their fears. As one teacher commented:

“I find it hard sometimes to get the children to go out to break as they are reluctant.”

Teachers pointed out that many outdoor play areas in schools are often unsuitable for infant children to play in at break times.
Curriculum

The infant curriculum was seen as ambitious in its scope and content for some children in areas of social and educational disadvantage. Play-based activity learning is not easy to provide for in overcrowded classrooms. Inadequate space for the storage of equipment, lack of play areas and space for activity/learning stations will also present a challenge for the teacher of the infant classes. Having a second adult in the infant classroom would help with the physical tasks of safe storage and retrieval of equipment for use in the classroom or in general purpose areas. Teachers commented:

“If you want to implement the revised curriculum for infants properly you need at least one other adult in the classroom.”

“I am lucky to have an SNA assigned to my class ... I don’t know what I would do without her. She makes such a difference.”

“It would be lovely to have another adult in the room with you, especially at the beginning of the year.”

“I think classroom assistants should be a must for all junior infants classes.”

There was general agreement that integration was a major part of the infant curriculum particularly when dealing with subjects such as SPHE, science and religion. There was general agreement that letters, reading and oral language were vitally important but there was some disagreement as to when formal reading and formal writing should begin. Many stated that they were not going to start formal readers until senior infants while others indicated that they would start at junior infant level. One teacher stated that the children “should be doing a lot more reading readiness and writing readiness and all the preparatory stuff” at Junior Infant level. Some teachers suggested that the first few months were devoted to “trying to settle them in to discipline and routine and developing social skills” rather than concentrating on the formal curriculum. Many referred to the pressure coming from parents who felt that their children “should be reading and doing proper writing”. Another teacher pointed out that some parents “just think of junior infants as playing and just colouring” and felt that the child missed very little if they were late for school or absent for a number of days.

Junior Infant Teachers’ Issues and Expectations

Teachers had a number of expectations of their school, the education system, parents and children for the first days of the school year in junior infants. Some schools were able to release, from within scarce human resources, another adult to the junior infant classroom for at least part of each of the first few days. This support was seen as invaluable and many believe that another adult in the infant classroom is essential to the delivery of a play and activity based child-centred curriculum for infants. Smaller class sizes for infants and spacious classrooms with areas for play and activity based learning, in addition to learning resources, equipment, toys and facilities for water and sand were viewed as important but not always available.

“We need a big classroom with play areas and space for sand etc. ... It is really important that we are not just working in one small corner.”

“I think it would be lovely if you had a smaller group but with large numbers it is very hard.”

The expectation that parents would collaborate with teachers particularly in the first term as the infant teacher is establishing routines was mentioned by a number of teachers. Among the responsibilities identified for parents was ensuring regular attendance and punctuality, assisting the child with tasks assigned for homework, taking care that books loaned are returned and in good condition and that parents dress their children appropriately for PE days and in the school uniform on other days.

Teachers wanted to be trusted by parents to care for and teach their children. They expected parents to allow their children to progressively become more independent by allowing them to do what they can for themselves rather than stepping in and doing everything for them - even when it took significantly more time without help. From the school they wanted the support of a resource/LS teacher for children who fall behind, and access to resources and expertise to support children with SEN. They also expressed the opinion that, “It would be great to have more occupational and speech therapists coming into the schools,” to support children with such needs and advise teachers on best classroom strategies to support the learning of these children. Access to educational
psychologists was also seen as valuable for the same reasons. For the children, they expected that by June they would be able to socialize, take turns, co-operate in learning tasks and play and have mastered the letter sounds and the number concepts to five.

**Post Transition**

Large class sizes continue to be a challenge for the teachers of infants in particular. There was no overall consensus on an optimum number of children in the infant classroom. The discussion on a specific number was linked to the benefit of having a second qualified adult in the classroom. There was general agreement that the optimum class size for junior infants was 15 to 1. Many teachers were of the view that twenty children were manageable in the infant classroom with the support of a classroom assistant or SNA. All agreed that the revised curriculum placed huge demands on teachers and that a single adult could not cope in terms of group teaching and active learning. In addition, the integration of children with special needs led to increased pressure on teachers in the classroom and this is where another adult would be needed.

Infant teachers also mentioned that they feel a sense of isolation from their colleagues in the school. The work of the teacher of infant classes is intense; children at this age require that the teacher be constantly vigilant as their capacity for independent learning and activity is minimal. It is impossible for the teacher to leave the classroom without arranging for another teacher to supervise. Schools are busy places and another teacher may not be readily available.

Factors outside the control of the teacher often affect the classroom. There are home issues that can upset children leaving them feeling insecure. One teacher found that, “sometimes children whose backgrounds are a bit unsettled find it harder to settle or they get upset much easier or withdraw into themselves”. A clash of values between those of home and school can cause confusion for the child. Frequent and lengthy absences and recurring late attendance can be symptomatic of difficulties at home or indicate that the home does not share the values of the school or value education itself in the same way that the mainstream of society does. Children miss out on much while absent from school. One teacher pointed out that in her experience, “Some children are coming in late everyday”. They can often forget what has been taught and regress in patterns of behaviour. The long school breaks can also have this effect.

Some teachers noted that in schools where numbers are declining children can arrive when they turn four towards the end of September or even later. This is particularly prevalent in areas of social and educational disadvantage. Teachers sometimes find that they must modify instructional language, and simplify it to enable some children to understand. Poor understanding of spoken language can be prevalent in some areas and is creating a new challenge for many teachers of junior infants. This is illustrated in the following comments:

> “I find that at least a quarter of the class is coming in with speech problems because they are not using language. They watch television but don’t use language.”

> “I think oral language is a huge problem throughout the whole school. I find that in junior infants no matter how simple I make it, I am still using words they do not understand. I have to use a lot of visual cues when speaking so that they know what I am talking about.”

**Conclusion**

In summary, teachers of junior classes thought that some parents expected much from teachers and schools and others very little. They generally agreed that the primary care givers took a greater interest in the school and their child’s learning while the child was in the infant classes than later as the child progressed through school. Transition into primary school was regarded by parents to be a significant milestone in their child’s life and in some cases traumatic for the child, the parent or both.

Teachers of the reception classes in primary schools had wide-ranging expectations of pre-schools, parents and the education system. They also alluded to the many challenges they face in their classrooms pre-transition, at transition and post-transition to primary school. Many of the challenges would be mitigated by a system commitment to lower class sizes in the junior cycle, a second qualified adult in the infant classroom in addition to classrooms, equipment and resources suitable for the delivery of a play-based, activity-led learning experience as envisaged in the revised curriculum. Inclusion of pupils with SEN in a meaningful way was seen as a particular challenge.
Special Education and Transition

Introduction
Transition from pre-primary to primary or from primary to post-primary involves many changes for all pupils. However, while the majority of pupils adjust to the new demands or their new surrounding within a few short weeks, adjustment for the pupils with Special Education Needs (SEN) may take significantly longer, and the pupils with SEN may need ongoing support. Transition is at a critical period of time and if the student cannot access the curriculum or belong to the new learning community because educational supports are not in place then the adverse consequences for the pupil as well as for the school community may be momentous.

In relation to the transition from primary to post-primary level, at present resources allocated at primary level do not automatically transfer with the pupil to second-level. These resources have to be re-applied for, with current documentation, to the relevant Special Educational Needs Organiser (SENO), by the receiving school well in advance of the student’s entry to post-primary. If educational supports are to be in place in late August when many post-primary schools open, it is important that the receiving schools are mindful of the dates by which applications must be made. The NCSE issues circulars outlining the documentation required and the dates by which applications must be submitted.

Another key issue for pupils with SEN in transition is appropriate placement. Here transition is generally more complex than moving from a mainstream school to another mainstream setting. Pupils with SEN at primary level are in special schools, special units in mainstream schools and in mainstream schools with educational supports. They transfer from each to an even wider variety of educational settings at second-level. Children who may have come from various school settings may have had, accordingly, vastly different educational experiences at primary level, and this may need to be taken into account at the time of transition. Information on local post-primary schools might be made available to parents at the primary school. Primary schools might provide parents with information on their child, held in the school record, to submit with their application to post-primary. Primary schools may also liaise with post-primary on request of the primary care-giver or with their expressed permission, in a manner which will help the student with SEN to make a smooth transition. Provision of relevant information allows post-primary schools to prepare well for the arrival of SEN pupils.

Current Provision
Currently, the National Council for Special Education has responsibility for the improvement in the delivery of education services to persons, particularly children, with special educational needs arising from disabilities. It was first established as an independent statutory body by order of the Minister for Education and Science in December 2003 and with effect from 1 October 2005 it was formally established under the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004 (EPSEN Act). The general functions of the Council, as set out in Section 20 of the EPSEN Act, may be summarised as follows:

- Planning and co-ordinating provision of education and support services to children with special educational needs.
- Disseminating information on best practice concerning the education of children with special educational needs.
- Providing information to parents in relation to the entitlements of children with special educational needs.
- Assessing and reviewing resources required by children with special educational needs.
- Ensuring that progress of students with special educational needs is monitored and reviewed.
- Reviewing education provision for adults with disabilities.
- Advising educational institutions on best practice.
- Consulting with voluntary bodies.
• Advising the Minister for Education and Science on matters relating to special education.
• Conducting research and publishing findings.

In addition the Council has specific functions in relation to assessment and individual education plans. The Council is required to consult directly with stakeholders as necessary and to establish a formal national Consultative Forum representative of all the stakeholders.

Since 2005, the NCSE has responsibility for allocating additional available teaching and other resources to support the special educational needs of children with disabilities. Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENOs) process applications for additional teaching and Special Needs Assistant (SNA) support for children with special educational needs from all schools.

Special Education Support Service (SESS)
The In-Career Development Unit of the Department of Education and Science (now the Teacher Education Section) established the Special Education Support Service (SESS) in September 2003. The service aims to enhance the quality of teaching and learning with particular reference to the education of students with special needs.
The SESS facilitates a partnership approach involving support teams of practising teachers, Education Centres, the Inspectorate, the National Educational Psychological Service, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, the National Council for Special Education, Third Level Colleges, Health Board Personnel, Teacher Unions and other relevant bodies and services.

An Overview of a Joint Initiative of the SESS and the Education Centres
In January 2008, the SESS in co-operation with Teacher Education Centres began to offer seminars on ‘Transition for pupils with special educational needs’, to teachers working in Primary, Secondary and Special Education settings. Seminar materials were devised by SESS in collaboration with St. Patrick’s College, Drumcondra. The seminars were delivered by teachers trained by the SESS and have been well subscribed with some centres scheduling additional seminars in response to demand. Seminars last between two and two and a half hours. Feedback from teachers suggests that there is an enthusiasm among teachers for follow-up professional development in this area. The SESS is offering additional training to facilitators in the early part of the current school year.

Challenges for the Pupil and Strategies for the Teacher
A growing number of children with special educational needs are transferring to second-level. In an educational context that is ever more inclusive, the SESS introduced this initiative to assist primary and post-primary teachers to better help pupils with SEN make a successful transition from primary to post-primary school. The seminars aim to highlight the issues, identify and reinforce good practice already in schools and to advise schools on how other strategies might be devised and employed to help make transition more successful for pupils with SEN. The focus is to put in place simple, practical steps that may make a huge difference to the pupil. The table below shows that pupils with special educational needs make up a significant number in our student population.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Disability</th>
<th>No. of children</th>
<th>Prevalence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical and Sensory Disabilities</td>
<td>13,035</td>
<td>1.21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual/General Learning Disabilities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(i) mild</td>
<td>20,597</td>
<td>1.91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(ii) moderate, severe and profound</td>
<td>16,141</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4,456</td>
<td>0.41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific Learning Disability</td>
<td>64,562</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autistic Spectrum Disorder</td>
<td>6,026</td>
<td>0.56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental Health Difficulties</td>
<td>86,083</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>190,303</td>
<td>17.68%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 30: Estimated number of children who may have SEN under EPSEN

EPSEN implementation report (2006) p72
Seminars offer some guidance to schools on putting systems in place to facilitate lines of communication to allow for collaborative planning of transition activities and continuity between preparation for transition, transition itself and post-transition supports.

A significant feature of these seminars is that they bring teachers from primary, secondary and special educational settings together. Home School Community Links initiatives and School Completion Programmes also facilitate collaboration but are only available to schools designated as educationally disadvantaged.

The seminars focus firstly on highlighting key issues for pupils with SEN at the time of transition. Secondly, they explore a range of practical activities and strategies teachers might use to minimise or eliminate obstacles to smooth transition for pupils with SEN. The benefits for the pupil and the school are both immediate and long term. Anticipation of difficulties that may arise and preventing them occurring is, in the long term, a more efficient use of human resources than fire fighting. The pupil is less anxious when better prepared for the change s/he will encounter in the new school. The school that is prepared to take steps to minimize difficulties associated with this change may find it has to react less to crises that might otherwise have arisen. Interventions may reduce the risk of school dropout associated with failure to make a successful transition. School exclusion or refusal may not arise.

A partnership approach to transition where primary, second-level and the primary care givers of the pupils with SEN collaborate is more likely to be successful. The first stage prepares for transition, the second stage provides support during, and the third stage provides support following transition. A transition programme is not seen as an additional extra but an essential component of a curriculum preparing pupils for life long learning and the many transitions they will experience in our rapidly changing modern world. Transition modules can be delivered across curricular subjects and in the learning support or resource setting. Sample activities in the participants’ booklet, for both primary and secondary level, focus on dispelling myths, and on equipping the pupil for the new educational setting.

Among the many changes the first-year pupils must adjust to in their new surroundings are complex timetables, multiple teachers, new rules, movement from class to class and new subjects. Movement around the school, for example, may be problematic for some pupils with SEN. A designated person to track the SEN pupil or a buddy system may help to alleviate difficulties in some instances. Small adjustments can make a huge difference to a child with SEN and whether or not s/he makes a successful transition to post-primary. Schools thinking about transition will focus on that which is under their control. Minor adjustments to the timetabling, providing more convenient locker spaces, and visits to the second-level school by the child prior to transition could be key to successful transition for some students. The participants’ booklet contains many practical suggestions and sample activities that schools might use.

The seminars aim to raise awareness of the key issues around transition to second-level and to build capacity in schools to reduce, minimise or eliminate obstacles to smooth transition, especially for pupils with SEN. Schools are encouraged to carry out an audit of current practice as a first step. They are encouraged to introduce the manageable and practical strategies that might answer best the particular needs of SEN pupils in their own unique educational setting. This will usually involve devising useful learning activities for pupils and delivering them prior to, at and after transition. This collaborative focus on transition may encourage both systems to change so that they may dovetail together more effectively for all pupils.
Transition and Special Needs

Focus Group Discussion

The process of transition into special schools varies enormously because there is such a range of difficulties and types of schools. In most cases also special schools cater for both primary and post-primary pupils. In order to ascertain the views of teachers in special schools about the issue of transition of pupils from the mainstream schools, a focus group discussion involving eight teachers from special schools in the Cork area was organised. The teachers represented a variety of different types of special schools. Their views are outlined according to the themes that emerged during the discussion.

Choosing Special Schools

Special schools were chosen by parents for a number of reasons. Until recently many parents sent their children to special schools as mainstream education wasn’t an option. However, many parents still opted for special schools for their children when they become aware of the various options available to their children in special schools, particularly if they were concerned that post-primary schools did not have the resources for special education. This is evident from the following comments:

“I think one of the things that influence parents would be the concern about resources at second-level.”

“When parents do get an opportunity to visit a special school their eyes are opened to the opportunities that are available in special schools that are not available in mainstream schools.”

“If a child isn’t getting on in mainstream they (parents) want better for them.”

Sometimes parents were concerned that their children would not be able to cope in a large post-primary school. For example:

“I think the over riding thing is fear that the children can’t survive in a bigger school...where they think there wouldn’t be the same understanding of their needs.”

The difficulty of securing resources and the necessity for re-applying on transfer to post-primary was a recurring theme in all the teacher focus groups. Transport issues were identified as influencing parents’ choice of school for their child. As one teacher said:

“Transport issues are huge for our children – if they get a place they get transport but going to secondary school they may not get transport.”

One teacher described how she had difficulties regarding one boy who had a place in a secondary school that everyone agreed would be better for him, but that transport was not given. And as his mother was not in a position to bring him to the school he had to go to a different school. The teacher was concerned that the boy could be out of school by the end of the year as the school did not appear to be as suitable for him.

It also depended on the age of the child and the circumstances under which the transition took place. In one school which dealt with dyslexic-type difficulties more of the children were being enrolled at a younger age due to earlier intervention in primary schools. Many children were coming to the school with a psychological diagnosis or a speech and language diagnosis. Most children who attended the special school for dyslexic-type difficulties returned to mainstream schools. However, teachers from the other special schools said there were no transfers back to mainstream schools.

Age of Transition to Special Schools

The teachers stated that the parents normally come to them when their children are in 5th or 6th in the mainstream primary school as there is nowhere for their children to go. The natural transition process seems to be after 6th class. It is more problematic if children are transferring at a later stage having spent a few years in a mainstream post-primary school. This is particularly the case if a child is transferring because of a lack of success in a mainstream school. For example:
“They may be coming from low self-esteem, parents can feel that they have failed the child, the child may feel that they have failed and you can be left with somebody who needs you to bring them back to a level of confidence where they feel that they are a whole person again.”

Teachers were of the view that children that came to the special school early did well in the special school. This can be seen from the following comments:

“We are quite happy to take them in younger ... their self-esteem hasn’t been damaged and they don’t think they are stupid and I think it is a lot better.”

The younger the better

Parental Concerns on Transition

Once a decision has been made by parents to enrol their children in a special school, they still have concerns about how well their child may settle, according to the teachers. Concerns centered around issues to do with friendship, behaviour and participation in activities. This is illustrated in the following comments:

“The big concern is that it is isolating for the children…it is hard to make or meet friends because they are so far away and can lose the friends they have got.”

“They are concerned they will pick up behavioural problems, bad speech or will imitate others in the class.”

“There are also concerns that their children may not have opportunities to engage in after-school activities if they are traveling quite a distance to the school.”

Concerns of Teachers

Teachers also had concerns about the transition of children to the special school. They usually show prospective children around the school and ask them what they like and don’t like about it. They also ask them what they would like to do at the end of school, as they like to make sure the children are enrolling for the right reasons.

“The worst thing would be to have children in our school against their will as it really is an uphill struggle and we had a few.”

“You find that they can’t do basic things like tie their shoes, change their socks or get dressed after swimming......which wouldn’t be taught in mainstream school.”

According to the teachers the pupils themselves also had concerns about transferring to special schools. Teachers take into account that the students are not confident teenagers and that they are concerned about friends and that they lose contacts that they had in their local areas. They may also have concerns about letting their friends know that they have transferred to a special school, particularly if the title of the school includes ‘special’. Some teachers’ comments included:

“For a number of them bullying would be an issue – the fear of bullying, probably previous experience of bullying.”

“Special needs children seem to have the fear of change.”

Pupils in special schools also transfer to other services on completion of their education in the special school. According to the teachers the students look forward to going to the vocational training centres but their parents are more concerned about how well they will settle in.

Transition Policy

In relation to preparing children for attendance in a special school, teachers outlined a number of practices they engaged in prior to enrolment. This usually involved visits to the special school. However, it was noted that it
was difficult and time consuming to organize such visits well. Teachers viewed such visits as important for the children as it gave them an opportunity to get a sense of the school, as the following comments show:

“Ideally the teacher or the SNA would bring the child to the school. We always offer them the opportunity to come to the school for at least the morning. They may not be in the class but at least they find the layout, know where the toilets are, their classrooms, what time lunch is.....”

“The key thing is the physical going to the new place and finding out where everything is...and for students to see a working school...they see children in the classes and doing English, woodwork etc.”

Sometimes there wasn’t a system for transferring into a special school at a later stage. This necessitated staff meeting the teachers from the mainstream primary school, the parents and the agencies engaged with the child. One school held an admission conference which is attended by the occupational therapist, speech and language therapist, principal, school nurse and the NEPS psychologist if available.

The difficulties of transition from a special school into a mainstream post-primary school were outlined by a teacher in the school which deals with dyslexia. The logistics were difficult in that the school has to set up links with all the schools and get NEPS to do reports for all the children before Easter so that the secondary schools could have resources in place for these children by September.

Teachers referred also to the problem of receiving psychological reports in a foreign language in relation to foreign national children who had been assessed in their own country, which were not accepted by the Department of Education and Science. They had to resort to having interpreters present with a psychologist in order to assess a child’s needs.

Teachers in the special schools stated that they appreciated information about the pupils who were to transfer to the school. Small things were important, such as what a student liked or disliked, what upset them, what could provoke outbursts or what could distress them. For example:

“We send out a report or report sheet to schools and ask them to fill it in and it could be as small as – what does the child like....or ....the child can’t cope with the fire alarm bell.”

In general, in all the focus groups, it was noted that it is in the area of SEN that there is most co-operation between primary and post-primary schools in terms of exchanging information.

**Policy on Special Schools**

One issue of concern to the teachers in the special schools is their designation as primary schools. Many special schools work almost exclusively with pupils at second-level age. There were suggestions that there should be special primary schools and special post-primary schools. Problematic issues include the fact that the school remains open until the end of June, even though some students are doing the state exams in June. Students also have a shorter day during the school year while their peers in post-primary schools have a longer day. Teachers are of the view that this impacts on the curricular provision for the students.

“We will have 40-50% of our students not attending in June and they are losing out from September to May as they have a shorter day.”

“If the school around the corner has a half day on Wednesday why don’t we because all the other secondary schools in Cork do.”

There was also a view that the management of special education at post-primary level, both in mainstream schools and in special schools, should be reviewed as recommended in the SERC Report. Other organisational issues referred to was the ‘dual enrolment’ policy some schools had which involved part-time attendance in a mainstream school and part-time in a special school, a practice in many schools but not officially supported in the system. The difficulties in the system were described by some teachers, as follows:

“People individually are trying to do things but the system is creaking and there is no coherent thought being put into it.”
“Lack of vision is a big issue on what they are going to do with special schools as it is the same as it was 15 years ago.”

It was also pointed out that since the introduction of the general-allocation model of providing special education support in primary schools, children with mild general learning disabilities are no longer assessed. This causes a difficulty when the child wishes to enrol in a special school for his or her post-primary education, as the child must then seek an assessment, which can be difficult to arrange, if there are no official services available.

Referring to the review of special schools which is currently taking place, some teachers were of the view that it would not happen, as it would raise issues which would be difficult to address. As one teacher said:

“I think they are actually afraid of opening a can of worms.”

**Concluding Comment**

On the whole, the teachers were proud of the work being done in special schools for children with special educational needs.

“Special schools are doing fantastic things but they are doing it in their own area with their own ways and means.”
Discussion and Recommendations

Introduction
This document has looked at some of the transitions that occur into and from the primary school. The existing available literature and research have been considered. The transition from primary to post-primary school in Northern Ireland and information from other countries were examined. In addition, research from one pre-school experience was presented and survey results from junior infant teachers, sixth class teachers at primary level and year heads of 1st Years in post-primary schools were considered. In order to gain more detailed insight into some of the issues in relation to transition in education a number of focus-group discussions were held in urban and rural school communities and their findings analysed. Issues of concern to teachers that emerged from the research have been discussed and some recommendations are presented. This chapter attempts to summarise all the findings, relate those to the literature that has been reviewed, draw some conclusions and present some recommendations on the topic in hand.

Relating the literature review to findings of current study on transitions

a. Pre-school to primary

International and national research have found that children are at risk of experiencing a difficult and challenging transition from pre-school to primary school due to the different expectations from the adults in the two different settings (Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta and Cox, 2000; Hausken & Rathbun, 2002; O’Kane, 2007). Junior infant primary teachers involved in this study concurred with these findings.

The call for smaller class sizes and more classroom assistants in primary infant classes echo the findings of international studies (Wesley & Buysee, 2003; O’Kane, 2007). For many years, the importance of small class size has been noted in terms of enabling teachers to work with the diversity of experiences and abilities in the infant classroom. International research has found that both class size and adult:child ratios in early childhood settings influence both programme quality and children’s learning and development (National Research Council, 2001). The move from an environment with low adult:child ratios to one with much higher ratios emphasizes discontinuities, and research has shown that children are very aware of the different levels of adult attention within the two settings (Ledger, 2000).

As children transfer from pre-school to junior infants, they are moving from a socially-focused learning environment to one in which they are being judged and compared with each other. However, there appears to be a difference between rhetoric and reality, as the skill of sitting still and listening is one that teachers say they value in the classroom. It is understandable why teachers of large classes would find this skill useful in terms of classroom management and the ability to listen and concentrate useful in practical terms. As evident from the INTO’s current research outlined in this report, practising infant teachers concur that class size and adult/child ratios impact on the their ability to adequately meet the needs of each individual four or five year old child in a class of up to or over thirty children. Many of the challenges would be mitigated by a system commitment to lower class sizes in the early years’ classes in the primary school, a second qualified adult in the infant classroom and classrooms and resources suitable for the delivery of a play-based, activity-led learning experience as mandated in the revised curriculum.

Curriculum
The revised primary curriculum (1999) at infant level in primary schools places an emphasis on child-centred learning. There is, however, a greater emphasis on direct instruction because of the necessity to implement a mandatory programme. The INTO advise that movement rather than learning while sitting still is important in the infants classes (2006). However, teachers have suggested, in both O’Kane’s study (2007) and in the current INTO study that children with the ability to negotiate classroom life independently, equipped with good social skills and the ability to concentrate and listen for short periods of time, are more likely to be successful at primary level. The balance between acting independently when required and also sitting still when requested may well be a difficult balance for children of four and five years old to understand.

Primary teachers found it problematic when children who attended some crèches or playschools had completed some of the content of the junior infant curriculum: this is something that should not be happening according to
the teachers in this current study. Perhaps this indicates further the urgent need for meaningful communication between all the stakeholders – which should be introduced and supported at an official national level. At local level, educators would be responsible for developing and sustaining respectful partnerships between parents and educators for all educational transitions.

Communication
Both O’Kane (2007) and the current INTO study found that communication and levels of continuity between pre-school practitioners and primary school teachers were low, and few teachers reported that information was transferred from pre-school to primary school. In the absence of national guidelines on transition, perhaps we should not be surprised with these findings. Nevertheless, educators cannot disregard the OECD Report (2002) which emphasised that strong links between pre-school and primary sector are beneficial in terms of developing shared goals, methodologies and synchronising staff development and training. Indeed, based on the findings of the current study, those recommendations would benefit any educational transition in our system.

Age of entry to primary school
Age of entry to junior infants was an issue for many junior infant teachers. Teachers involved in the current INTO study (2008) felt that the age a child starts is the most important factor as the more mature the child is, the easier the transition and that raising the school entry age and reducing class size would make a positive difference. A year of free quality pre-school education could ensure that all children were given the opportunity to learn and develop in pre-school, rather than starting formal school at four years of age (O’Kane, 2007). Historically, there has been resistance to suggestions of raising school entry age from both parents and primary school teachers. Raising the school entry age may be problematic in itself given the lack of government financial support at pre-school level. According to O’Kane (2007) the cost of pre-school in Ireland is a factor in parents sending their children to school at four years of age.

Perhaps it is timely to revisit the issue in light of the views expressed by primary infant teachers in the INTO 2008 research. Cognisance must be taken of the fact also that free early education for three year olds in advance of entry to primary school has been suggested by both the OECD (2004) and NESF (2005). The questions at issue here are whether universal pre-school education for three year old children would ease the transition to primary school when the children reach four and whether primary teachers, supported by appropriate resources and a reduction in class size, need to reconceptualise the junior infant classroom in order to meet the needs of four year olds more appropriately. Even though it is not compulsory for children to attend school until they are six years of age, Ireland has a strong tradition of providing for four and five year old children in primary schools, which in effect is a universal pre-school programme for children of pre compulsory school age. Raising the school entry age would be contrary to this strong tradition and would have implications up through the primary school. The school starting age was last raised in 1936 when it was raised to four. Attempts to raise the school starting age in 1981 were met with strong opposition from both parents and teachers and were unsuccessful.

Parental expectations versus Partnership with parents
The role of parents in supporting their children when starting school is of immense importance according to infant teachers. In summary, teachers of junior classes thought that some parents expected much from teachers and schools while others expected little. They generally agreed that the primary care-givers took a greater interest in the school and their child’s learning while the child was in the infant classes than later as the child progresses through school. Transition into primary school was regarded by parents as a significant milestone in their child’s life and in some cases traumatic for the child, the parent or both. Teachers believed that the school environment, which should be bright, warm, welcoming and happy, was thought to be central to successful transition. Teachers do not appear to consult parents very much on the issue of transition to primary school.

a. Primary to post-primary

Having considered the literature on the transfer from primary to second-level schooling it is clear that the significance of this transition for young adolescent and their families must be given due recognition by educators at both primary and post-primary level. School transfer from primary school to second-level is a multi-faceted process that draws upon the resources of students and their families and militates against those who do not have adequate resources in the socio-cultural area (DES, 1981; Smyth et al., 2004; O’Brien, 2001 & 2004). National and international profiles indicate that issues of concern for pupils transferring to second-level school included:
making friends, fear of getting lost, and anxiety about ability to cope with new subjects, teachers and learning styles (e.g. Smyth et al., 2004; Fouracre, 1991; Stradling and MacNeil, 2000; Zeedyk et al., 2003).

Varying levels of academic, social and emotional supports are necessary throughout the transfer process (Smyth et al., 2004). Findings also indicate that meaningful partnership approaches need to be adopted: contacts, information and training by teachers are necessary to ensure better understandings of differences between systems thus enabling teachers at all levels of education to communicate respectfully and effectively towards developing strategies for the involvement of pupils and their families (particularly those at risk of failure) in the process. This partnership approach needs to be supported at an official level (O’Brien, 2004). Similar findings from the current study have been identified.

Communications – Entrance exams
Better and transparent communication about the post-primary system and school was the most significant ingredient to improve the primary to post-primary transition process for the sixth class teachers in the INTO 2008 research. In relation to the curriculum, those same teachers felt that, in general, post-primary teachers were not familiar with the revised primary curriculum and, therefore, they had unrealistic expectations of the pupils sitting entrance exams. Primary teachers said that consideration should be given to the abolition of entrance exams; if the traditional exams were insisted upon, they should be set by primary teachers since post-primary teachers have little or no knowledge of the child-centred primary curriculum.

According to many of the post-primary teachers consulted the purpose of entrance exams is to identify those with special needs even though information on children with identified special needs should be automatically passed on to the child’s new school. Post-primary teachers were of the opinion that, in general, students adjust well to the transition to second-level, but a whole-school approach to ‘problem children’ - many of whom come from lower socio-economic backgrounds - was seen as necessary. Supports needed to be put in place prior to transition for children who were experiencing difficulties.

Curriculum
While the misalignment of the curriculums at primary and post-primary level was of major concern for primary teachers, it is noteworthy that the issue of curriculum discontinuity did not emerge as a pertinent issue for post-primary teachers. There is a strong possibility that concerns expressed by primary teachers in this regard stem from the culture that many entrance exams are unrelated to the primary curriculum and that primary teachers are not consulted in relation to the content of the entrance tests. In contrast to the views of primary teachers on Curriculum and Transition, some post-primary teachers were of the view that the over-emphasis on academic performance should be discouraged and that students be directed towards engagement in broader extra curricular activities. They need guidance towards developing good communication, organisational, collaborative skills in preparation for living a balanced life after schooling. There is clearly an urgent need for national direction to ensure smooth and seamless educational transitions – there is little or no meaningful continuum in the educational process.

Transition: a continuum in the educational process?
Sixth class teachers felt that the poor communication between primary and post-primary sectors was a failure of the Irish education system which does not view education as a continuum to Leaving Certificate level: they believe that two distinct levels exist with both ‘singing off two different hymn sheets’. They call for consultation and in-service for primary and post-primary teachers in relation to curriculum alignment and other issues. Likewise, post-primary teachers felt that primary and post-primary education should not be viewed as totally separate experiences but rather as a continuum. They also believe that there should be a national plan/policy for this important transfer passage stating that the needs of all children needed to be met in a uniform and consistent way in all schools.

Maturity of children
Sixth-class teachers believe that the personal coping skills of children are of vital importance in ensuring a successful transition. It was felt that the maturity of the pupils and their level of self-esteem and confidence all contributed to how well they would settle in their new educational setting. Primary teachers also felt that the lack of information about the post-primary schools led to unnecessary anxiety among those pupils who experience difficulties about the transfer. On the other hand, post-primary teachers believe that most difficulties / anxieties related to transition are associated with different teaching methodologies, the number of teachers, organisational
issues and timetables and rules; they believe that it was vital to have good relations with the feeder schools but wondered if more could be done at primary level to prepare sixth class for secondary in terms of emotional and organisational development. It is evident that both primary and post-primary teachers believe that the lack of a national cohesive plan creates a vacuum. The literature already examined (Smyth et al, 2004; Fouracre, 1991; Stradling and MacNeil, 2000; Zeedyk et al, 2003) as well as findings of a limited and subjective case study of a small group of participants over a relatively short period of time in Cork (2007-2008) concur with this view. Fear of bullying was the most prevalent fear for the students in the Cork case study although, for most students, their fears were unfounded when consulted at the end of their first year in post-primary. Second-level teachers maintain that many of their schools had flexible transition policies in place to give students time to adapt but such policies are at odds with what the DES demand - that schools should refrain from streaming students at an early stage. These findings indicate that schools need direction to empower them draw up policies that are informed, fair and in the best interests of the needs of the children and their families.

Comment
Overall, the literature on educational transitions has identified issues of differences in culture and curricula in pre-schools, primary and second-level schools as issues for each educational transition. It is clear that any successful transition depends on good communication and a level of continuity (cultural, social, curricular etc) between the key stakeholders in the different levels of schooling. Findings from practitioners in the current study appear to concur with this position.

Transition to second-level is an issue which requires specific intervention in education in Ireland. While post-primary teachers felt that the majority of students cope well with the transition, they felt that it was vital that the necessary supports – which some, not all, schools claim they have - be in place for the few students who do not “handle” the transition well. Some pupils never settle into second-level schools and fall into the “early school leaver” category probably through no fault of their own.

Based on the INTO findings outlined here it is clear that practitioners in both sectors continue to wonder about what the practices, culture and curriculum of the other level are while the children and their parents seem to be left out of the equation altogether. Those same practitioners find the current situation unsatisfactory. Common concerns have emerged for teachers at all levels represented in the INTO 2008 study: junior infant teachers, sixth-class teachers and year-heads of first-year post-primary schools raised issues of immaturity, length of school day, dealing with a new environment, not fitting in, children with special needs and the delay in having the necessary resources and support on time as being detrimental to successful transition. Furthermore, these issues must subsequently have some serious implications for the smooth continuum in learning and education of the children concerned. Such findings are noteworthy and must be taken seriously by policymakers and educators.

Conclusion
The extent of consensus between all of the participants during this research by INTO in 2008 is significant. Awareness among parents, teachers - and indeed the pupils themselves - of the areas of concern in the transition process, is encouraging. Local and national programmes and initiatives to support transition need to take cognisance of and utilise the experience and expertise of these groups, especially in relation to those who are not achieving or not reaching their potential in the education system.

As more attention is focused on crucial educational transitions for our young people and their families, it is incumbent on educators at pre-school, primary and post-primary level to develop innovative and effective strategies, individually and co-operatively, to ensure the most beneficial outcome for our pupils. This study recommends that policy-makers, too, must play their role, in consultation with the partners in leading the formulation and implementation of national guidelines for all schools.

The entire findings of this particular study concur with the notion that educational transition is an adaptive process for children and their families, and that all stakeholders including the State should/must be involved in communication about the process. Aspects of the study also confirmed the value of involving multiple stakeholders, particularly the children themselves, in the research process.
In summary, the INTO makes the following recommendations.

In relation to the transfer into primary schools, the INTO recommends:

• that more formal communication procedures be established between pre-schools and primary schools;

• that class size in junior infant classes be reduced to 20 pupils and to 15 in the case of multi-classes and in the case of schools in DEIS;

• that a qualified classroom assistant/childcare worker be appointed to all infant classes;

• that professional development opportunities be provided to all junior infant teachers on a regular basis in relation to curriculum and methodology in the early years;

• that pre-school teachers be afforded opportunities to become familiar with the primary school curriculum;

• that the proposals in DEIS in relation to providing professional development support for the infant classes be implemented immediately;

• that guidelines be available to both pre-school and primary schools in relation to the transfer of information;

• that information and opportunities for consultation be provided for all parents of junior infant pupils.

In relation to the transfer from primary to post-primary school the INTO recommends:

• that more formal communication procedures be established between primary schools and post-primary schools;

• that national guidelines be available on the transfer of information;

• that opportunities be available for both primary and post-primary teachers to become familiar with each other’s curriculum and assessment processes;

• that the NCCA engage in curriculum-alignment initiatives between primary and post-primary;

• that all forms of entrance exams or transfer tests be abolished;

• that supports for special needs children should automatically transfer with pupils to post-primary schools;

• that national guidelines be available to both primary and post-primary schools in relation to drawing up school policy on transition and in relation to the organisation of transition activities and initiatives.
## Appendix I

### Comparative Table – Transition Stages in Various International School Systems

**Organisation of primary and secondary education in some developed countries**

*Countries in italics have devolved education systems.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Primary School Age/transfer</th>
<th>Compulsory Start</th>
<th>Grouping</th>
<th>Progress</th>
<th>Age at Transfer</th>
<th>Secondary school types</th>
<th>Access</th>
<th>Grouping</th>
<th>Progress</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Australia</em></td>
<td>5/6 Age/Set Automatic</td>
<td>12/13</td>
<td>Inclusive high school</td>
<td>Automatic</td>
<td>Age/Set</td>
<td>Automatic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Canada</em></td>
<td>6/7 Age Automatic</td>
<td>12/13</td>
<td>Inclusive high school</td>
<td>Automatic</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Automatic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Finland</em></td>
<td>7 Age Mainly Automatic</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Inclusive Peruskoulu</td>
<td>Automatic</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Mainly automatic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>France</em></td>
<td>6 Age Automatic</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Inclusive collège</td>
<td>Automatic</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Performance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Germany</em></td>
<td>6 Age Set Performance from age 7</td>
<td>10 or 12</td>
<td>Inclusive Gesamtschule or differentiated: Gymnasium leads to Abitur and university</td>
<td>Automatic</td>
<td>Age/Set</td>
<td>Performance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Italy</em></td>
<td>6 Age Mainly Automatic</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Inclusive scuola media</td>
<td>Certificate</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Mainly automatic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Japan</em></td>
<td>6 Age Set Automatic</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Inclusive junior high school</td>
<td>Automatic</td>
<td>Age/Set</td>
<td>Automatic</td>
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<td><em>Korea</em></td>
<td>6 Age Set Automatic</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Inclusive junior high school</td>
<td>Automatic</td>
<td>Age/Set</td>
<td>Automatic</td>
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4 Compulsory education is provided in an ‘all-through’ school (Peruskoulu, age six/seven to 16/17) although the younger and older students may be taught in separate buildings.

5 Education is compulsory to age 16. Consequently, students must normally complete at least one year at either the upper secondary lycée générale et technologique (general and technological upper secondary school) or the lycée professionnel (vocational upper secondary school), according to ability and career intentions.

6 Non-selective, full-day schools (unusual in Germany). Fewer than 10 per cent of children attend the Gesamtschule, attributed to general parental preference for differentiated secondary schooling.

7 The Realschule curriculum stresses mathematics, science and modern languages and offers numerous vocational courses.

8 The status and enrolments of the Hauptschule have declined in recent years.

9 A few experimental 12 to 18+ schools aim to decrease competition for entry to senior high school. A strategic plan (2002) proposed Super English Language Schools at junior and senior high levels.

10 Japan: Children receive an elementary school (primary school) leaving certificate (age 12), but usually progress automatically from their local elementary school to their local junior high school.
### Organisation of primary and secondary education in some developed countries cont’d

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Primary School</th>
<th>(Lower) Secondary School</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Compulsory Start</td>
<td>Grouping</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Netherlands</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Age</td>
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<td>New Zealand</td>
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<td>Age/set</td>
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<td>Singapore</td>
<td>6/7</td>
<td>Age; stream from age 10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Age</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>7(^{14})</td>
<td>Age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Varies</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

\(^{11}\) Repeating a year is at the discretion of the school, but is rare.

\(^{12}\) The three ‘types’ of education may be offered in separate schools, or in ‘combined’ schools which place students in the ‘type’ (or track) which best suits their needs. Transfer between the types is possible.

\(^{13}\) Students who experience difficulties may transfer to a less demanding school type/track.

\(^{14}\) Children may start at six (and leave at 15) or defer entry to age eight.

\(^{15}\) Grundskola cater for children aged six or seven to 15/16, but the younger and older children may be taught in separate buildings.

\(^{16}\) In some states, children transfer to middle schools at age nine and to high school at age 13+14.

Tables taken from the International Review of Curriculum and Assessment Frameworks Archive; accessed October 2008

PART TWO

Proceedings of the Consultative Conference on Education

14 – 15 November 2008, Tullamore
Transitions in Primary School

Ger Stack, Education Committee

Why Transition?
There are many transitions in a child’s primary school career. The movements from infant to middle and from middle to senior standards are potential areas of stress for all children. Today, however, we will focus on the two major transitions in primary schools - from pre-school to junior infants and from primary to secondary school. These are crucial stages in the child’s education as they can entail a change of location, teacher, curriculum and philosophy. Indeed the transition from primary to secondary is accompanied by the move from childhood to adolescence and this introduces further social and emotional issues into the transfer process.

The aim of this conference is to identify obstacles to a successful transition, to look at best practice and make recommendations for the future transfer of pupils both into and out of Primary school.

In my presentation I’ll be quoting from comments made by teachers in our own research.

Communication
The lack of communication between the primary and second-level schools is identified as a problem by teachers on both sides. One primary teacher stated that there was, “Little or no link between the primary and the secondary school”. Another stated that second-level schools “Never approach us looking for feedback”. While reservations were expressed as to confidentiality, most teachers bemoaned the fact that vital information was not being transferred with many pupils. There was a variety of practice among schools in the transfer of information between primary and post-primary schools. The majority agreed that a more formal system of information transfer was required and that the NCCA report card template would facilitate the introduction of this system.

This lack of transfer of information is also evident between the pre-school sector and primary schools. They had different expectations of each other. Despite the fact that the majority of infant teachers expressed a desire for increased communication with pre-schools only 10% reported receiving reports on incoming children.

Curriculum Continuity
The period of transition from pre-school to primary school is a time of rapid change in the life of a child. The child is moving from a learning environment that is more informal than the primary school classroom – a transition that can be very difficult for the child. School settings have their own culture reflecting the values, traditions and beliefs of the primary school - creating new experiences for children, which can impact on their behaviour and learning.

Infant teachers gave conflicting views on the pre-school experience of incoming children. These range from the teacher that said, ‘I wish it was compulsory that they all went to pre-school as it makes a huge difference’, to the comment of another teacher who stated that “I don’t know what they were doing in that pre-school but their behaviour was atrocious. I think they were let run riot”.

Obviously teachers feel that there is a huge variety of standards among pre-schools.

Primary teachers identify the change from a child-centered, experiential curriculum to a subject-centered, exam-driven one as a problem for children entering secondary school. They seek closer alignment of the curricula in the two sectors if education is to be a genuine continuum from pre-school to Leaving Cert. They felt that post-primary teachers were unfamiliar with the revised primary curriculum and had unrealistic expectations of pupils entering first-year. As one primary teacher said “we’re singing off two different hymn sheets”. However, it is positive that two third of the post-primary teachers stated that they were somewhat familiar with the primary curriculum.

Entrance tests/assessments are still viewed as a matter of concern by many primary teachers and parents. There was some confusion as to the content of the tests and concern about having to prepare specifically for these tests. One primary teacher stated that teachers were, “Very much in the dark in regard to the content”. Only 9% of teachers said they were consulted by the post-primary schools with regard to the content of the transfer tests.
The timing of these tests was also an area of concern for both teachers and parents at primary level. As children move to several different secondary schools tests take place at varying times between October and April. Sixth class teachers complained that the curriculum is distorted due to the amount of time spent in preparing for entrance tests to second-level. One teacher said “they upset the planning of work for the year as I end up rushing through work in order to have the course finished by February/March”. There was an element of “teaching to the test” where teachers were aware of the content and concerned that their pupils were properly prepared. Another teacher stated “Children are too aware of the implications of these tests. We spend eight years telling them that doing your best is good enough and suddenly only being one of the best is good enough”.

**Methodologies**

Teaching methodologies also need attention. The more pastoral based primary system is in contrast to the over emphasis on academic performance at second-level. Post-primary teachers also referred to the fact that there was an over emphasis on the achievement of points due to the dominance of state exams. One stated that the junior cycle curriculum, which was to be aligned more closely with the revised primary curriculum, was “aspirational”. Teachers were still teaching to the test, in this case the Junior Cert.

**Special Needs**

Special needs pupils may take longer to adjust to the new demands placed upon them on entry to school at both levels. They need a more helping hand. Key issues identified were appropriate placement and up-to-date documentation at the time of transfer. At reception level the inclusion of children with special needs in a meaningful way was seen as a particular challenge. One infant teacher made the comment that a child who arrived into her class without documentation lost “a whole year” because his dyspraxia was not diagnosed in time. Another stated that a child with motor-control issues were still waiting for an assessment in May despite the fact that the problem was highlighted in September. Another area of concern was the fact that increasing numbers of special needs children were entering primary classes at various stages from infants to sixth class. One teacher made the comment that, “We are being asked to integrate children … but we are not getting the support or training we need.”

Many parents are concerned that secondary schools do not have resources for special education. Resources allocated at primary level do not automatically transfer with the pupil to second-level. These resources have to be re-applied for by the second-level school, with current documentation, to the relevant SENO. This process has to take place well in advance of the student’s entry to post-primary.

Children transferring to special schools face additional challenges, as they may be moving away from home and from their friends – we must remember their needs too.

**The Way Forward**

Good communication was seen as vital by all teachers for transition to be successful - between pre-school and primary or between primary and post-primary. Parental involvement, school visits, open days, tips and advice for pupils and parents and information booklets were all seen as being important building blocks to a successful transition both into and out of Primary School. A good use of IT is the development of school websites and the production of DVDs to give details of the layout, rules and routines of schools. We’ll hear more about strategies used by schools later on today.

A partnership approach is strongly recommended in relation to transitions for children with special needs. Teachers expressed a desire for a needs-led professional development programme in the area of special needs.

A transition programme is seen as an essential component of a curriculum preparing pupils for life-long learning and the many transitions they will experience.

The research shows much consensus among teachers and parents regarding the issues that arise at transition. Policies on transition that involve parents, pupils and teachers will improve the process of communication and enhance the transfer experience for all pupils.
Gerry O’Sullivan, Education Committee

Ger Stack has outlined some of the broader issues in relation to transition, and I am now going to look in more detail at some of the findings of the INTO research on transitions that was conducted earlier this year.

Firstly, can I say thank you to all those teachers who completed the questionnaires. I know that the last thing a teacher wants to see is another questionnaire coming at them, but it is very important to have the voice of the Irish classroom teacher to inform research and ultimately to shape policy decisions. We also held focus-group discussions with junior infant teachers, sixth-class teachers, post-primary teachers, teachers in special schools and parents. The background paper gives a comprehensive overview of our findings.

Three questionnaires on the topic of transitions were distributed – one to junior infant teachers, one to 6th class teachers and one to post-primary teachers with responsibility for 1st years. We had a good response rate to our surveys.

It’s probably not surprising that there was only one male respondent among the junior infant teachers. This is in stark contrast to sixth-class teachers where one third of respondents were male and to the post-primary teachers where 40% were male. Most respondents taught in mixed schools.

Expectations
So what are we expecting our junior infant children to know and be able to do when they start school?

The junior infant teachers stated that they wanted children to be toilet trained and independent, to be able to put on their coats and open their lunchboxes, to know their colours and their nursery rhymes, to count, and to recognise their own name.

According to the junior infant teachers, parents most of all want their children to be happy in school, to settle in well and to make friends. After that, comes their learning.

Post-primary teachers also have expectations in relation to children starting in post-primary school. They suggested that pupils should be encouraged to be independent; be exposed to a greater variety of teachers perhaps by way of team teaching; get used to moving from classroom to classroom and using a homework journal. Something to think about, maybe!

Pre-school Experience
Over 90% of junior infants represented in the survey had attended some form of pre-school provision before coming to school.

As Ger has already said teachers agree that attendance at some form of pre-school influences children’s experience in their first year in school. Pre-school prepares children for the routines of primary school and develops social skills such as sharing and taking turns. They are also used to being with other children and with other adults. They settle in better, adapt more quickly and are familiar with group situations. They are able to do jigsaws, colour and do basic counting. They are also better able to sit, listen and pay attention when required. However, sometimes there was an element of having to ‘re-do’ what was done in the pre-school.

While respondents were positive about the curriculum for junior infants, they were less positive about the appropriateness of their overcrowded classrooms for providing a play-based, active-learning curriculum for junior infants. Almost a quarter stated that their classrooms were not appropriate and 39% stated that they did not have sufficient equipment and resources in their classroom.

Challenges
Over half the junior infant teachers taught in a multi-class. The main challenge here was the overall classroom organisation - for example, trying to give the junior infants something to do - so that adequate time was left for the other classes. There is always the pressure to ensure that other grades in the classroom do not miss out on
teaching time. Space was also a big issue. It was a challenge for all junior-infant teachers to help children adjust to their new surroundings and to get used to the daily rules and routines. It was also a longer day for the children.

We can see here that first year pupils experience similar challenges in adjusting to a new routine, new subjects, timetables, social issues such as bullying – and of course a longer day.

**Factors Influencing Transition**

According to the junior infant teachers there are a number of factors that influence how well a child settles into school. Are we surprised to find class size so influential? – No. The junior infant teachers made it very clear they wanted smaller classes. It is worrying that 5% of respondents had over 30 pupils in their junior infant classrooms. One class had 39 junior infant pupils.

The factors that support successful transition to post-primary school were: communication, shared understanding regarding curriculum, personal attributes such as confidence, self-esteem, maturity and independence, parental support, and having friends moving with them to post-primary school.

Unhelpful factors were seen as:

- The pressure of transfer tests.
- The practice of streaming pupils immediately in the 1st year.
- The lack of coherence between curricula at primary and post-primary level.

Essentially, lack of information and fear of the unknown were seen as significant factors in inhibiting successful transition.

As Ger said, we need more communication, more information about schools for parents and pupils and stronger links between primary and post-primary schools.

**Conclusion**

What is interesting about transition – regardless of the point at which it happens – is that many of the same issues concern the teachers of 1st year students in secondary school and the junior infant teachers. The issues of immaturity, length of school day, dealing with a new environment, not fitting in, special needs children and the delay in getting the necessary resources and supports in place by day one of school were all raised repeatedly. These are issues that affect all teachers who have to deal with children in transition.

Finally, the evidence is that the majority of children successfully negotiate the transfer between the different levels of education. However, the dangers of not supporting vulnerable children at a time of change and transition, particularly at the point of transition between primary and post-primary, are clear.

I would like to mention 20 boys Limerick City.

At Congress 2004, I proposed a motion calling on the relevant authorities to provide secondary school places for those boys. Last year it became publicly known that of 8 of those pupils, 2 were at home; 3 were in jail; 3 were dead.

**THESE FACTS NEED NO FURTHER ELABORATION**
Primary School Transitions and Post-Modernity: Student Well-being and Equality

Maeve O’Brien, St Patrick’s College

Introduction

It is quite a humbling experience to be in front of such a crowd of colleagues so I hope what I have to say will be of interest to you. What I propose to do is not just to describe the research that I was involved in over a period of three years on transition from primary to second-level, but to take you on a bigger journey that I’ve had around the whole idea/concept and research around transitions. In thinking about this talk, I realised that I have been working on the area of transitions and identities since 1999, and I continue to do that in my work today. It is an area that I think is highly significant in relation to human development, and in relation to education.

The first thing that I want to say is to reflect that in John Carr’s talk he commented that schools should be a place of proud belonging and I found that highly inspirational. I would like to say that overall, in the many research projects that I have been involved to do with transitions, that is something that the students themselves feel about their primary schools. They often say that they hate to leave their primary schools because of the familial atmospheres in those schools, and because of the relationships that they have with their teachers. As one teacher speaking to a very large group of teachers, I want to say that having listened to the previous speakers, I won’t be speaking to the issue of teachers’ perceptions of the transition as I think that has been well covered, and although my research (O’Brien, 2004) explores teachers’, students’ and parents’ views on the transition to second-level, I will focus more on parents’ and students’ views.

First of all, I want to locate the whole idea of transition in education in the current context, and we are looking at the post-modern context, a time of significant change in society. So transition is not just happening to students who are making the move from primary to second-level education or into primary school, we are all in a context of ongoing transitions. This has implications for our identities; it is a time when we may feel in chaotic space. We question who are we as teachers, and what can we offer to parents and students, and how to achieve our own potential. John O’Donoghue the theologian and philosopher was often seen as a spiritual commentator on our changing times and the upheavals we experience in this context. I have taken from his book, Eternal Echoes what he says about identity and imprisonment. We are being asked to listen to our inner voices: “to enlarge our frames of belonging” and “not to settle for a false shelter that does not serve your potential”. This is really quite beautiful when we think about children, we do not want them to settle, we talk about potential and this idea is embedded in the curriculum. One of the first things that you hear when you start your journey in teacher education is about children reaching their potential, and as teachers we want to reach our potential. So we are called not to give in to the circumstances in which we find ourselves, and not to settle for false shelter, to be really active in the current context despite the challenges it poses.

“In the inner landscape of the soul there is a nourishing and melodious voice of freedom always calling you. It encourages you to enlarge your frames of belonging-not to settle for a false shelter that does not serve your potential.”

So what I want to do now is look at the larger philosophical backdrop to the research that I have conducted and explore with you the whole issue of transitions in order to facilitate students’ well-being, as that is at the heart – the goal of the teacher in the classroom, the worker in the school, whatever aspect of education that you are working in. You want the students to reach their potential. I also want to explore what transition means in this neo-liberal space, a space in which we are asked to be rational and productive, and thus the kind of politics that we have to engage with. The economic context seems dire and the social context seems problematic in relation to that. So what does transition mean? I propose not to speak just to the universal transitions that all students make in the move from primary to second-level, but to focus specifically on very vulnerable students, students who are in schools that are designated disadvantaged, and to compare that with the experiences of students who are more privileged, and moreover, to take on board some of the things that students with special learning needs have said about the transition into second-level education.
I will speak about transfer in Ireland and say a little about it internationally, because the international scene can be similar or quite different. I will explore transfer as a process, how a child negotiates a path through the two systems, and what it means for parents. I am not going to say anything about the supports in schools because you are going to your groups to discuss this later.

**Individualisation, Individualism and Schooling**

The first area that I am concerned about is the whole area of individualisation in society, individualism and the problem of responsibility that is offloaded onto students, families and teachers to produce particular kinds of identities in the educational and social space, and the pressure that is exerted through dominant understandings of detached rational actors to reinvent ourselves in line with the current economic and social climates. That is all very well if we are privileged enough to have the resources to do that, if we have enough resources within ourselves and within our communities, but if we are vulnerable then that is very difficult to reinvent ourselves in line with what we are being told or in line with particular sets of expectations. If I am earning €50,000 a year in the private sector I am expected to reinvent myself as a good citizen and take a pay cut. That is the kind of backdrop that I am exploring in relation to the process of transition.

To enlarge on this point, in the current context, we have inherited the view that people are independent rather than inter-dependant beings. We expect students to manage transfer as beings who are growing towards independence; we expect them to achieve the highest points in the Leaving Certificate and to compete as individuals. This system of meritocratic individualism, which is intensified at second-level, has an impact on the primary school system. I would protest this perspective as there is much evidence that we are inter-dependent. The very fact that we are here, as delegates, and members of a union, indicates that we do depend on each other, and that solidarity and collegiality are very important in our lives. So this singular identity is something I think we need to contest. Bauman (2000) is a writer who talks about the faces of liquid modernity and what that means for the self, he cites Ferguson on the problems of “self” for young people in this kind of modernity/post modernity that he is describing:

“*in the kind of times that we are living, the age of irony has passed to be replaced by an age of glamour in which appearance is constructed as the only reality.*” (Bauman: 87)

And if you think about young people moving into adolescence, and into the second-level system, how do they achieve identity and how do they meet the challenges that involves?

“*modernity thus moves through a period of authentic self-hood to one of ironic self-hood to a contemporary culture of what be termed associative self-hood and this involves a continuous loosening of the tie between inner soul and outer forms of social relation. Identities thus are continuous oscillations.*” (Ferguson in Bauman: 87).

What is our identity? We are constantly in transition and problematically for us because as union members the tie between the inner self and the outer social reality no longer seems a possibility. I think what you will be urged to do today at this conference is to see yourselves as part of that collective reality and not just as a single individual in this society.

**Marketisation of Schooling**

The second point in relation to the larger social backdrop is the issue of marketisation and commodification in schooling, and I know the INTO has a policy on this which is really welcome. The whole idea of corporate interests in education is deeply problematic. We have seen the problematics of public private partnerships, and when the going gets tough the private part of the partnership runs away. This marketisation impacts on school transitions because it impacts on the curricula that can be offered, what is going on in the hidden curricula, and impacts deeply on assessment, an issue that you will take up tomorrow. The relationship between teachers and students, does that become a commodified relationship? Primary school children may say that they have good relationships with their teachers, is that a possibility down the road in the kind of society that we are creating? And what is the relationship between teachers and students at second-level? Smyth, McCoy and Dermody’s (2004, 2006) studies of students at second-level for NCCA showed that there was what they called ‘second year drift’ after the first year in second-level schooling. This has to do with relationships with teachers, so the relationship is key. The issue of choices at transition is another key consideration. Parents are very focused on
choosing the best schools for their children if they have the resources to do so and purchase this in an education market (Lynch and Moran, 2006; O’Brien 2008). Is this really something, morally, that we really wish to stand over?

The private market forces also enter through private sponsorship. This is evident in this slide that I got from a doctoral student in St Pat’s who got it from Joe Fogarty part of the organisation against private sponsorship in education. We can see Tesco, Utterly Butterly ...... I am going to stop saying the names as it is like I am doing advertising – so you get the picture!

Quality and Care in Education at Transition
The third point I want to make in relation to the landscape of transition is that we need to think about the quality of education very carefully. One of the things that comes to us from egalitarian discourse is the importance of emotions and care to our well-being, and to education (Noddings 1998; Baker, Lynch, Cantillon and Walsh, 2004; O’Brien and Flynn, 2008). This is one of the key issues referred to by the students, parents and teachers around transition in my own research (O’Brien, 2004). It is a time of emotion so we need to take this seriously, and I don’t mean just necessarily the touchy feely kind of care that we might feel is more appropriate at the junior infant level, but care about education and care about students’ learning, and care about how children in the most disadvantaged schools have opportunities to learn. So this requires work on the part of teachers and the part of parents and is something that isn’t recognised by political actors in our society. Indeed, I would argue alongside Kathleen Lynch with her work in UCD that care and love in education are deeply political issues (Lynch, Lyons and Cantillon, 2007) and we need to recognise that. And finally, I suggest, in relation to equality, in my own research over the nine years that I have been working on transitions, talking to parents, being out in the community, looking at different kinds of families, at differences in social class, in ethnicity, in the sexual structure of families, that we need to be very clear about this, different kinds of families experience very different kinds of discriminations at the point of transfer into second-level. This has been mentioned in relation to the Limerick boys (Gerry O’Sullivan, Education Committee) which had very much to do with social class.

Making the First to Second-level Transition or Not?
In the Irish context, the NCCA have been concerned about this for a number of years, and they would say that at least in the last 10 years, each year a thousand students never made the transition into second-level. Those students are mainly students from the Travelling community and from working class communities. We have a high dropout rate also pre-Junior Certificate among these groups, which is also of concern. What are the key issues then in relation to transfer practices in the Irish system?

I think one of the things we have to grasp the nettle on is that schools do practice selection at second-level. This is often hidden because we don’t have national policies, and we don’t have agreement yet around the forms of assessment that we use. This means it is difficult to have an appropriate debate on what is happening as some of the exclusions get hidden very subtly by those who are privileged enough to make choices and who have resources to use their privilege to advantage their own families.

Just to say a word about Britain, our close neighbour, their system is very different because there are policies in relation to where your child can go to school. If you are living in a particular catchment area, your child will go to school in that area. We have, apparently, a much more open policy. What the research in Britain has shown is that those who have the resources may even move house to facilitate getting their child into the best school (Reay, 1998). Of course it may be easier to decode which are the best schools when you have league tables. In Ireland, even though we don’t have official league tables, we do have unofficial league tables as they are usually reported in the national newspapers, so that is also something that has crept into our system.

Transfer has already been mentioned as a time of discontinuity (Hargreaves, Earl and Ryan, 1996) (one of the first books I read on the area of transition and so I have a deep affection for that book). These authors name three transitions that are significant at the move from primary to second-level education. One is the move across school systems and organisations - an organisational or systemic move. The second is across peer cultures, and research suggests that we should take the issue of care seriously here, particularly in relation to children’s friendships and the whole issue of bullying. The latter is often named by young people as a significant fear when they are making the move into second-level, particularly by boys in disadvantaged areas (O’Brien, 2004). And thirdly, they name the co-incidental developmental movement from childhood into adolescence.
Crossing School Systems
What about crossing the system? If the systems are different – what are the key differences between primary and second-level? I think you could probably have written this slide yourselves, you know what the differences are from experience. If you look at the cultures of schooling at primary level, Hargreaves *et al.* (1996) suggest that primary schooling is characterised by a culture of care and control. That is a really interesting thought, because we want to hold onto the care, but what of the control? Moreover, in a changing climate where class sizes are increasing, will teachers increasingly have to police and maintain discipline in their classes, or will they have time to care about the quality of education and the individuals that they are working with? With respect to the curriculum, there is less subject delineation at first level, there are no public examinations, the day revolves around the teacher and the class group, and thus, children spend a lot of time relating to one teacher. At second-level, students experience a system characterised by competition, where they must relate to multiple teachers and adjust to a fragmented curriculum and school day. Does this move towards greater fragmentation promote well-being? Can we and our students meet the challenge or is that very difficult?

School and Student Sample in Transition Research
In my research study on transition (O’Brien, 2004), there was a sample of 153 students selected from a variety of primary school types (n=11) by gender, location, size and status as advantaged or disadvantaged. (I just want to name my co-interviewer in the research; Christian Vekic who is now working in O’Connell’s school in Dublin, a second-level school). We used a variety of methodologies in that we questionnaire and interviewed students, held focus groups and classroom discussions, and also asked students to write about their experiences - so it was very rich pool of data. From the 11 schools at primary level the students dispersed to almost 30 schools at second-level. Again, even the dispersal to so many second-level schools raises a difficulty that has already been mentioned; how do you communicate and what opportunities are there for real dialogue and for the passing of information between the primary school and the second-level schools.

Anxieties at the Crossing
Students frequently mentioned *assessment* for the second-level school as an issue that created high stress in the family, and certainly subsequent research with mothers in relation to transition (O’Brien, 2005) mention assessment tests as a time of high stress for their children. A factor that contributed to this anxiety was the paucity of information about the content and the form of the tests, and lack of knowledge of how the tests will be then used. So there is an information void with respect to assessment tests. They are used as we know for class
placement, for streaming and for setting subject choices. Students really worry “will I get the subjects that I really want to do”?

Relationships with teachers were again mentioned as of paramount importance as were peer relations, and that all-important question for students “will I be with my friends”? Discipline, the disciplinary systems in the formal setting of the second-level school seem much more complex than those more informal disciplinary management systems at the primary level, so this is a big negotiation from the informal into the formal. Students also face the whole issue of social integration, will I fit in or will I stand out? In terms of my identity will I measure up? So that philosophical questioning is evident in students’ responses, the angst that young people experience as they make the transition.

### Performance and Test Scores in the most disadvantaged schools

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<td>Total</td>
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The ranges of scores were noticeably more restricted in most of the disadvantaged schools, but those with a more mixed social intake were more similar to middle-class schools.

### Students’ Performance in Disadvantaged Schools and Transition

I always deliberate about putting up any of these figures (pictured above), but I decided that I would display one slide to illustrate some of the challenges faced by students in disadvantaged schools. This slide shows extracted test scores from the overall set of test scores (we gathered data on Micra T and Sigma T for all the students at primary level). We wished to examine patterns of performance across schools, and I think in the current climate, it shows that we need resources for disadvantaged schools, so that we can work with children to make sure that they have literacy, and not just functional literacy, but critical literacy at the move into second-level school. The ranges of scores were noticeably more restricted in most of the disadvantaged schools, but those with a more mixed social intake were more similar to middle-class schools. These scores are taken from the most disadvantaged schools in that sample, and the range shows that students can obtain scores of six or seven on those standardised tests, but what happens is the mean gets pulled down by proportions of low scorers. It is also a caveat around the use of school averages in terms of league tables, because although some students can do very well, and other students may be struggling, the overall score for these disadvantaged schools often makes it look like the school isn’t doing its job.

### Ability Grouping at Transition

What about streaming? That is something that is still practised to some extent at second-level, not in its pure form, but what we now know as banding in second-level. A recent study by the ESRI conducted by Smyth *et al.* (2006) would say that streaming per se at second-level is less predominant than in the past. Nonetheless, the
continuation of the practice at all, and the impact of all kinds of ability grouping on students begs the question of how we actually think about students as they progress through the system. It is based on very traditional ideas around ability and intelligences.

I wanted to give recognition to the voices of students in relation to streaming and forms of ability grouping, and also to include the voice of a student who was placed in a special class on transition to second-level. In this study, some schools at second-level felt the best that they could do, despite going against current policy for mainstreaming, was to have a special class at second-level. The social effects of this were felt strongly by the students who found themselves in that position.

“The work isn’t too much, it’s a bit easy so far, I think that it’ll get harder, I know all the people in my class so far, I don’t think it’s fair, we should be going to classes like all the others.”

This piece above is taken from a student in a special class who feels socially excluded by streaming practices, as her ‘special class’ are being kept together for the day, and unlike others, they don’t have the same social opportunities to mix with and to meet new people, which is one of the excitements young people anticipate at transition.

“I think it’s bad that’s what happened in primary school and it makes you feel bad.”

Referring to this statement above - imagine asking yourself what are they talking about - streaming in primary school. I am sure that went out in the bad old days, but teaching to the test means that teachers sometimes resort to measures that are not what they would desire, or would be most desirable in terms of good practice. I have seen a small number of schools teaching to the assessment tests and who streamed for Irish, English and Maths in 6th class, and whose students were not happy about that.

“Yes we’re graded, they don’t give you any homework, I was disappointed, I’m not in a good class, I’d like to be in a different class, most of them mess and get you into trouble.”

The literature on streaming would attest to this fact, that students who are placed in the lowest streams will find that they are not challenged, they don’t get the best teachers, there are more discipline problems in those classes, and their horizon of expectations are severely curtailed.

Class Identities and Transition

What about social class and student experiences at transition? There is a good literature in Britain on parental choice and social class (Reay and Ball 1998; Reay, 1998) but a fairly meagre one focusing on students’ perspectives on this (Reay and Lucey, 2000; 2001). The current study focused on the students’ experiences and identities following the body of literature that associates middle class identities with the academic, and working class identities with being ‘messers’ or ‘lads’ (see Willis 1977 in particular). I picked this quote from Tara to share with you, as she was a student who stands out very much in my mind. She came from a large mixed disadvantaged school in the Midlands, and she was seen as one of the most responsible and able students, not just academically able, but one of the most promising students as a leader in that very disadvantaged setting. On her transfer to second-level, Tara talks about her experiences with her second-level teachers and her sense of injustice at unfair treatment:

Tara: “I’m picked on by one teacher, he always shouts at me, I go to another teacher and she’s lovely and she tells me not to mind him. The teacher who picks on me says he never tells us what to do (in class) ‘cos we never do nothin’ anyway. The class is divided into loonies and swots. The loonies answer back, I was a swot last year, you see there were loonies and swots in primary but they got the same attention.”

Loonies and swots you say……and this is a disadvantaged girls’ school that isn’t practising streaming. In fact the teacher is practising streaming within the classroom, and Tara feels badly now, given that in primary school you were included regardless of your identity and identifications, but at second-level only the middle class academic identity counts in this classroom.
The Significance of Peer Relations

Peer relations are of paramount importance to young people, but in this study as in others, it appears to be gendered, and students move through the transition differently, where girls have tighter friendship groups with best friends, and boys tend to have looser friendship groups with the team, or the gangs they hang around with, so this can be problematic in terms of moving school.

One of the other issues that was raised by students was the fear of bullying and students were very reluctant to name harassment, either verbal or physical. They often resorted to euphemisms or tried to reduce the significance of incidents of harassment. They stated: “sure they were only having a mess with us” or they were “only joking with us”, but students, particularly in boys’ schools, casually mentioned that they would get kicked around sometimes, in the locker rooms, or pushed out of the lunch queues. I’ve seen children been pushed down steep hills to a river, and all this was articulated as just having the craic. It would appear that an educational process is required and a safe environment needs to be created, so that students can talk about the issues that they have with their peers in school (see Allardt’s model of well-being in schooling, O’Brien and the Human Development Team at St Patrick’s College, 2008).

Teachers’ Perspectives on Transition

I have said that I won’t focus on this area as it is being discussed by others, but this one statement from a teacher in a disadvantaged primary school about the area of performance and curriculum, and the problems that we have because the two systems are so differently focussed is telling about the challenges at transition:

- "There are students on third and fourth class readers, it’s more pupil-centred at primary, here, there’s a standard for the class and they’ve got to climb that ladder, it’s subject centred and it’s the exam, it’s subjects versus the child (second-level).”

Parents and Transition

I want to say something about parents, as it is something very close to my heart. Being a privileged parent I sometimes feel guilty talking about this, but I do see this as one of the key issues in relation to transition. The fact that social class and capital shapes the kind of choices and transitions that young people can make from the primary system into the second-level system is significant. The work of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu is helpful in thinking about this. Bourdieu (1986) conceptualises a series of metaphors for the resources (capitals) that we may accumulate in the social world. Having economic, social and cultural resources enables us to manage ourselves and manage our identities in particular fields of endeavour. In the field of education, if you have economic resources at the move to second-level school, if you have cultural resources in that your parents actually know the school system and can use that cultural knowledge to make informed decisions. If you are a newcomer you are not going to know very much about the system, and if you have left school early, or have had negative experiences yourself of schooling, perhaps as a Traveller parent or as a working class parent, your cultural capital is not going to be very much in line with the cultural capital that operates within the school system. Similarly, if your social capital, if the network of affiliation that you have in your community is not the kind of network that is going to buy you privilege, if you belong to a community where there are many social problems associated with low income, unemployment, and problems with perhaps crime and drugs, that community will not provide the dominant forms of social capital that can ease the path through schooling and transitions. In that case you are not going to be an insider, you are going to be a cultural outsider in the educational field.

Bourdieu’s work as taken up by Diane Reay (1998; Reay and Ball, 1998) who suggests that it is not that parents who come from working class communities, don’t care about their children’s schooling, and this is something that this research really tried to counteract, it is that they really don’t have the insider status, and sometimes they don’t have the information that they need, or they don’t get the chance to be heard in relation to their children’s schooling. In a subsequent piece of research (O’Brien, 2005) in which I was involved, in a large school in Dublin West, a child had dyslexia and the mother, a working class woman, didn’t really know what dyslexia meant. It took her months to engage with the personnel in the second-level school around the dyslexia. Comparatively, there was a middle class mother who had two children with dyslexia in an all-Irish school in South Dublin, who told me that she went to the school to see the principal after their transition every morning until they got the resources that they were entitled to. We can see the inequalities that are being reproduced here.
Moreover, the effort that is made to support students is gendered. You may be saying to yourself that “she is not mentioning the father at all”. Well, I am talking about equality and all the research that has been conducted in Britain, and subsequent research carried out here by myself and others would show that it is mothers who are the key figures in relation to the transition of children from primary to second-level education. I am not saying that fathers don’t want to be involved, but because of the way society has traditionally been organised mothers are still seen to be the primary caretakers of children and that includes school support work.

Let’s contrast the difficulties of working class parents and middle class parents. The literature in Britain would say that middle class parents are active choosers in that they choose for their children. It doesn’t seem very democratic, but they know best or they see that they know best. Alternatively, working class parents don’t feel like they know anything so their children are seen as more expert choosers. The quotation below illustrates this middle class mother’s capacity to guide and choose for her daughter despite her daughter’s own wishes:

“We had her name down because it’s an all-girls school, as she gets older boys will take over and girls get held back. She accepted the decision but if she had her choice she’d go to Finntown. She’s been very mature once the decision was made. She’ll be fine, she’s very adaptable, once she knows the plan she’ll be fine. She’ll get into it, the work is fine, the big issue is friends. There’s lots of discussion and she knows a few others. She’s come on a lot at making friends but she likes to do her own thing.”

The female student mentioned above wanted to go to the local community school, but her mother’s choice was that she would go to the single-sex girls’ school as that was seen to be a better place, both academically, and from the point of view of appropriate femininity. And part of the problem is this regulation about being a particular kind of young woman because this mother believes that when ‘boys kick in’ that this is going to be problematic and distracting. Control is exerted by the middle classes in order to privilege their children in the educational space sometimes in line with what Annette Lareau (1989) calls ‘the dark side of mothering’, a space where there is little regard for children’s own choices about their identities.

Well-Being, Identity and Transition
The whole point in talking about transition, and really I have just given you a flavour of some of the research, and tried to highlight some of the key equality and social justice issues, but I think as teachers that we are and need to be concerned with the well-being of students and the school community. This slide (pictured above) is from a recent publication *Well-Being in Post-Primary Schooling* (O’Brien et al., 2008). As you can see in the middle box, well-being is constituted as having four dimensions:

- **Having** We need resources (I’ve mentioned capitals).
- **Loving** We need the opportunity to care about our students, we need to create a good climate and decent relationships so that they can actually become people who feel worthwhile in themselves.
- **Being** We need space for being, and so this whole issue of control is a large question within the education system. Having the means for self-fulfilment suggests that a space is required for students to be creative. (It is so good to hear that next year’s topic will be about the Arts, but in the current climate we need to ask where is the space for creativity, we have to contest the squeeze on the creative and also the encourage students to be involved in school decision making). We know there is policy on student councils but as yet even the latest report would show that the level of real teacher/student partnership on councils has yet to be achieved.
- **Health** The final aspect is Health. Health status in the school matters, if children are ill, or if children are suffering, and there is so much research on this to show that working class people suffer much poorer health than the middle classes, and if we look at Travellers and ethnic groups who may have come from areas that may have been war torn, we need the resources to nurture students’ health, mental and physical. Children can bring their bodies to school but we can’t really fully educate them unless those bodies are well.

My final question to you is – at transitions, are there possibilities for transformations? I would like to refer to the work of Paulo Freire the South American philosopher and activist who believed that education is not for domestication but for liberation. Can this transition be a liberating experience so that young persons can feel themselves move towards a more fully human identity, or is this a process of closing down in the kind of educational system that we are forced to work within today?
Strategies to Support Transition – Panel Presentations

Patsy Sweeny, St Mary’s Secondary School

Good evening everybody, and thank you Mary for that introduction. I want to thank you for the privilege of being invited to address so many INTO members and colleagues on a subject that is dear to all our hearts, that is how we in the secondary sector actually receive the students that you have prepared so well and hand over to us. This handing over from the primary to the secondary system is, as we know, one of the most crucial stages through which a student will go. I know later on we are going to look at some other transitions or transfers that students have gone through as nowadays the transfer from primary to post-primary is not the only transfer. But for the moment I am going to look at the transfer from primary to post-primary and explore some of the issues, the inputs, the projects and processes that we have put in place in our school to deal with the transfer and which ultimately makes up our Transfer Programme.

These processes have probably been shaped and informed by my former life which was working on the Transition Year Support Team and working with the SLSS. It was in the process of dealing with students, particularly when crafting Transition Year programmes that very often we found that students coming into Transition Year had come through three years of second-level school and yet there was a need for us at Transition level to actually introduce them to taster subjects. This was because students who hadn’t chosen, or who were precluded from choosing - maybe science - in 1st year of second-level (because maybe at that stage they had to make the choice and decided against choosing science) discovered after three years in second-level that they now had aspirations of pursuing a career that necessitated one or more science subjects for the Leaving Cert. This gave us the cue to develop ab initio science programmes to try and bridge that gap and enable them to access a Leaving Cert Senior Cycle Science programme.

That was one of the reasons that we began to look more carefully at how students make these initial critical subject choices in first-year and also the necessity of providing them with a much wider choice base. Another thing I discovered was the importance of the Multiple Intelligences and the often narrow perception of a student’s intelligence coming through second-level - the perception of what they were good at, and what they weren’t good at, and the need for us to tap into that knowledge at a much earlier stage than at Transition Year.

When I returned to the school as Principal four years ago, one of the first things I did was to distil all those ideas into a transfer process and initiate a formal Transfer Programme while bearing in mind the needs of parents and students when preparing to move into second-level. We looked at the various issues that parents would look at, things like preparing for the move, gathering the information, identifying priorities, analysing the findings, making value judgements, reaching decisions and finally making the choice of school for their particular student - then we looked to see how we could facilitate that process.

- We looked at all the things that we could put in place that would facilitate parents in preparing for the move even though the students themselves would have been preparing for it from their base in primary school. They would be coming to an end of the primary school curriculum, making their confirmation, experiencing end of year tests/reports, the secondary school prospectus would be arriving in the school, transfer programmes would be initiated, open days and such events, and a lot of conversations would be going on between parents and primary school principals, conversations with friends and siblings.

- Next comes ‘gathering the information’ and ensuring that the information was factual and not anecdotal. We all know how the rumour mill can prevail as regards what some schools have and some schools haven’t, particularly if you’re not a stand alone school and in a competitive situation. It is very important that the information your parents are getting is factual. In order to ensure that it is factual, we felt that a school Transfer Programme should look at the ‘Moving Up’ report which I will refer to later, the document ‘Introducing your Second-level School’, Parent information nights and, whether we like them or not or agree with them or not, parents are hugely influenced by things like league tables. We also felt Open Days were very important for the students as well as the need to inform parents of current best practice in our school.
• Identifying priorities for parents is also important - the type of school, the mission, ethos, school plan, policies, the Home School Community Liaison facility. What was on the school curriculum? What was the breadth and balance of the curriculum? How were classes organised? Was there streaming or banding? How were choices made in first-year? Was there a book scheme, fees, contributions? What was the special needs support like in the school, or the pastoral care programme? What was the school’s code of behaviour and discipline policy? Was there a student council? What was the range of extra curricular activities? What was the school’s current level of academic achievement and what was the school’s definition of success? Did it define success merely by points achieved in the Leaving Cert. or had it a more broad holistic definition?

• Helping parents analyse all the findings. What they valued and what they valued for their students? What they valued for their son or daughter? Would they be happy there? Would they be safe? Would they be bullied? Were there transport issues, extra curricular activities? And then finally making the value judgement through looking into the mission statement of the school. What was the school ethos and values? What were its academic ambitions? What are its cultural provisions? What were the parents’ own holistic aspirations and how would they fit into the discipline policy? What were the links with community and finally the accessibility of the school - both social and physical accessibility?

• We also looked at the information that we needed to provide them with - academic information, such as the breadth and balance of our programmes, the scholastic record of the school, how is it as a feeder school to third level and what are the supports for the weaker students and the special needs student. What sports were provided? What areas of the Arts were provided? What cultural activities, pastoral care activities? Was there a guidance counsellor? Was there a transfer team, school leaders, mentors, student council, parents’ council, year heads, all of those issues? What were the links with the local community? How embedded was the school in the community and what were the reciprocal links between the home and the school? Areas like fundraising - which very often portray the values of the school.

• Finally, to clarify for parents the school profile - what type of school it is e.g. voluntary secondary, comprehensive, VEC school? How was it governed - trustees, Board of Governors? How was it funded? Was it single sex or co-ed? Again, all the issues about where a student does better or worse and the varying performance of boys and girls in school and things like that. Sometimes parents would be able to tell you where a school was on the league tables which gives a very narrow perception of the school and again parents need to be informed of that - that it isn’t really a very safe criteria by which to judge a school. Also the physical condition of a school - invite them to come and see it.

All of that Lead to the Development of our 12 step Transfer Programme:

1. The 12 step programme begins in January prior to the students coming into our school. It begins with a phone call from our school to the 26 feeder schools in our catchment area. I think one of the things that developing this transfer programme has done is that it helped us to clarify our catchment area boundaries. So now second-level schools can clarify for parents where their boundaries/ bus routes really are. It begins with a phone call to every primary school principal in the catchment area requesting permission to visit and the ‘go ahead’ for a suitable time when we can deliver our school prospectus. This not only contains all the school data and updated information, if there were any updates to be made, but also includes an invitation to parents and to the primary school principal to come in to the launch of our Transfer Programme which takes place every year in January. I have to say we always have a tremendous response from the primary school principals in the area and indeed from all the parents.

2. On that night we look at the issues that I have referred to. We go through all those slides with the parents as regards how they gather information and how they analyze their findings, how they make value judgements, things they should be thinking about and should be asking themselves about choosing a school, things they should be discussing with their primary school principal about moving their student. We back that up with the evidence of the Moving Up programme. The Moving Up programme, as you are probably aware, is one of the most comprehensive longitudinal studies that has ever been embarked on by the government and is being conducted currently by the ESRI. It started back in 2002 when 900
first-year students in 12 post-primary schools were identified for the survey and they have been followed ever since right through the system. Not only that, but all post-primary school principals have been contacted and quite a number have been interviewed in detail. The students have been interviewed at various times during the year and at the end of each year. The name of the report detailing the experiences of first-year is called Moving Up. It looks at the issues that the survey threw up - what are the concerns of students moving into second-level school? How realistic are those concerns? What were their actual problems when they arrived? What were they afraid of? What actually happened? What did they enjoy most about school? I go through all that with parents and I reassure them that if their students are experiencing any of those apprehensions, even at this stage in January, that it is very normal. We also go through the fact that if they experience such difficulties as the strange classroom or the longer day, missing their primary school and things like that - well that is very normal as well as they are all documented in the Moving Up programme. We give parents a copy of the Moving Up programme to read and this is very reassuring for them because it indicates for them that it is not just happening to their sons or daughters, it is a national phenomena and that this is exactly what students go through.

3. We follow this with a school Open Day, which we usually hold on the day before the school closes for mid-term break in February. Our school musical runs all through that week so we leave most of the students at home on the last day and we bus in all the primary school girls (we are an all girls secondary school). It does make it difficult at times for primary school principals because we try to co-ordinate with the colleges and the vocational schools so it means that maybe the students are being brought to two open days. We try to co-ordinate with the colleges so as to facilitate and not leave teachers with half classes with one gender all gone at one time. We organise a rolling day of rotations for them where they have a taste of all the various departments in the school - language department, the science lab, a chance to do a bit of cooking or an experiment in the science lab or field work in geography or play some games and we take them on a tour throughout the whole school. The 5th year students are their guides and the various teachers do the demonstrations and engage with the students. We then treat them to lunch in the canteen. In the afternoon, they go to the hall and the Transition Year students put on a matinee performance of the school musical that is running in the school at that stage. Then they are bussed back to their school for 3pm and in time for their own buses.

4. First week-end after the mid-term break in February we have our school enrolment.

5. A month after the school enrolment we invite the parents back in and do a programme with the parents called ‘Enhancing the Experience of the Learner through Multiple Intelligences’ – this we used to do with parents of Transition Years but I do a scaled down version now. We set up the assembly hall with eight different stations representing each of Gardner’s Multiple Intelligence and go through the multiple intelligences theory with them and look at how each of the intelligences are nurtured, the gateways through which we nurture the intelligences in the school and the particular subjects that nurture each of the intelligences. In this way we justify why we offer them all 17 subjects on the curriculum in the first year - in order to ensure that all of the 8 gateways of their intelligences are nurtured. We set up fun activities at each of the eight stations and we get the parents to move through the eight stations doing an exercise at each station which will test each of their intelligences. Really it is a fun thing more than anything else so as to get across to them that we all have different intelligences and different levels of intelligence and if we were to profile every one of the intelligences in the room every parent would have a different intelligence scale, e.g. some would be very good on the mathematics, some may be weak on the linguistics, some could be very strong on the bodily-kinaesthetic, some may be weak around the interpersonal or intrapersonal and they absolutely love it. The feedback at the end of the night “I know now why I could never do this” or “I’ve one daughter who can study with the radio on and I’ve another who has to have total silence. I never knew it was tied into a musical intelligence”. We would have seen through our own research, for example, that if they have a high musical intelligence they should do French rather than German, but we will still give them the option of doing both because French is a more musical language and German seems to come easier to those with higher mathematical intelligence.

We go through all of that with the parents and explain to them that their own profiles are probably replicated in the students and obviously the multiple intelligence profiles are replicated in the teachers
and that’s why sometimes they can come home and say “I hate Ms so and so” or “Mr so and so” when in actual fact what they are trying to do is articulate their dislike of a particular subject, a particular learning style or intelligence because it clashes with theirs. We go through all that with the parents before they ever come into us - so the parents are now very aware that the students will be able to access some subjects quite easily and other subjects they are going to find quite difficult.

6. On the second or third day back in September we have the 1st Year Day in the school when no students are in except our 1st Years and the Senior School Leaders. (Every year in June we seek nominations for 5th Year students wishing to become leaders in 6th Year. Both teachers and fellow students vote on the final selection who are then trained as leaders during the summer). We start the day with a special 1st Year Mass for students and parents and during that mass the leaders are invested with their Leader badges and presented to the parents of the first-years. After the mass they get to meet their first-year charges. The first-years are delegated to their class groups - we have 25 to 30 leaders and as we take in 100 to 120 first-years there is about a ratio of 1:5 or 1:6. The leaders take them over from their parents after the school mass and for the rest of the day and the remainder of the year they are their leaders, their mentors and their critical friends.

7. When we have the system bedded down later in September or October we have all the first-year parents back in again when we review together the first month while the 1st year Year Head will also have prepared, not really a survey but a ‘dear diary’ exercise with each of the students starting with “Dear Diary my first month in ________ and the things I loved were ________ and the things I am finding difficult are ________.” Rather than actually doing a cold survey we just do kind of a chatty commentary on how they feel. We discuss this with the parents and compare it with the findings of Moving Up and how closely they are aligned and very often the issues which our first-years are experiencing are exactly the same ones as those which have been identified in Moving Up. It is reassuring for parents that their children are normal. Straight away they are beginning to say that “they like French better than German” and “I love science and I don’t like…..” and it is always the ‘doing things’ that they prefer. We also find that they prefer the novelty of the new subjects as opposed to what they are very competent with and experienced with in the traditional subjects in the primary school.

8. Throughout the year we also run what is called the First-year Transfer Programme which means the Year Head, School Chaplain, Guidance Counsellor, Home School Liaison Person are timetabled simultaneously one day a week. They rotate through the four first-year classes so that they would visit each class once a month. So if any issues are emerging then they can keep in touch with them. There is also the Pastoral Care Programme which is run by the Year Head and Tutor for each class and they meet them every morning to takes roll and notes and things like that. We have the School Leaders programme where the Leaving Certs are timetabled to go in and if any issues emerge they (1st years) would talk it out with the Leaving Certs. They see them as their big sisters. They wear the same uniform as them and initially they trust them more than they would their year heads or the tutors. We don’t stream them in first-year, we divide them alphabetically. Not all the As or Bs together - we write the whole list out alphabetically and then go 1, 2 3 4 etc so all the ones go together, all the twos together etc giving a good mix. In order to pick up on our special needs students we have Team Teaching in first-year in Irish, English and Maths so that each lead teacher with have a team teacher in their class with them who will float among the students and will obviously target - but not too obviously - the students that we already know, either from the SENO or from their parents at enrolment, that they have had resource hours in primary school.

9. After Christmas in first-year they hold aptitude tests, administered by the career guidance teacher and the resource teacher. To discuss the results they individually meet with every parent and this information, combined with what we ourselves are finding out, what the parents themselves had heard from the student, what their aptitude tests have indicated, what teachers are saying about their strengths and again bearing in mind an awareness of their multiple intelligences, we begin the discussion about how we are going to narrow down their subjects and what subjects they have to chose from. From the following five subjects - science, home economics, art, music and business - they will pick three.
10. That goes on until about Easter and then we have a subject advisory night for parents before the final choices are made. We highlight what eliminating a science subject for example might mean. What are we eliminating down the road? Or if we eliminate a language, what are we eliminating down the road? We try and ensure that they all keep a language if possible and decide not just from a CAO point of view but by trying to keep many different gateways open.

11. All these conversations culminate in the 1st Year Parent Teacher meeting which takes place in March.

12. The following week after that PTM the final subject choices are made.

**That would thus be the main thrust of the 12 steps Transfer Programme.**

All of the issues which are referred to in the ‘Moving Up’ programme - asking what the role of school would be in facilitating an easy transfer - we feel we have responded to e.g.

- That there would be pre-entry contact between the post-primary and primary school - we organise open days and events.
- That there is an information flow between the schools.
- That there is an awareness at second-level of the experience of the students at primary level. And I would honestly have to put up our hands and say that is our biggest weakness in the area of the general subjects e.g. I couldn’t guarantee that every first-year teacher of Irish is au fait with what their experiences have been in Irish coming into the school. What is probably one of the greatest concerns in the Moving Up programme is the dip in performance of first-years halfway through their first year. We will find this very often at their first-year parent/teacher meetings that their fathers or mothers come in and say that “she was great in primary school at Irish, it was one of her best subjects now I see in her Christmas tests that she has dipped”. And that was a concern for us also and would be a concern of every secondary school teacher. It is one of those things that you don’t want to say “are we on the right track?” or whatever. Then it emerged as one of the key findings in the Moving Up programme that there was this dip in performance in 1st year and when they analyzed it further they discovered that the dip was in the traditional subjects - Irish, English, and Mathematics. But when they moved on to the second year of the programme, the findings showed that the dip had gone and they had come back up again. When they analyzed this further and interviewed the parents and the students it transpired that it was usually the better able student who experienced the dip. What was happening was that sometimes the first-year teacher was covering material that the student had already done in primary school and the better able student had retained it so well they actually got bored and they down-shifted and kicked out and this marked the dip in performance. The dip didn’t appear in subjects that they didn’t traditionally access in primary school but the reassuring thing is that the dip disappeared as soon as new and more challenging materials were accessed in 2nd Year.

So the key areas that Moving Up recommends and which we feel that we have responded to:

- Making connections with the students prior to the learning
- Provision of class tutors and student mentors
- Mixed ability groupings rather than streaming - that is why we enshrine mixed ability alphabetically in first-year
- A clear and efficient anti-bullying policy and that is something we deal with on the very first night when parents come in - even though a lot of schools would shy away from it. But I think it is really important that we bring up the subject of bullying and let parents know that it is a problem in every school and that every school is a perfect breeding ground for bullying. We reassure them that we have a very strong anti-bullying policy and assure parents that if there is a whisper of bullying that it will be dealt with immediately.
- As wide a variety of subjects as possible - one of the key issues that has come out of the research is that second-level schools who ask their students in first year to chose between a core number of subjects are doing them a huge disservice insofar as they will never have an opportunity to access those subjects again and may discover later in life that they would have had a great flair for maybe art or music. We are doing them a huge disservice if we preclude them for accessing all subjects in 1st Year.
• Offer tasters if you can’t offer the full curriculum
• Careful monitoring of progress and help with special needs.
• Contact, participation and encouragement for all the students.
• Help the students choose their subjects at the end of the year.
• Seek advice and information from the school
• Finally, have a very strong Transfer Team that should include the Principal, Deputy Principal, HSCL, the Year Head, the Resource Teacher, the Special Needs Teachers, the Classroom Teachers, Career Guidance, the School Chaplain, and the Student Mentors.

That would be our actual programme for the year.
I am principal of Scoil Oilibhéir which is a large co-educational school in the north eastern quadrant of Cork city. This is just a quick overview of an article that was written for Oídes 35 for those of you who are interested.

What entitles me to talk about transition is that, first of all, I’ve been involved in it for years as a class teacher; secondly, I have been involved in developing this particular local transition programme; and thirdly, as a father where I had my own children moving from home to primary school and from primary school to secondary school and now indeed from secondary school to third level, I have observed the various challenges along the way. All of us would probably remember our first days in primary school as one of the days that stick out in our mind. We don’t remember our first day in secondary day in particular, but they say in the research that 80% of children experience anxiety at transfer. I didn’t experience anxiety on my first day, I experienced trauma. I am an only child and about a week before I was due to go to secondary school my mother brought me to town to deck me out in my uniform. I came home very proud of myself and I can remember walking up to the mirror practicing the walk of a teenager. On the first morning in first-year I had the misfortune to arrive a little bit late and when I arrived in the secondary school yard, all my peers turned around and gave a gasp of utter horror followed by hilarious laughter because I was the only one present who was wearing short trousers. I will never forgive my mother for that and if knees could blush, certainly mine did.

If you just look at some of the challenges facing the child in transition, it comes at a very peculiar time when you are moving from childhood to adulthood. The boys’ voices are breaking and their trousers are getting shorter by the minute because they are growing out of them all the time. The transfer occurs when all this is happening in their life. They are going from the known to the unknown. The normal primary school student is well versed with his own school, well familiar with the rhythms of the day and he moves into a completely new rhythm. Primary school pupils are comfortable with a child-centred curriculum and have mastered most of the subjects at this point of time. They have met most of the curricular demands that have been made of them and they are accustomed to one class teacher. Someone mentioned that there is a lovely familial atmosphere in the primary school class and the children know their teacher as friend, they know who to talk to, if they are sick they know who to go to give the notes to and they are very familiar with their own class teacher. They are also the senior pupils and you know the senior pupils in our classes, they are absolutely super. They have mastered most things that have been asked of them in the school. They are also members of the school band, they are in the school orchestra, they are on the school quiz team, and on the school hurling team. They have a very good established peer group and they know their friends. Maybe, they have fought with them down through the years and had various disagreements but they have accommodated to each other and know exactly who their own particular friends are within the class and how others are going to react in various situations.

They are going from a very simple situation in primary school to a very complex situation at second-level and that is always going to be a challenge for them. They are going from the familiar to the unfamiliar. The physical features of the secondary school are a huge issue for them. The only time they move in primary school is when they may go to the halla or maybe on the odd occasion to the computer room. But secondary school is a complex building with a complex nest of various specialist rooms - so it is a huge change for them to make that simple change. Then there are the new and unfamiliar subjects - subjects like technical graphics, or French or Geography, or SESE etc. They all can be quite daunting for a student in transferring. Then there are the new and unfamiliar teachers. They are used to dealing with one teacher, perhaps the principal from time to time, and all of a sudden perhaps they have to cope with say maybe eight teachers in one day. Also the dispersal of the peer group is very important. Their friends are gone from them. The children that they have been with for eight years suddenly may have gone to another secondary school maybe in the same secondary school, but in another class. This can be quite upsetting for children as well. And they go from being the senior pupils right back down to the junior pupils. Two years ago I had the experience of bringing our 6th class children up to our secondary school and at the door some of the secondary school teachers were waiting for them and they said aren’t they ‘dotie’. And that is what we say when our junior infants come in September and it was most unusual that what we consider big fullbacks were now little dotes again. As well as dealing with different adults, they are dealing with a variety of teaching styles. You may have one teacher who may be very much in favour of the collaborative style and then other teachers who may be more traditional in their approach. In primary school, they were able to cope with the demands of the teacher, they knew him and they knew his or her ways inside out and suddenly there are a whole lot of different people coming in to them.
How then do we respond as adults? This is the challenge that is facing us in our two schools. We had the luxury in our situation of having two schools that were set up together, now 25 years ago this year. We were able to cope with mainly the same constituency, same children, same families, so we were able to develop a local transition programme between the two schools which is not the same everywhere. But certainly it is a model that I will present to you here today and take from it what you like.

The three key elements in our approach:

Firstly, in sixth class a new subject is introduced and called the secondary school. It becomes a primary school subject and is taught over a period of five weeks. This culminates in the second element when the class pays a visit to the secondary school and they have a simulated morning in the secondary school. The third element is that we have developed very good communications procedures between both schools so that staffs are aware of all of the issues that are involved in transition.

If I just look at the secondary school as a primary school subject and flick through the various elements of it.

**The Secondary School – A Primary School Subject**

![Diagram showing elements of secondary school as a primary subject]

We would discuss things initially like uniform and the difference in uniform. We talk about the crests of the various schools and this can lead onto other subjects like history and geography, I would imagine. We then talk about the physical layout of the school and then we would look at the timetable. This is something that is alien to a 6th class child. The teachers may have a timetable themselves but the child does not have one. We get them to develop their own particular timetable and to make a timetable that would suit their day in primary school. We also do a cursory introduction to the new subjects and we would look at one or two of them in some depth. We would have some teachers on our staff who would be very good at French or Spanish and we would actually have them come in and do some basic lessons on those topics with them.

We would also discuss the whole area of going to secondary school - that even though you are leaving your old friends, it is a tremendous opportunity for making new friends and we discuss all aspects around that. We talk about assembly and movement. That is something that primary school children are not used to, not used to the morning assembly or moving to new classes and we discuss all of those issues with them. We also talk about the longer school day and this is something that we need to bring to their attention. This is countered by, for example, when talking about the comparison with primary school especially when talking about homework. In our school we give homework Monday to Thursday and we leave the children free at the weekend. But this is not going to be the case at second-level and we need to prepare them for that jolt as well. We talk about extra curricular activities and most secondary schools have a huge range of extra curricular activities. We talk to them about the various terminologies used like year heads and year tutors - those are words that we take for granted but can be quite difficult for children. A couple of years ago I asked one of our pupils who had transferred, “what does Mr Furlong do in that class?” and he said he is the first-year tutor (said wrong).

The second element is towards the end, when secondary schools are doing their in-house examinations. They spend a simulated morning in the sixth class. In that particular session the children will come and be divided into various new class groupings and that comes as a jolt in itself. They would have their assembly and then they would spend 40 minute periods in each of the classes. We have insisted that they do Gaeilge, Mathematics and Béarla just to show that the normal subjects do carry on. Then they spend some more time on the exotic subjects in the language labs or maybe in the Arts room and then we go and collect them around 1pm and they are just full of enthusiasm after the morning. Following that they will come up with a dictionary of terms that are used at second-level and it forms part of a project display that they have in 6th class.
Then we actually invite former pupils - already we have talked about the transition year pupils, and in St Aidan’s the transition year pupils come back and speak to our 6th class and that is really a lovely morning. We have extended that recently and we have asked back some of our past pupils who are at third level. In the school that you are in, you may not have the role models of third level or you may not have the ambition that we would like to have in our pupils, but it is lovely for the pupils to see children who have mastered the secondary school curriculum and third level and are now working in the community. Two years ago we had a lovely opportunity where two of our past pupils were commissioned, one into the army and one in the navy and both of them came back in their uniforms and that was an absolutely lovely morning. We are also very lucky that Declan Kidney is one of our past pupils / parent in our school and he was invited back and brought back some of the Munster team with him as well and that was a lovely occasion. And he spoke to the children about his time in the secondary school and what he had achieved. So, as I said, we do those things.

We also invite back parents who have special skills, for example, we have a book binder who is one of our parents and he speaks to them about his particular skill and how he learned his skills and how he interacted with the education system. The information evening for parents is crucial. The principal of the secondary school and myself meet with the parents of the children who are transferring and we largely give them this particular talk and inform them of the challenges that their children are going to make. We advise them that there are supports available and advise them how best to support their child. Then as already outlined to you today there would be the open day in the secondary school and there would be an induction programme there as well.

As regards communication, one of the by products of this particular programme - because it is a very localised programme - is that there is a tremendous understanding between our 6th class teachers and the 1st year teachers. They would have come and discussed their programmes with our 6th class teachers and our 6th class teachers would have explained their programmes so they know in advance what the children will know going into the secondary school. As regards communication, we are very careful. What we do initially, if there is any critical information that needs transferred, we do that early on. But generally speaking for the normal child we would wait until after mid-term. We decided at the time - “let’s give the child an opportunity to spend eight weeks at secondary school without any history or baggage, let the secondary school teachers get to know them themselves”. Then after the mid-term our 6th class teachers would meet with the first-year tutors and transfer any information of an educational nature that was necessary. I know that the NCCA are looking at developing a transition information card. We have developed our own particular one and it has stood the test of time. We would fill in the basic elements and the child’s progress in primary school. There is a little box called EB ‘Eolas Breise’ and information of a sensitive nature that we would not want to communicate on paper we would just tick on that particular box and we would transmit that orally to the 1st year tutors. Our parents, of course, are well aware of this particular process and we receive their permission to do it as it is all in the interest of their children to do it.

So I present this to you today as a model that works for us. Take from it what you would like. There may be some elements that you would like to introduce into your own school. It has worked for us for the last 20 years and we will continue to use it in the future.

Go raibh maith agaibh.
Anne Fay, Principal, Scoil Iosaf Naofa, Fermoy

I have been teaching infants most of my teaching career and I would say, without a doubt, junior infants is probably the most rewarding class that you can teach because you take them from when they come in until the end of the year when they leave you as independent learners. But, at the same time having taught in both a big school, where I have taught 40 infants at various times in my career, to working in a small school where I teach junior and senior infants - the terror of September is just incredible. You just don’t know - the fear of violence and I don’t mean from the children but from the teacher more than anything else and all the things like the misery the parents go through, the misery the child goes through all those different aspects of teaching infants that you face every September.

I have been involved in early childhood over the years and have gone to various conferences. I am very interested in the whole aspect of transition from home or pre-school to primary school. Last year I decided that I was going to do something in our school this year because we were doing the things that most people do, we meet with the parents, we bring them in and talk exactly about what is going to happen. Then we bring in the children, maybe, for one evening with their parents and that is the introduction to primary school. So I decided that it just wasn’t working. Every single year there was somebody that was going to be miserable. If you only had the one that was going to be miserable, but more often than not, there was more than one and then they would upset the others including the senior infants. So this year I looked at doing something different.

With that in mind the objectives were to raise awareness among the parents of possible transitional challenges. Most parents were well aware of this having all been to school themselves and any of them who had children before were very aware that it can be quite challenging for the child, even if the child has been in play school. Many of our new entrants would not have gone to play school. We set out to provide opportunities for the new entrants in terms of settling in, to make it easier for them, to make them more comfortable and to give them ownership of what was happening. Then we decided that we would monitor the effectiveness of the new approach to transition.

Now I teach in a small school. We have 64 pupils. The process involved consultation with the parents and staff. The parents were very much on board in relation to this. They said right, whatever you want to do, whatever you think will make it easier, we will go with it. Obviously they were very concerned with how their child was going to settle in. The staff were also on board because they could see every year the difficulties that we experienced. For some children it could be until the end of September or longer and still they wouldn’t have settled in. So we decided to have a go at it.

It took six days. Six days was an arbitrary figure, though maybe, I was wrong to say that it came out of no-where. It came out of looking at the month of June and seeing how many days were free. You know what the month of June is like. You have so many bits and pieces to do in the school anyway. So we decided to take six days in June. We decided that we would not do it all together - the six days in a row - because we felt it would be too much, not just for the new entrants but for the senior infants of the next year. I also consulted with their parents to see if they could stay with us for six afternoons. Who would be involved? Well the parents, myself as the class teacher and the other personnel in the school who were involved were the SNA, the senior infants and the resource teacher. Then we planned the session and this was the agenda for the six days as they turned out:

- Day 1 – Orientation day
- Day 2 – Painting
- Day 3 – Storytelling and books
- Day 4 – Games in yard
- Day 5 – Construction and music
- Day 6 – Family fun day

The orientation day was much the same as any day that you would bring in junior infants for the first time and just give them time to explore the room and see what is happening. I said to the parents from the outset that “you are free to come and stay for any or all of the sessions and I welcome you if you want to stay with us”. We were having 12 new infants this year.
The second day I said to them “we will be painting and please don’t bring your good clothes tomorrow. Come ready for a bit of painting.” That really settled them hugely. On the first day you usually don’t do painting. You also let them take home a painting so when they came in the next time there was something there of themselves in the environment of the school.

The third day all of us got together and read books with the children. The fourth day, we had a fine day in June, and had games in the yard. The fifth day we developed construction, action rhymes and music and it was a nice day. Then I said to the parents “look, I want you all here on the last day”. By the way the parents stayed for five minutes the first day then they left them. They told me they thought it would be better and one of them very honestly said to me, “I would like the hour to myself”, so I facilitated that as well. But I said on the last day, “we are having a fun day and we’re having a picnic all organised”. The rest of the school were getting involved. We were having sporting activities out in the yard. We don’t have a hall obviously and of course, it bucketed rain. We never saw anything like the deluge that was there. We realised on the morning that there was going to be a problem. We brought them in that day and we did have the family there for the hour. Overall it was great success.

We did two days the first week, 3 days the second week and one day in the last week and we all left with that warm fuzzy feeling. We all knew the children and the children knew us. In the back of my mind all during the summer, I was thinking, “is this going to work”. But we tried and we would see how it would go.

On the 1st September when we came back, there was not a bother, not a tear, not a whinge, not a whine, nothing. They just came in and sat down and had a wonderful day. There wasn’t a bother in the world. I thought, this was the first day but still, I wasn’t believing that the other shoe was about to drop. One of the parents came to me that day and said, “you know, since James was able to walk, he held my hand absolutely everywhere I go in the house, but this morning, we turned around the corner and we saw the school and he let go and he ran the whole way into the class”. She said it was just fantastic because she was really worried about him having attachment issues. Other parents that I have spoken to since said that their little girl, on the first Saturday after we were back, cried bitterly and said, “what did I do wrong that you won’t let me go to school today”. So it has been a great success.

And Sean, the little boy who had huge difficulties because his granny had just been diagnosed with cancer and his mother was a single parent, he came in to school in September and was absolutely fantastic. His mother came to the parent teacher meeting and she said, “I am so happy we did what we did last year because it really worked for Sean”.

So from my point of view, we came back in September and everything went really well. Where do we go from here is the next question. Obviously I can’t extrapolate from that and say, “this is the way to go” and all children will be like this for ever more. These may be just those kind of children who didn’t need as much settling in. So we are going to try it again next year. The parents were very happy with it, both sets of parents. The senior infants’ parents were very happy with it as were the senior infants because the senior infants really felt that they were in charge. This was their room and they were welcoming the ‘new babies’ as they called them. They were only babies themselves. It was really good for them. It was really good for all of us in the way it worked and we are going to go with it again next year. This time, with one difference - I do intend to talk personally to the play schools because I don’t think we have enough interaction with the pre-school teachers or the pre-school settings, obviously as we don’t have enough time. But I do think that might be a help for us.
Since I have been given the pleasure of taking the graveyard shift on Friday evening I will try and keep this light! In the discussion document you have received as part of your information pack, you will see a formal paper on my research. I won’t talk about the full range of data from the project. What I wanted to do today is to focus specifically on the children involved in the project, and give you an idea of their views on starting school in Ireland. So although the full project involved both a nationwide questionnaire to teachers and following case study children during their first year in school, I will only talk about data from discussion groups with some children involved in the study.

Methodology
Firstly, parental consent was gained to allow the children to take part in discussion groups. Then children with consent were invited to take part, so the child had the final say on whether or not they wanted to be involved. Discussions took place in the school hall, with groups of four or five children at a time. A conscious decision was made to group friends together when deciding on who would take part in groups. In total, 10 group discussions took place over the course of the project, involving the participation of 47 children (some children took part in more than one discussion group). The discussions were very child led, some revolved around pictures the researcher had brought of typical school situations. The researcher also brought some prompt questions along to discussions and used these to initiate conversations. All discussions were recorded, the children were asked at the start of each discussion if they would mind the conversation being taped. Prior to discussions commencing, the researcher gave each child the opportunity to talk into the tape recorder, and listen to themselves talking, to ensure that they were familiar with, and comfortable with, the idea of being taped. The children greatly enjoyed being taped, and often asked that parts of the tape be played back so they could listen to themselves talking again.

Findings
So, if we have a look at the first day in school, as Séamas and Anne have already mentioned in their presentations, tears and upset were a major focus when they talked about the first days! Here are some quotes from the children when asked if they remembered the first day at school. They all talked about the children who had been upset.

- “It was a bit scary, I was a bit scared, because all adults were talking to me an all, and that was a bit scary.”
- “And I was crying because I didn’t know Mr Delaney [School Principal] yet.”
- “Sadie was always crying, because she wanted to stay with her mam, and she was out in the hall and she was slapping Mrs Murphy because she wanted to get to her mam. She really wanted to stay with her mam...and her mam had to go to work maybe...?”

Homework also proved to be a major right of passage for the children. In the first discussion groups in September many of them talked about the homework they were going to get. They didn’t get any homework for a few weeks and they were very excited waiting for it. As you can see from these quotes:

- “I was allowed to watch telly when I got home from school, but now I’m not. I’ll have to do my homework.”
- “It’ll be kind of fun, because my sister told me.”
- “I like eating my lunch, and eating bars. And I love homework, I absolutely love it!”

But as you can see from the following comment, in some cases the excitement about homework was short lived:

- Mary: “So tell me if you could do more of something at school, what would it be?”
- Callum: “Homework!”
- Mary: “You would like more homework?” [surprised voice]
- Callum: “No, I would like to do it at school!” [laughs]
Work Versus Play

On a more serious note, the children’s conversations highlighted a clear division in what they saw as play and work. When I asked them what was their favourite thing to do at school, it was play, play, play. Friday morning was free-play time when they could do whatever they wanted to do and nearly all the children spoke about Friday morning play as being a favourite. When I asked them about playschool and what did they do – they played, they played all day.

However, when I asked what they did in school other than Friday morning play they claimed they ‘worked’. Now, I was conducting classroom observations as part of the project, so I was very aware of what was taking place in the classroom, and I would have considered it to be a very active learning environment. I remember one group clearly, they were singing the “I’m going on a bear hunt…” song, so they were climbing under tables, over chairs etc while acting out the chorus. I brought five of them out and asked what they had done that morning and they answered just work, work, work!

I think the following slide highlights this nicely. In this conversation we were having a discussion about what information would be important to pass to a little brother who was starting school next year…

- Mary: “And what would we tell him about playtime?”
- Ryan: “That you play with toys.”
- Mary: “And does teacher let you do that every day?”
- Robbie: “No, just one day.”
- Ryan: “On the last day.”
- Mary: “On Friday?”
- All: “Yes.”
- Mary: “And what do you do on the other days?”
- Daragh: “We just do work.”
- Ruairi: “We do listening.”
- Mary: “So you do work and listening.”
- All: “Yes.”

It became clear during the discussions that they only thing they considered play was when they could choose the activity. It is important to note that, although many of their activities may be considered by adults to be play, actually the children themselves had little free choice in what they were doing. Most of the children in this school would have attended good quality pre-schools in which they had a good deal of autonomy. They then moved to the primary school environment where they actually had very little control over their learning, so this might be something worth thinking about from your perspective. Now in saying that, it is also worth noting that these children went from a 1:10 ratio in pre-school to a classroom of 30 pupils which was obviously a very different situation. We are all very aware of the issues of class size and I do take that on board.

The Playground (or as these children referred to it, The Yard)

Those of you who are teachers of infants classes will be very aware that the yard can be a huge issue for children. Many children adored being out in the yard, it was their favourite place to be. But for others it took time to settle into this new environment. The yard in this school was for junior infants, senior infants and first and second classes (with the older classes using a separate area). So from an adult perspective, it would not appear to be a particularly threatening situation. But for so many of these children it took time to adapt to life on the yard. The following slides tell you about the experience of one child. This first quotation was early in September and I was asking Callum about his favourite thing to do in school. He said outside, but it was clear from his response that this was not really the case.

- Mary: “And what is your favourite thing?”
- Callum: “Outside playing.”
- Mary: “I remember in the beginning I found the yard very noisy.”
- Callum: “I did [as well]”.
- Mary: “And are you used to it now?”
- Callum: [very quietly – sounds unsure] “Yes.”
I was also conducting observations in the yard as well as in the classroom which showed that Callum, like a few of the children, really hung back in the yard situation, they didn’t take part in activities. These children often appeared isolated, standing alone, but very watchful of what was happening in the yard. Moving on to the next quotation, again in September, Callum talks about the yard.

➢ Mary: “So, what do you play?”
➢ Callum: “I just walk. There’s nobody really to play with.”
➢ Mary: “Is there not?”
➢ Callum: “No. And there’s nothing really do to.” [sad voice]

In this next slide he was talking about running around in circles all the time…

➢ Mary: “And who do you run around in circles with?”
➢ Callum: “I don’t know.”
➢ Mary: “Well, you could run with the boys and girls from your class.”
➢ Callum: [Silent]
➢ Mary: “Jack, who do you play with?”
➢ Callum: “He plays with his friends.” [In an ‘isn’t that obvious’ tone of voice]

It was clear again that he was just struggling to get to grips with the yard. And as I said he wasn’t the only one. I just want to tell you about this final little clip from Callum, as you can see this discussion was in February.

➢ Mary: “What about you Callum, what’s your favourite thing in school?”
➢ Callum: “Lunch” [all laugh]
➢ Mary: “If lunch is your favourite, what’s your second favourite?”
➢ Callum: “Captain of the Runners”.
➢ Mary: “And what is that?”
➢ Callum: “Somebody is on and they pick a team, and they have to catch the people and put them into jail, and the other person has to try and tip them, and if they get tipped you can run back into den, and that’s the game.”
➢ Ross: “And somebody might run over to them, and I might get tipped, and I would run back over to them, I could go back to the den.”
➢ Callum: “We play with Kevin, and Ronan, and you [to Ross] and 1st class....”

You can feel from what he said, and the way he said it, that he was thoroughly enjoying the yard at this stage. But just to note that the yard is a context in which there is little adult supervision. Away from the ‘safety’ of the classroom situation it can take time for children to become confident in this context. You will have read in my discussion paper that the teachers of junior infants questioned in the project highlighted social skills, independence and self esteem as being important skills for children to possess during this transition. During observations on the yard it was easy to see why these skills were important in this context as well as the classroom environment.

**The Rules**

One theme which developed during the conversations with the children was the rules and regulations that they were expected to follow at school. Certainly the rules that govern one educational setting may not apply in another. This can cause misunderstandings and confusion. It is vital that children develop an understanding of the new rule systems if they are to successfully negotiate classroom life. The rules were mentioned in various contexts, and the children had a very clear understanding of what they were expected to, and were not expected, to do in school. Indeed, they could have listed a hundred rules to follow they were so clear about them!

➢ “The bell means to go out and the bell means to go in.”
➢ “You are not allowed on the grass when it’s wet. You are if it’s dry and not if it’s wet. If it’s wet and you go on the grass, you have to go to Mr Delaney’s office.”
➢ “I would say teacher would send Ronan to Mr Delaney’s office, because he’s bold.”
➢ “If you poke, you are sent to Mr Delaney’s office.”
➢ “I was sent to Mr Delaney’s office because I walked home on my own...”
During discussions the children would argue over the minor details of rules. They also had a very clear picture of the power system in place in school. The children clearly understood school in terms of children deferring to adults. They seemed to allocate the role of disciplinarian to Mr. Delaney (the school principal) rather than to Mrs Murphy (their class teacher). Although Mrs Murphy was spoken about in terms of needing to comply with her rules, Mr Delaney was consistently quoted by the children as a deterrent from behaving badly. The children were also very clear on what would happen if they did not follow the rules, as the following excerpts show:

- **Ronan:** “Yes, you put up your hand, and you stay with your hand up.”
- **Erin:** “Yes, because if you put your hand up and shout, right, you will go to Mr Delaney’s office, and he would lock the key.”
- **Mary:** “Would he?”
- **Erin:** “Yes, he would bring the key off with him.”
- **Mary:** “And have any of you ever been in Mr Delaney’s office?”
- **All:** “No.” [emphatically]
- **Mary:** “Then how do you know that?” “Who told you that?”
- **Erin:** “No-one, but we saw Mr Delaney.”
- **Rachael:** “My sister told me.”

The children were clearly able to express their concept of discipline and punishment for ‘bold’ behaviour. Although they had very clear ideas about what happened to children who were ‘bold’ these were not necessarily accurate representations, but more dramatic versions, often passed down by older siblings, as shown below.

- **Daragh:** “Yes, if you go to Mr Delaney’s office, they have big metal sticks… one time [elder brother] went because a big boy was bullying him, and he saw these big metal sticks, and Mr Delaney was hitting him with it.”
- **Erin:** “Mr Delaney said if anyone was bold, he would just bring them to his office, and if anyone was bold he would bring them to his office for nine days, and every day for nine days he would give them a slap, because they would be bold!”

Although the children spoke about being sent to Mr Delaney often, and used the threat of being sent in their general conversations, they actually knew that this was not really an option for the junior infant class. However, although they knew it was highly unlikely for a junior infant pupil to be sent to Mr Delaney’s office, they took great pleasure in discussing the fact that this could take place, often with great dramatic effect!

**Conclusion**

Finally, in conclusion, some important points to note. First of all these children of four and five years old were well able to express their opinions on school life. They cheerfully offered their thoughts and confidently expressed their world view. Their understanding of the rules and power systems in the primary school were apparent. They also provided very informative and perceptive insights into life for a junior infant pupil.

This presentation has given an overview of the findings from child discussion groups that were undertaken as part of the Building Bridges project. My paper in the formal Transitions Discussion Document from the conference details the teachers of junior infant classes responses to the project questionnaire (O’Kane, 2008). The findings from the full study concur with the notion that transition to school is an adaptive process for children and their families, and that all stakeholders should be involved in communication about the process. The study also confirmed the value of involving multiple stakeholders, particularly the children themselves, in the research process.

Further details of all aspects of the project are available in written form (O’Kane, 2007) and I am most happy to respond to any requests for further information by email: maryok.oakleigh@gmail.com.
Panel Discussion

Delegates were invited to offer comments or to pose questions to members of the panel, which consisted of Maeve O’Brien, Patsy Sweeney, Séamas Ó Dálaigh, Anne Fay and Mary O’Kane. The session was chaired by Mary Cawley, cathaoirleach of the Education Committee.

Question:
First of all, thank you to the panel for a variety of examples this evening. I would like to address my question to the principal from Cork. In his school, he is dealing with one or two primary schools feeding into one secondary school. How do you cope in a situation where, in one class, you are sending children to more than 20 schools? Where do you find the time as a classroom teacher to negotiate and do the best that you can for the children in your care in that situation? Thank you.

Response: Séamas Ó Dálaigh
We are very lucky in that we are dealing with just one primary school and one secondary school. Therefore the programme has been very easy to develop. But about 80% of our children would transfer from our primary school to the secondary school and the other 20% would be going to various other secondary schools. A lot of the elements of the transition programme are common to all secondary schools - the ones that are a little bit more exclusive is the actual visit on the day itself. But most of the elements of the transition programme would be relevant to every secondary school as such, so we are able to do the secondary school as a subject for all of the children despite the fact that they may all not be transferring to the one school.

Question: John Boyle, CEC
I would like to thank the speakers on their wonderful presentations. I have a question for the panel. If you had the opportunity to say one thing to the Minister of Education in relation to what you would do about this topic - because most of what we are hearing is not really supported by the Department; the schools are making it up and doing very well - on a national basis if you had one thing to say to the Minister about transition what would you say?

Response from Panel

Mary O’Kane
From my own research experience, the first phase of my project asked 500 teachers of junior infants and pre-school practitioners nationwide what they thought were the most important issues relating to children making the transition from pre-school to primary school. One issue which both groups reported on was the fact that these children are making the transition from ratios in pre-school of 1 adult to 10 children (in fact, in some cases the ratios reported were even lower than this). The children are then moving to the junior infant class with much larger adult child ratios. In fact the largest ratio reported on in my study was 1 teacher to 36 pupils. So I think we can see that this is a very difficult transition for the children in terms of class size. Can I just also say that, whatever the class size in the junior infants classes, the teachers also reported that there should be a second pair of hands in every junior infant classroom. This may appear to be a very obvious answer in light of recent developments with regard to class size, but this is what teachers and pre-school practitioners in my research project were stating, prior to government statements about increasing class sizes again.

Anne Fay
I would agree with Mary totally. The answer is, first of all, class size - there is no doubt about it. But I think if we could ever get the Minister, be it this one or any other one, to believe that there was an importance in this kind of transition, he would see it as an issue. We do these things ourselves and we do them without any support from government. So if I was to ask the Minister, I would ask that there would be some support given to the school, and I mean financial support. There is no doubt that every school has its own way of looking at things and its own way of dealing with its own transition issues. But to give some financial support so that you can actually run a proper transition programme - at both primary and secondary level, I believe is important.
Séamas Ó Dalaigh

There are lots of things I would like to say to Batt. But what I really would like to say to him is that the transition programme that we have developed, a local transition programme, really works. One of the real crimes of the cut backs at the moment is the crime that has been committed against our Traveller community and they don’t have any advocates at the moment for their particular cause. Even though we can hang our hats on lots of different things, the actual fact that they have cut the grant is an absolute scandal. In our particular case, we have Traveller children in our school and they have engaged in this transition programme and have been highly successful at second-level. This year, for the first time, two of them reached Leaving Certificate and graduated with their Leaving Cert. and are now students in UCC under the Access programme. That is fantastic progress and I put that down largely to the support that they received during the transfer between primary and secondary school and the subsequent support at second-level. And now to think, at one stroke of a pen, that this is now going to be put in danger, is an absolute disgrace.

Patsy Sweeney

Obviously the cutbacks are going to impact hugely. The tragic irony is that the whole transition programme is informed by the ESRI ‘Moving Up’, which has been commissioned by and paid for by the Department. The recommendations have been validated by the Department and now all of it will have to stop. We alone stand to lose five teachers immediately: two from pupil-teacher ratio, we lose a disadvantaged area post, we lose a HSCL post, and we lose one because of the pupil teacher ratio at LCVP (Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme). That means that we go five over quota. That means that the kitty for resource teachers will be raided - resource teaching in second-level is not ring fenced. So, if we go five over quota when we get our allocation, our resource teachers will go - which means that our team teaching in first-year will go. It means that teachers who visit primary schools will no longer be able to do it. All the night work will go - there were three parents’ nights involved in the programme that we run - the teachers are not going to come in at night to meet! The parent teacher meetings and all of those issues, covering for teachers and other classes - the teachers won’t agree to that any more because of the cut backs in cover and substitution. So the whole programme is at risk. But worse - the actual supports that were built into the programme for the weaker students, for the Travellers, for all students, the team teaching, all of that will have to cease. The huge mixed ability classes will now no longer be able to be run. We will have to cut back on subjects because we will no longer have the luxury of being able to run small classes, small groups of history classes or chemistry etc. We will have to drop subjects as well. So the choice of subject and ergo the experience of the first-year will be severely curtailed and after all the progress of giving them a broad canvas in which to chose their subjects will, once again, have to disappear. We really are going backwards about 10 years.

Maeve O’Brien

When you ask parents what do they want for children at the transfer to second-level they will say that they want them to be happy. That is all parents - whether you are talking about Traveller parents, working class parents, middle class parents, or parents who have newly come to this country. So when we are talking about happiness, we are again talking about the issue of well-being. So how can education, the school system of education, provide for the well-being of people who participate in our society - particularly in the economic downturn. There are some universal issues around transfer. But there are also very particular ones, and I think it is to the most vulnerable that we need to look at. Although the problems of the economic downturn are going to affect those who have good jobs, and people are going to be out of work who never conceived of being out of work - those at the bottom are really going to be in a most difficult situation. So I think we really have to raise issues around disadvantage, around Travellers, around disability.

For example, we talk about equality in education but in our college we have very few (students) coming in with particular disabilities in the first place and now we are going to have less, because the cuts that are envisaged is going to make it so difficult for them to come. So the question is, is schooling just to create human capital and fodder for the economy through the kind of curricula and assessment systems that we have, and we are just going to go – we’ll rise again, as it is just another cycle of disappointment. We are in a global economic situation now. Where can people go? I think it is about looking at a model for well-being and I think the Allardt Model (1993) - having looked at a number of models with the NCCA – is a useful one. I think we are looking at having resources - we are looking at resources. You have got to have resource education. It is the first thing to do. The model takes account of loving. We have to think about care. How do we care for ourselves as teachers? Are we going to kill ourselves in this project, and keep people going in a society in crisis? The element of ‘Being’ and the right to
choose is significant and complex. I’m really interested in what Mary was saying about how you give parents information to choose, because parents who have never had experience of that kind of dialogue around education are still going to be outsiders, particularly in a system where those with privilege will use those resources, because resources are now very scarce. I think we are in a very serious situation.
Report From Discussion Groups

Introduction
Delegates were assigned to different discussion groups to facilitate closer examination of some of the issues that arose from the conference documentation and presentations. Each one of the seven discussions groups was given a list of questions to focus on, and topics discussed included communication, transfer tests, curriculum, special needs and expectations. Members of the INTO Education Committee acted as facilitators and rapporteurs. Reports from all the discussion groups, summarising the views of participants, were collated under thematic headings and are outlined below.

1. Communication
The education process from pre-school to third level should be seen as a continuum...
How can communication between all levels – pre-school, primary and post-primary – be improved and should formal structures be put in place to facilitate this?

Teachers were broadly in favour of introducing formal channels of communication between the three levels, pre-school, primary and onto post-primary. There was some discussion on what information should be communicated and how it would be transferred (i.e. in written form, on templates designed for this purpose or in person, orally at meetings of key personnel from the child’s current placement and the school to which they are transferring). Some teachers expressed reluctance to put information on individual pupils in writing and were more in favour of holding meetings at which information could be transferred orally. It was noted that because of freedom of information concerns, anxiety around recording information on pupils can make such written information less than useful. However, many other teachers believed that professionals should always be able to defend documented information. Teachers use professional judgement and need not be unduly concerned about putting evidence-based information about pupils’ learning and development in writing.

Teachers recognised that information is transferred from primary to post-primary school and between primary schools when students transfer. This communication was regarded as generally informal, dependent on local contexts and pre-existing channels of communication or relationships between personnel in both schools. Home-school community links and school completion programmes provide opportunities in some schools to foster and maintain channels of communication. Informal communication works well when it happens - because it is not prescribed it does not always happen. Failure to transfer significant information can detrimentally affect prospects for successful transition for some students and can give rise to unnecessary challenges for receiving school organisations.

While teachers were generally positively predisposed towards transferring useful information to receiving schools, there was some concern around the administration burden inherent in this process. Schools are already busy places and often time and human resource constraints will limit a school’s capacity to be effective in gathering, formatting and transferring information about pupils leaving the school and processing information on reception pupils. Concerns were raised about communicating ‘sensitive’ information on some pupils, regarding their individual needs or background and whether a school could do so without the written permission of the student’s primary care givers. Some teachers stated that guardians have the right to view any information held by the school on their child and that the most correct way to transfer information to a receiving school was through the parents and not directly from school to school. However, others disagreed and commented that the school’s expectation that information would transfer with the student might not always be realised.

The most common reason cited for having formal systems of communication between schools related to pupils with special needs. Schools require information on the special needs of students before they arrive to prepare the physical environment and to put in place educational and other supports which may facilitate successful transition.

Issues: Pre-school to Primary
Many teachers supported the view that the ‘enrolment form’ is a significant instrument for the communication of information on pupils beginning school or transferring from another school. Early start and primary schools
which have a pre-school facility on campus or nearby have an advantage over schools where feeder pre-schools are not geographically proximate.

Teachers pointed out that there is a huge variation in the nature and quality of provision among pre-schools. It was also noted that in some schools children may come from many different pre-school situations. These factors add to the difficulty in fostering and maintaining effective links. State-provided universal provision of a common curriculum for the early years was mentioned as a means of standardising and maintaining quality of provision. However, one teacher did point out that some children still arrive without having attended any form of pre-school provision. In addition, in many European countries our infant cycle at primary would be regarded as pre-school provision. In these countries children begin school later.

Some teachers indicated that they have had experience of parental reluctance to provide information on their child’s special needs at enrolment for fear that their child would be refused a place in the school.

**Issues: Primary to Post-Primary**

Competition for places in some post-primary schools and their control of the selection process can be an issue for teachers in senior classes at primary. It is particularly an issue when the selection process is not transparent and the criteria for acceptance are not shared. In the absence of formal communication teachers and parents can be left trying to second guess what post-primary schools expectations are.

Transfer of profiles of Educational Attainment, as in the British system was mentioned as one comprehensive instrument for communicating precise pupil specific information to the post-primary school. However, not many teachers present felt that the value of the information gathered in profiles would be worth the time and effort expended on the administrative burden of maintaining them. It was generally felt that maintaining profiles would divert teachers from their primary task of teaching and providing quality learning experiences for the children in their care.

Some post-primary schools gather information through the practice of requesting senior cycle teachers at primary level to fill out information forms on individual pupils. Other post-primary schools gather information from senior cycle primary teachers by visiting the primary school and speaking to the class teachers.

**Other issues and transitions**

The point was made that formal channels of communication would also facilitate other transitions and transfers. In particular, transfer from one primary school to another due to family relocation and transition from a junior primary school to a senior primary school at first or second class, as is the experience of many primary pupils.

There was broad agreement that formal channels of communication between school levels are desirable. However, there were many views on the specific mechanisms and how and when these might be employed. The discussion groups commented on many prevalent practices and saw that many had merit. However, no one formal structure for communicating information was agreed to be best practice. Channels of communication need to be open and maintained but both the type of information to be transferred and how best it might be done is likely to be more context specific, different from school to school and pupil to individual pupil. A common system-wide practice is likely to have merit but will not be sufficient in all cases.

2. **Curriculum**

*One of the factors impacting on children’s experience of transition is a lack of continuity in the treatment of curriculum areas between the different levels – pre-school, primary and post-primary. What can be done to ensure continuity in the area of curriculum?*

**Issues: Pre-school to Primary**

Teachers were of the opinion that curriculum continuity from pre-school to primary school would be best achieved by subsuming pre-school education into the primary system following the ‘Early Start’ model. A national curriculum for the early years, which takes into consideration the revised curriculum for primary infant children, can deliver a standardisation of educational provision at pre-school. Teachers of infant children can also be cognisant of the learning content, skills and the type of learning experiences children transferring from pre-
school will have had. A universal pre-school provision delivered nationwide on or proximate to national schools was regarded as the best way to move forward. In this context, teachers were also in agreement that a three year infant cycle would facilitate such integration. Children would attend the school based pre-school unit from three years, begin the infant cycle at four and complete it at six/seven years. Support for integration and standardisation of pre-school provision was recommended because in the current system children begin primary school with vastly different ranges of capability and when children learn something incorrectly they can spend up to four years unlearning and relearning properly.

Issues: Primary to Post-Primary
At transfer to post-primary level teachers commented that teaching and learning changes from being child-centred to being subject-centred. There was consensus that the development and introduction of the revised curriculum was a lost opportunity to dovetail curriculum content and methodologies and mitigate the disjoint that is so obvious between levels. Irish and mathematics were seen in particular as curriculum areas where both levels need to be more aware of how and what is taught. Some members of the groups believed that curriculum overload at primary level contributes to lack of continuity in the area of curriculum between levels. They questioned the need for having such a broad range of subjects at primary level and pointed out that the primary school could instead prioritise providing children with basic learning and skills they would use as life-long learners throughout their lives. Instead of children learning content they could learn how to learn, an invaluable gift that would continuously enhance their lives and productivity in society. If children leaving primary school, for example, had learned well how to read then they would be able to read for the rest of their lives.

It was pointed out that there is a statutory body (NCCA) charged with curriculum development with responsibility for curriculum both at primary and post-primary. This is where the mismatch should be addressed. It is not surprising that there is a lack of continuity between the levels when it is recognised that each level evolved independently for almost two centuries. It was acknowledged that change happens slowly but that even in what is a separatist educational system both levels share a common interest, namely the education and learning of children.

3. Special Educational Needs
What particular difficulties do children with SEN face on entering mainstream primary school and transferring from primary to secondary school?
What are the challenges for pupils with SEN transferring from mainstream to special schools and vice versa?
What policies need to be adopted, at school level and at system level, to facilitate a smooth transition for pupils with special educational needs?

Teachers focused mainly on challenges placed on schools by the current system for allocating resources to children with special educational needs. The administrative burden which generally falls on principal teachers was regarded as unduly excessive. Resource entitlements that have been allocated at primary level do not automatically transfer to second-level. The second-level school must submit a new application with current assessments of needs to the SESS within a specified time frame for these resources to be available in the September as the child arrives. The general allocation method while it has merits also creates an administrative burden for principals in small schools who have to negotiate clustering arrangements. This is particularly problematic for non-administrative principals.

Parental expectations for their children to attend their local primary school can be unrealistic. Primary schools have built capacity for inclusion in recent years. However, the best interests of the child are not always served by placing them in the local school. Geography cannot be the only criterion for educational placement - the school must be an appropriate placement capable of mediating appropriate parts of the broad curriculum for the child. Sometimes a special school is the appropriate educational setting for a child. It was seen as particularly problematic at transfer to second-level when the sixth class teacher must encourage the parent to seek a placement in a special setting when local post-primary schools have not built capacity to meet the educational needs of children with SEN.

The real need for ongoing professional development for schools on meeting the needs of children with special educational needs was voiced by many teachers. SESS seminars on transition for pupils with SEN were praised as an excellent initiative. Such seminars and others need to be more widely available and expanded. The model
for school based professional development as used in the roll out of the revised curriculum was favoured. However, schools should be able to identify their professional development needs and having done so be facilitated in providing for those needs, possibly through the network of education centres throughout the country.

The group felt that one of the difficulties associated with the transfer of pupils with special needs was that resources allocated to the primary school do not travel with the pupil. This is particularly the case with IT equipment. Other concerns were the under-resourcing of borderline children, the perceived stigma of being a special-needs child in a bigger school, and the fact that with the pupil coming into contact with a larger number of staff that there is a greater chance that confidential information could be exposed. Issues of concern include exemptions from aspects of the curriculum and how this could impact not only on the pupil’s future career prospects but also on themselves.

Although there was a good deal of support for the transfer of information the group felt that teachers needed to be careful about what was conveyed about pupils since this could be accessed under the Data Protection and Freedom of Information Acts and that teachers could be asked to prove with evidence remarks they may record about their pupils. It was suggested that members of INTO should be given a directive by the union and the DES on what was appropriate for these transactions with other schools.

4. Transfer Tests

*What impact do transfer/entrance tests have on teaching and learning in sixth class?*

*What are the alternatives to transition tests?*

Teachers were of the opinion that transfer tests do impact on teaching and learning in sixth class, especially in urban areas where there is stiff competition for places at second-level in what are perceived as desirable schools. Teachers of the senior classes will sometimes be under pressure to modify the English and maths curriculum especially and to spend more time on these subjects in the lead up to the transfer test. This pressure can come from parents and from the fact that schools in urban areas can be judged on the number of children they manage to get into the most favoured local secondary school.

The impact of failure in transfer/entrance tests was pointed out to be life-long and critical. It can move the young person away from where s/he was socially comfortable to social isolation which may turn out to be life-long. Being labelled as having failed at a young age can impact on the child’s self-esteem throughout life. It can become for some a self-fulfilling prophecy of underachievement, a pattern difficult to break.

Transfer tests were also seen by some as an instrument for the preservation of privilege. They were seen to correlate directly with social exclusion, the continued marginalisation of minority communities and a mechanism which sustains intergenerational poverty. Entrance tests are written with reference points unfamiliar to children from areas of social disadvantage.

Teachers did mention alternatives to the current system of using transfer tests for selection, streaming and gathering of information on pupils’ level of achievement/ability.

(i) Norm-referenced standardised tests for Ireland.
(ii) Accept standardised test scores provided by the primary school.
(iii) Interviews with children transferring from primary school.
(iv) Application forms for primary school children to complete.
(v) Consultation meetings between sixth class teachers and post-primary teachers.
(vi) Profiles of educational achievement to transfer with each pupil.
(vii) Portfolios of representative pieces of work to transfer with the pupil.
(viii) Co-operative transition programmes between schools at both levels.
(ix) Postpone (transfer test) assessment till the end of first year at second-level.
(x) Secondary schools could allocate places without reference to a test.
(xi) Secondary schools could allocate places with reference only to their own inclusive enrolment policy.
(xii) Only children who have been allocated places are invited to sit a transfer test.
5. A Continuum

The education process from pre-school to 3rd level should be seen as a continuum. Factors that can prevent this are a lack of comprehensive information and continuous communication between the various levels of education. How can communication between all levels be improved and should formal structures be put in place to facilitate this?

Teachers felt that in many rural settings where multi-class situations are the norm, the visits from the second-level schools to show slides of their school activities were a good idea. However, this was seen as being a ‘hit and miss’ practice and can vary in the quality and level of information being given to the children. Very often parents are not privy to this presentation and children can therefore make decisions as to which post-primary school they will transfer – parents would be excluded from this decision and delegates felt this was not good practice.

It was agreed that formal structures should be in place to facilitate the transfer of all necessary and relevant information between the educational sectors. These structures would be best placed in the Local Education Centres. Such structures would eradicate the creeping silent ‘animosity’/suspicion that appears to exist between the two sectors at primary and post-primary level – delegates agreed that there seems to be a silent disregard by one sector in relation to the work of the other. Nobody was grasping the nettle in relation to this issue. Everyone agreed that, undoubtedly, there is discontinuity in curriculum development at the point of transfer to post-primary, with consequent gaps in children’s learning; there is a sense of helplessness in primary schools in relation to being equipped to address this on their own. Delegates unanimously agreed that objective professional intervention is necessary with no leadership from the DES.

The view that communication between education levels and schools is poor in general was strongly voiced across the sub-groups. The reason for this may be bound up with the notion that each class, school, and sector is “independent” of the rest. Participants tended to be quite scathing of colleagues in pre-school and second-levels in relation to information transfer. They felt that pre-school tried to control what they did in primary but that second-level seemed to disregard their input and appeared not to trust the information supplied.

Recognising that this was a major fault line, delegates called for school principals of all levels to work more closely together to obviate this situation. It was suggested that a good start would be to create a senior post in both primary and secondary schools to deal specifically with the issue of transition. These postholders would control the flow and quality of information between the school partners, the transferring pupils and their parents to make the whole process more transparent and stress free.

While formal structures would be welcomed, a level of local autonomy in relation to arrangements for transfer of information between the educational sectors was recommended. It was stated that the DES is providing no guidelines in relation to this issue. Delegates questioned what had happened the recommendations contained in the DES Pupil Transfer report which was published in the 1980s. Why has the DES largely ignored this report? Unanimously, teachers agreed that DES guidelines with options for local ownership of structures, are urgently needed.

Many teachers felt under pressure to ensure that pupils did well in entrance and scholarship tests. These tests had a negative impact on the curriculum and distorted the school year in the 6th class. The curriculum became limited in its scope and results were used unfairly to compare teachers and schools. Delegates suggested an alternative model whereby better communication structures would be put in place. This model would involve building a profile of each pupil and storing such information between parents and teachers at primary and 2nd level. The profiles should include more holistic information - emphasis should be on diet, nutrition, self esteem, assertiveness, strength, and weaknesses – which would be of more benefit ultimately to the pupil.

Finally, delegates felt that in the small number of schools where boys transfer from co-educational to single sex schools at the start of 1st class problems can occur and that this transition needs to be looked at.
6. Continuous Comprehensive Schooling

'Transfer between education levels should be about keeping pupils in their own localities (as far as possible) rather than creating a segregated secondary system.'

Is there scope for schools to merge (primary and second-level) to forms institutions similar to those in Finland and other Scandinavian countries that offer a continuous education from 6 to 16- the compulsory school years?

One teacher reported that her school is in partnership with a Finnish school currently through the Comenius project and Finnish teachers visited their Irish partner school recently. Class size in Finland is 19:1 with a classroom assistant in each class: therefore, the Irish education system is at a different stage of development when compared with the Finnish one. If such an ideal ever came to fruition here, it would mean that, effectively, small rural/urban schools would be eliminated. The above idea would probably fall into the new VEC type schooling which has just been introduced in primary schools in Ireland and most delegates would agree with that development especially in a multi-cultural nation that Ireland has become in recent years.

Some of our more experienced colleagues had received their own education in a model somewhat similar to the one suggested above – in the ‘secondary tops’ which was described in very positive terms when the model was in use in Ireland in the 1960s /70s.

Another such model is the Special School - for example Schools for Children with Mild /Moderate learning disabilities where children’s needs are catered for in the same school from 4 – 18 years of age. Difficulties are being experienced by many schools now in relation to school transfer for children with special needs who in the past may have been in, or have had close links with, a special school throughout their primary years. This has now changed as the inclusion of children with special needs in mainstream has become embedded in the system even in primary schools.

Overall, even though delegates felt small schools would suffer should the above model be introduced, it was felt that it would offer a continuum of education especially for vulnerable children from marginalised homes and therefore it would be a positive development for those children. In fact it was agreed that the introduction of such a model should be actively pursued and negotiated for many children in communities that are designated as disadvantaged. For many of our pupils the post-primary system is a liberating experience especially for the majority who come from homes where education, achievement and academic ambition prevail. However, all possible supports should be put in place to ensure that the minority of our young population who are born into and are growing up in poverty-ridden homes and communities would benefit from and complete their schooling up to 18 years of age: policy makers should, at this stage, pull out all the stops to ensure this happens in the near future.

7. Starting School

One school has a set-up whereby the pre-school shares yard, hall and other resources with the primary school and most of their junior infant intake attend the pre-school to the extent that those who do not were called the “new boys” when they transferred to junior infants!

Junior infant classes contain children who have more and more behaviour problems despite having attended pre-school. The biggest issue is that most pre-schools had already begun the junior infant curriculum which leads to many difficulties such as lack of school readiness e.g. inadequate development of listening skills, basic language, social development etc. regardless of whether children attend pre-school or not. There are misinterpretations of the underpinnings of aspects of the primary curriculum and many teachers said that this leads to some children being bored in junior infants - this was considered a serious issue.

8. Class allocation

It was agreed that, in general, NQTs are often assigned to infant classes. Some teachers believed that there could be a perception that one needs to be bounding with energy, young, enthusiastic and vibrant to effectively survive the challenges of the infant classroom. Others wondered why this perception prevails as speaking from experience teachers know that one needs health and energy to effectively perform in 6th class or indeed in any
class in primary school. Others said that it was a question of being ‘unlucky’ enough (or lucky enough as the case may be!) to be the last staff appointee and in general delegates felt that would be the main reason for this practice.

Attitudes prevail in some schools in relation to taking 6th class - for example, it’s a “badge of honour” to be asked to take 6th class in some schools in the south west! In most rural schools where there are teaching principals the 5th/6th classes are usually taken by the principals themselves and in many such instances those in the infants classes remain there for prolonged periods. WSE reports are now recommending schools to draw up a Class Allocation Policy to ensure all teachers get the opportunity to experience the different class bands.

9. **Expectations**
   
   **a. Parents’ expectations**
   Parents of a 1st child entering primary school want everything communicated; perhaps they are over protective and this could be because they are used to daily feedback from pre-school since child was 6 months old. The fact that the primary school curriculum is being started in pre-school is a matter of concern for primary schools. Most teachers say learning (as per curriculum content) is down the priority list for parents – as long as their child is happy and not being bullied, parents are content.

   **b. Teachers’ expectations**
   Some schools inform parents by way of sending a list home detailing what they expect children to know coming in to junior infants: for example - to ensure children are independent and able to ask and go to toilet on his/her own. Such communication would be advice that is practical in nature. It was felt that parents should also be supported by schools so that children are ready to begin academic programme also.

   **Re readiness for secondary school** – it was felt some children and some adults have a fear of change so perhaps it is possible that such trepidation/fear/anxiety could persist for children who are about to transfer to secondary schools also. Furthermore, it was felt that some children at 12 or 13 lack the basic organisational skills required for the move from primary to post-primary. The DES has practically prohibited children repeating 6th class and very often many children could benefit from another year in primary. It was also felt that primary schools know that many of their 6th class children are not ready for the academic nature of the second-level curriculum. Teachers believe that immaturity can exist for some children at the point of transfer into primary school and for children transferring from primary school.

   The roll out of the expansion of Early Start (pre-school based in school) has not happened and the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education, based in St Pats, has been disbanded. This leads teachers to believe that early childhood education is not considered important - it is not a priority for the DES. There are poor children in all areas apart from schools in DEIS catchment areas and the DES should be aware of that and deal with it. These children are often forgotten and are therefore doubly disadvantaged.
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